INSPECTION REPORT

**Fircroft College of Adult
Education**

15 November 2003

ADULT LEARNING
INSPECTORATE

Grading

Inspectors use a seven-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of learning sessions. The descriptors for the seven grades are:

- *grade 1 - excellent*
- *grade 2 - very good*
- *grade 3 - good*
- *grade 4 - satisfactory*
- *grade 5 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 6 - poor*
- *grade 7 - very poor.*

Inspectors use a five-point scale to summarise their judgements about the quality of provision in occupational/curriculum areas and Jobcentre Plus programmes. The same scale is used to describe the quality of leadership and management, which includes quality assurance and equality of opportunity. The descriptors for the five grades are:

- *grade 1 - outstanding*
- *grade 2 - good*
- *grade 3 - satisfactory*
- *grade 4 - unsatisfactory*
- *grade 5 - very weak.*

The two grading scales relate to each other as follows:

SEVEN-POINT SCALE	FIVE-POINT SCALE
grade 1	grade 1
grade 2	
grade 3	grade 2
grade 4	grade 3
grade 5	grade 4
grade 6	grade 5
grade 7	

Adult Learning Inspectorate

The Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) was established under the provisions of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000* to bring the inspection of all aspects of adult learning and work-based learning within the remit of a single inspectorate. The ALI is responsible for inspecting a wide range of government-funded learning, including:

- work-based learning for all people over 16
- provision in further education colleges for people aged 19 and over
- **learndirect** provision
- Adult and Community Learning
- training funded by Jobcentre Plus
- education and training in prisons, at the invitation of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons.

Inspections are carried out in accordance with the *Common Inspection Framework* by teams of full-time inspectors and part-time associate inspectors who have knowledge of, and experience in, the work which they inspect. All providers are invited to nominate a senior member of their staff to participate in the inspection as a team member.

Overall judgement

Where the overall judgement is that the provision is adequate, only those aspects of the provision which are less than satisfactory will be reinspected.

Provision will normally be deemed to be inadequate where:
- more than one third of published grades for occupational/curriculum areas, **or**
- leadership and management are judged to be less than satisfactory.

This provision will be subject to a full reinspection.

The final decision as to whether the provision is inadequate rests with the Chief Inspector of Adult Learning. A statement as to whether the provision is adequate or not is included in the summary section of the inspection report.

INSPECTION REPORT

Fircroft College of Adult Education

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INSPECTION REPORT

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROVIDER

1. Fircroft College of Adult Education (Fircroft College) is one of five specialist residential colleges in England. It is based in Selly Oak, Birmingham, and was founded in 1909 by George Cadbury to promote learning and social justice for working people. Most of the learners come from Birmingham and the West Midlands, although a growing number are from the East Midlands, Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire. There are two bursaries for overseas learners. Most learners are resident at the college. The college provides full-time and part-time access to higher education programmes and short courses in humanities, community development, family learning and information and communications technology (ICT). During the inspection, only the full- and part-time access to higher education and the community development short courses were being offered. Most provision is based at the college. The part-time access to higher education course is offered in partnership with a local university at two community locations. The college works with a number of partners, particularly with voluntary and community sector organisations and higher education institutes. There is no subcontracted provision.

2. The college employs 51 staff. The senior management team consists of the principal, the director of academic development and programmes, the finance officer and the registrar. The principal and the director of academic development and programmes line manage the academic staff, the finance officer line manages the household staff, and the registrar line manages the administrative staff. The academic staff include five full-time and five part-time lecturers, and nine regularly visiting lecturers. There are 20 domestic staff and eight administrative staff. The college restructured its academic staff in 2001-02 to provide co-ordinators for each programme and lead tutors for each subject. A middle management layer of supervisors has recently been introduced to manage the domestic and administrative functions of the college.

3. Fircroft College's learning provision is funded by Birmingham and Solihull Learning and Skills Council (LSC). In August 2003, the unemployment rate in Birmingham was 5.4 per cent, compared with 2.5 per cent in England as a whole. The main areas of employment are in the service, production and construction industries, manufacturing and in public administration, education and health. According to the 2001 census, Birmingham's minority ethnic communities represent just under 30 per cent of the local population, compared with 9 per cent nationally. In 2002, the proportion of school leavers in Birmingham achieving five or more general certificates of secondary education (GCSEs) at grade C or above was 45.3 per cent, compared with 51.6 per cent nationally.

SCOPE OF PROVISION

Humanities

4. The area of learning includes a full-time access to higher education course and a part-

time project offering a flexible route into higher education. There are a number of short courses, but none were running at the time of the inspection.

5. The full-time course runs for 30 weeks from October to the end of May. There are 32 learners enrolled on the course. Forty-seven per cent are men and 70 per cent are aged between 20 and 35. Most live in at the college and most are from the greater Birmingham area. Forty-four per cent of learners are from minority ethnic groups and 19 per cent have a disclosed disability. Sixty-eight per cent of learners have qualifications at level 1 or below on entry. Following a period of initial assessment and training in study skills, learners choose a programme designed to identify a clear progression route. There are two core subjects, 'Studying Society' and 'History/Social Policy', and a choice of elective subjects. There are opportunities to gain GCSE equivalence in mathematics and science, and take part in a community placement.

6. The part-time course is offered in partnership with a local university. The core subject is 'Living in a Changing Society', and learners have an opportunity to study GCSE mathematics and English. Provision is based in two outreach centres in Birmingham and supplemented by linked residentials at the main college campus. There are 42 learners enrolled on the course. Fourteen per cent are men, 82 per cent are aged between 20 and 40, and all are from the Birmingham area. Sixty-seven per cent of learners had level 1 qualifications or below on entry to the course.

7. Both the full-time and part-time courses are accredited through the Open College Network. The full-time access course is managed by the long-course co-ordinator. The outreach provision is managed by an employee of the university, and mainly staffed by part-time tutors to ensure flexibility in meeting learners' needs.

Community development

8. In 2002-03, 56 residential short community development courses were offered and 528 learners were enrolled. In the week of the inspection, there were 34 learners on short courses. On average, courses last for three days. Many are designed to develop the skills and knowledge of people involved in voluntary and community organisations. Courses offered range from understanding multi-ethnic Britain, to finance in voluntary organisations, and community research skills. Most are offered at levels 1, 2 and 3. Family learning programmes are also available, providing a residential experience for families to learn together, and develop their literacy and numeracy. Schemes of work and lesson plans for family learning are linked to the literacy and numeracy core curriculum, even when the primary learning outcome is, for example, drama or science knowledge and skills. A series of dedicated programmes is planned and delivered in partnership with mental health organisations. The courses are free and the college provides childcare facilities. Courses target adult learners, predominantly those who have been socially excluded and/or educationally disadvantaged, and adults who work with socially excluded groups. In 2002-03, 44 per cent of the learners enrolled had had no education since leaving school. Twenty-four per cent had no qualifications but 16 per cent had qualifications at degree level. The local LSC recognises the college as a specialist provider of courses for the voluntary sector. There are plans to offer 64 courses in 2003-04. The enrolment target of 640 represents a planned growth of 21 per cent.

ABOUT THE INSPECTION

Number of inspectors	4
Number of inspection days	21
Number of learner interviews	86
Number of staff interviews	87
Number of locations/sites/learning centres visited	3
Number of partner/external agency interviews	28
Number of visits	23

OVERALL JUDGEMENT

9. The quality of provision is adequate to meet the reasonable needs of those receiving it. More specifically, Fircroft College's leadership and management and equality of opportunity arrangements are good, and its quality assurance arrangements are satisfactory. The quality of learning in access to higher education programmes is good, and in community development it is satisfactory.

GRADES

grade 1= outstanding, grade 2 = good, grade 3 = satisfactory, grade 4 = unsatisfactory, grade 5 = very weak

Leadership and management	2
Contributory grades:	
Equality of opportunity	2
Quality assurance	3

Humanities	2
Contributory grades:	
Adult and community learning	2

Community development	3
Contributory grades:	
Adult and community learning	3

KEY FINDINGS
Achievement and standards

10. **Retention and achievement rates are very good on the full-time access to higher education course.** In 2002-03, 91 per cent of learners were retained and 74 per cent

achieved their qualification. Progress is good. More than 70 per cent of learners who finish the course start at level 1 or below and achieve level 3 on completion. In short courses, in community development, retention and achievement rates are satisfactory overall. Although learners on some courses have very good achievement rates, on others there is no achievement at all. Some learners are unable to reach the required standard, and others do not submit work for accreditation. **On the part-time access to higher education programme, retention and achievement rates are poor.** Only 32 per cent of learners were retained and 28 per cent achieved the full award in 2002-03. There are large numbers of withdrawals for family or work reasons. Some learners re-enrol the following year, and many achieve at least one unit of accreditation. Some are offered places in higher education or employment without the need to complete their access to higher education certificate.

11. **There is good achievement of personal skills on all the programmes.** Learners develop increased confidence and self-esteem. They succeed in taking on roles of responsibility in their communities, or are able to apply for work and other education courses that they would once have considered out of reach.

12. **The attendance rate on the full-time course is poor.** In some classes, learners' punctuality is poor. Staff are aware of this. Many of the learners concerned have not developed the discipline of regular attendance and punctuality in their early life experience. Attendance is monitored and discussed through course team meetings and interviews with learners.

Quality of education and training

Grades awarded to learning sessions

	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6	Grade 7	Total
Humanities	0	3	4	2	0	0	0	9
Community development	1	4	1	0	4	0	0	10
Total	**1**	**7**	**5**	**2**	**4**	**0**	**0**	**19**

13. **There is much good teaching and learning at the college, but some unsatisfactory teaching in community development classes.** Most tutors set challenging goals, and enable learners to relate learning effectively to their own experience. Good group learning plans are used in some of the best classes.

14. Teaching and learning resources are satisfactory. All but one of the teaching rooms are accessible to wheelchair users. The library is open for 24 hours each day. Information technology (IT) facilities are good at the college site, but learners in the community do not have sufficient access to computers.

15. **Monitoring of learners' progress is good on the full-time access to higher education course.** Marked assignments are carefully recorded, and anyone who is falling behind is carefully monitored. Staff are very active in ensuring that assessment deadlines are kept. Part-time learners have their progress logged by their tutors. Individual teaching sessions are provided when required. However, **on short courses, the feedback on marked work**

is often too brief, and not specific enough about what learners need to do to improve.

16. **Programme design at Fircroft College is flexible and responsive to learners' needs.** Learners value the flexibility, and the way in which their personal and cultural values are acknowledged and respected. Part-time access to higher education courses are planned to balance learning and family commitments. Learners can study at different times of the day, and by different arrangements. Short residential courses are often negotiated with particular community groups.

17. **Learners receive highly effective personal and academic support in full-time access to higher education provision.** They have very good access to additional support for literacy and numeracy in specially arranged workshops. They are given good advice and support throughout their programmes, and in many cases after completing their courses. However, additional support needs are not systematically identified for all part-time and short-course learners, and adequate literacy and numeracy support is not always available for these learners.

Leadership and management

18. **The college has clear leadership, reflecting its mission and values.** All staff understand their roles in ensuring the quality of the learners' experience. The college's style and culture is set at management level. Relationships with the governing body are open and good. Governors are skilled and knowledgeable. They contribute effectively to full and informed discussion on strategy and direction. Management is open and consultative; the staff's and learners' views are sought regularly and valued.

19. **The college collects and uses a wide range of management information.** Targets are set and monitored carefully. Financial management is strong. The college compares itself with similar institutions to ensure the best value. Spending is closely monitored. The quality of written reports is very good.

20. **There is a clear and detailed staff development policy,** and the staff development budget has recently been increased. A wide range of training is taken by staff at all levels. The continuous professional development planned is linked to strategic objectives. Managers and governors take part in a range of awayday and other training events to consider and plan strategy.

21. **The college is involved in a number of partnerships which benefit learners, their families and the wider community.** These range from strategic partnerships to individual organisations and groups. Partner organisations reflect very good levels of commitment to disadvantaged learners.

22. **The implementation of a strategy for literacy, numeracy and language support has been slow.** The college is aware of this. Although support is good for learners on the full-time course, it is not consistently available for learners on short courses. The college began work on its basic skills quality initiative in 2001.

23. **Some accommodation is unsuitable.** For example, one teaching room is not accessible to wheelchair users, and appropriate rooms are not always available for confidential conversations. The college is planning a new building to resolve this.

24. A number of new strategies have been introduced, but are not yet effective in developing and sharing best practice in teaching and learning. The new academic board sub-groups have only met a few times, and it is not yet clear whether their remit is appropriate. Two of the original four groups have already merged. New processes, such as internal moderation, are not yet fully used. For example, although the internal moderation process identified some of the same issues identified by inspectors, it is not clear whether the internal moderation process leads to weaknesses being rectified.

25. **All college staff have a very good understanding of equality of opportunity.** They are aware of individual learners' needs, and work with them on the basis of equality and respect. All staff are regularly involved in equality and diversity training. The college's promotion of equality of opportunity is effective. The college is a community in which staff and learners live and work together. **Communications are effective,** and common room meetings for staff and learners are held weekly.

26. The college makes effective use of physical resources to support individual learners' needs. There is a good range of adapted equipment, and access to most of the buildings and gardens is good. Six bedrooms are adapted, and two computer desks may be adjusted for wheelchair users.

27. **There is not enough action-planning to meet the college's equality of opportunity targets.** Clear targets have been identified, and action plans produced, but some actions are not specific enough to meet the targets. The monitoring of data for equality of opportunity is incomplete. For example, data on the learners' ages do not provide separate information on older learners.

28. The college's quality assurance framework is effectively linked to its self-assessment cycle. There are clear links with the work of committees, and with organisational processes within the college. All staff are involved in the self-assessment process. Learners' views are collected through evaluations and contribute to the self-assessment process. However, **although the quality assurance arrangements are well designed, they are relatively new and, as yet, incomplete.** It is too early to judge the impact of some new procedures, for example internal moderation and observation of teaching and learning.

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Leadership and management

Strengths
- clear direction reflecting the college's mission and values
- open and consultative style of management

- good use of management information
- strong emphasis on the development of staff and governors
- wide-ranging strategic and individual partnerships
- very good staff understanding of equality and diversity
- good promotion of equality of opportunity
- well-planned physical resources to support learners' needs
- very clear links between the quality assurance framework and key organisational processes

Weaknesses

- slow implementation of the college's strategy for literacy, numeracy and language support
- some unsuitable accommodation
- ineffective promotion of good practice in teaching and learning
- insufficient development of action-planning for equality of opportunity targets
- incomplete monitoring of participation data for equality of opportunity
- incomplete arrangements for quality assurance

Humanities

Strengths

- good retention and achievement rates on the full-time course
- good attainment of personal skills
- good teaching and learning
- good systems for monitoring learners' progress
- very responsive curriculum design and programme planning
- good learning support for learners on the full-time course

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement rates on the part-time course
- some poor attendance and punctuality
- insufficient access to IT for part-time learners in the community
- insufficient recognition of some part-time learners' individual needs

Community development

Strengths

- very good attainment of personal skills
- highly responsive provision which reflects cultural and community needs

Weaknesses

- insufficient literacy, language and numeracy support
- some inadequate feedback to promote effective learning

WHAT LEARNERS LIKE ABOUT FIRCROFT COLLEGE OF ADULT EDUCATION:

- the residential experience - the sense of belonging; learning away from outside pressures
- the values of the college - feeling that individual and cultural needs are respected
- the commitment and support of tutors and all other staff
- their increased self-esteem and confidence
- open access to courses, regardless of qualifications

WHAT LEARNERS THINK FIRCROFT COLLEGE OF ADULT EDUCATION COULD IMPROVE:

- the amount of provision so that more people can attend
- the quality of pre-course information
- the amount of time they are given during the course to complete their learning diaries
- the facilities for children to include provision for younger teenagers so that their parents can attend residential courses

KEY CHALLENGES FOR FIRCROFT COLLEGE OF ADULT EDUCATION:

- fully establish strategies for developing and sharing good practice
- fully implement a college-wide strategy for literacy, numeracy and language support
- complete quality assurance arrangements
- continue to meet the needs of the wider community

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Language of the Adult and Community Learning Sector

Terminology varies across the range of education and training settings covered by the *Common Inspection Framework.* The table below indicates the terms appropriate to Adult and Community Learning

Single term used in the framework	Relating the term to Adult and Community Learning	
Provider	**Provider**	Any organisation providing opportunities for adults to meet personal or collective goals through the experience of learning. Providers include local authorities, specialist designated institutions, voluntary and community sector organisations, regeneration partnerships and further education colleges
Learner	**Learner**	Includes those learning by participating in community projects, as well as those on courses. Learning, however, will be planned, with intended outcomes.
Teacher / trainer	**Tutor**	Person teaching adult learners or guiding or facilitating their learning.
	Mentor	Person providing individual, additional support, guidance and advice to learners to help them achieve their learning goals.
Learning goals	**Main learning goals**	Intended gains in skills, knowledge or understanding. Gains may be reflected in the achievement of nationally recognised qualifications. Or they may be reflected in the ability of learners to apply learning in contexts outside the learning situation, e.g. in the family, community, or workplace. Learners' main goal/s should be recorded on an individual or, in some cases, group learning plan. Plans should be revised as progress is made and new goals emerge.
	Secondary learning goals	These may include planned-for gains in self-confidence, and inter-personal skills. These should also be included in learning plans where appropriate.
Personal and learning skills	**Personal and learning skills**	These include being able to study independently, willingness to collaborate with others, and readiness to take up another opportunity for education or training.

Other terms used in Adult and Community Learning

	Relating the term to Adult and Community Learning
Unanticipated, or unintended learning outcome	Adults often experience unanticipated gains as a result of being involved in learning. These include improved self-esteem, greater self-confidence and a growing sense of belonging to a community. Gains of this kind should be acknowledged and recorded in any record of achievement.
Subject-based programme	A programme organised around a body of knowledge, e.g. the structure and usage of the French language or ceramic glazing techniques. Students could be expected to progress from one aspect of the subject to another, to grasp increasingly complex concepts or analyses or to develop greater levels of skill or to apply skills to a new area of work.
Issue-based programme	A programme that is based on the concerns, interests and aspirations of particular groups, for example members of a Sikh Gurdwara wanting to address inter-faith relations in their town, or parents worried about the incidence of drug abuse in their locality. Issue-based learning tends to be associated with geographically defined communities, but the increasing use of electronic means of communication means that this need no longer be the case. Progress is defined in terms of the group's increasing ability to analyse its situation, to access new information and skills which will help it resolve its difficulties and generate solutions and its growing confidence in dealing with others to implement those solutions.
Outreach provision	Provision established in a community setting in addition to provision made at an organisation's main site(s). Outreach programmes may be similar to courses at the main site(s) or be designed to meet the specific requirements of that community.
Neighbourhood-based work	The provider's staff have a long-term presence in a local community with a specific remit to understand the concerns of the local residents and develop learning activities to meet local needs and interests.
Community regeneration	The process of improving the quality of life in communities by investing in their infrastructure and facilities, creating opportunities for training and employment and tackling poor health and educational under-achievement. Community regeneration requires the active participation of local residents in decision-making. Changes and improvements are often achieved either directly or indirectly as a result of the adult learning activities which arise from this.

	Relating the term to Adult and Community Learning
Community capacity building	The process of enabling local people to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence to take advantage of opportunities for employment, training and further education and to become selfmanaging, sustainable communities.
Active citizenship	The process whereby people recognise the power they have to improve the quality of life for others and make a conscious effort to do so: the process whereby people recognise the power of organisations and institutions to act in the interests of the common good and exercise their influence to ensure that they do so. Adult learning contributes to active citizenship.

DETAILED INSPECTION FINDINGS

LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT   Grade 2

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Strengths
- clear direction reflecting the college's mission and values
- open and consultative style of management
- good use of management information
- strong emphasis on the development of staff and governors
- wide-ranging strategic and individual partnerships
- very good staff understanding of equality and diversity
- good promotion of equality of opportunity
- well-planned physical resources to support learners' needs
- very clear links between the quality assurance framework and key organisational processes

Weaknesses
- slow implementation of the college's strategy for literacy, numeracy and language support
- some unsuitable accommodation
- ineffective promotion of good practice in teaching and learning
- insufficient development of action-planning for equality of opportunity targets
- incomplete monitoring of participation data for equality of opportunity
- incomplete arrangements for quality assurance

29. Fircroft College's leadership is strong and effective, and its overall direction is clear and well understood. Staff clearly understand the college's mission and values, and their own role in the quality of the learners' experience. Managers strongly promote the college's style and culture, setting and maintaining its mission and values by personal example. Senior staff promote open management. Some retain a teaching commitment, and all hold regular meetings with the different sectors of the college. Staff and learners value the good access to senior managers. Staff views are regularly sought. For example, they were consulted on the introduction of the new appraisal system. Relationships with the governing body are open and good. Governors are skilled and knowledgeable, and contribute effectively to the college's strategy and direction. The college recognises the challenge of balancing mission with change. The curriculum reflects external changes while maintaining the college's traditions. Managers identify key challenges. They recognise the value of residential learning in promoting social justice.

30. A wide range of data is collected and analysed. Targets are set and closely

monitored by managers and governors. There is a clear and systematic planning cycle, and clear lines of accountability. The college collects and analyses management information which it compares with data from similar institutions. Data on learners' recruitment, retention and achievement rates are collected and monitored systematically. Recruitment data are analysed to ensure that the college's mission to work with particular groups is achieved. Financial management is strong. Managers use detailed costings and funding projections when planning, and spending is monitored very closely. This benefits learners by allowing managers to allocate funds where they are needed most. There is a rolling programme of building and upgrading residential and teaching facilities. The quality of written information is good. Written reports meet high standards of content and presentation. Progress towards planned actions is monitored carefully at committee and governing body meetings.

31. The staff development policy is clear and detailed. Management support for individual and corporate staff training is good. All the staff take part in a wide range of training; for example, household staff have taken national vocational qualifications, or learn to cook for different cultures. Newly promoted middle managers take part in management training. Corporate staff development events take place over two weeks each year, and balance serious issues with lively planning. All staff had training in the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Specialist trainers from a mental health charity have given training in mental health issues. Part-time staff are invited to corporate training. There are clear targets for tutors to achieve teaching qualifications, and academic staff are entitled to 70 hours of academic research time each year. Enhanced appraisal arrangements, including 360 degree appraisal, have been introduced this year. Individual action plans include targets which are reviewed regularly. The college has a continuing professional development plan which is linked to strategic objectives and is clearly costed. The staff development budget has been increased significantly. The management team and governors have taken part in a number of awaydays to consider strategic issues. Governors' meetings now include a training presentation.

32. The college has a wide range of strategic and individual partnerships. There have been long-standing partnerships with further and higher education institutions. In one case this has led to the development of a foundation degree and eased learners' transition to university. The college is a founder member of a local adult and community learning planning group. A number of partnerships are used to support learners, for example by offering specialist counselling or advice about housing or drugs misuse. Partner organisations reflect particularly strong commitment to the needs of disadvantaged learners. Projects, families and communities benefit from their input. Some partnerships meet very specific needs, for example working with learners from isolated rural communities.

33. The college has been slow to fully implement its strategy for literacy, numeracy and language support. Although support is good for learners taking the long course, on most short courses the support is unsystematic. The college began to improve its literacy, numeracy and language provision in 2001. A statement and action plan were produced and two staff have been trained. However, only half of the action plan is in place so far. Further staff training and development is planned, but not until early in 2004.

34. Some of the college's accommodation is unsuitable. The college's analysis of property and room usage identified that there is insufficient teaching, social and crèche space. There are only four teaching rooms and an ICT suite. The largest teaching room also serves as a crèche, and is not always available for teaching. There is no break-out space for small group work, and the upper floor of the main building is not accessible to wheelchair users. Some conversations, including confidential ones, take place in cramped rooms which are also used as thoroughfares. The college has recognised this weakness, and new facilities are planned.

35. The college has developed a number of strategies to promote good practice in teaching and learning, but these are not yet effective. New academic board subgroups have only met a few times. The outcomes of meetings are not always well recorded. Each group has a clear remit but these have not yet been reviewed to ensure that they accurately describe the group's function. Two of the original groups have already merged to make them more manageable and focused. Newly developed internal moderation arrangements are not yet used effectively. For example, internal moderation identified some aspects of weaknesses also identified by inspectors. Pre-course moderation of materials identified potential problems for learners with literacy and numeracy needs, and post-course comments highlight the need for literacy support for learners. The internal moderation form is not clear, and the section requesting suggestions for improvement is sometimes left blank. It is not clear whether suggestions for improvement are followed up.

Equality of opportunity   Contributory grade 2

36. College staff have a very good understanding of equality and diversity. All have a strong commitment to meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups, and to widening participation. They are clear about their roles, responsibilities and boundaries in working with learners and other members of staff. Team members work together effectively to develop good practice in supporting each learner. There is very good awareness of individual learners' needs, and staff work with learners on the basis of equality and respect. Learners value the supportive approach of staff and their willingness to provide prompt assistance and guidance. Staff participate in regular equality and diversity training. Recent sessions have effectively covered the implications of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, challenges faced by learners with mental health issues, and the impact of staff behaviour on learners. Staff act as good role models for learners. Some members of staff were previously learners at the college and contribute useful insights from their experience.

37. The college's promotion of equality of opportunity is effective. This was partly identified in the self-assessment report. For learners and staff the college is a community in which they work together. For example, an important part of the daily programme is that learners and staff eat together. Kitchen staff arrange for special dietary requirements to be met. There is good teamwork among learners and staff to resolve problems and to develop within the values of the college. Communications are effective. For example, the college common room is shared by learners and staff. Common room meetings are

held weekly. Learners and staff attend and the meetings provide a useful forum for raising issues and sharing information and ideas. Many learners join the programmes as the result of recommendations from friends and relatives. Some learners use their personal development at Fircroft College effectively in their local community. The college has a wide range of partnership and link arrangements with other organisations that promote equality of opportunity and widening participation. The college's equality of opportunity policy has recently been revised. It is comprehensive, clearly written and refers to relevant legislation.

38. The college makes effective use of physical resources to support individual learners' needs. A good range of equipment is available for people with visual impairment, including adapted computer software, keyboards, headphones and tape recorders. Suitable computer equipment is also provided for learners with dyslexia. The college has a variety of aids for those with a hearing impairment, including an induction loop in one teaching room. There are ramps for access to and within the college buildings and part of the garden. The first and second floors of the main building are not accessible to wheelchair users. This prevents access to one teaching room. However, classes are relocated when necessary. The college has planned a new building that will provide lift access to the first floor. Six bedrooms are accessible for wheelchair users and two of these have adapted shower and toilet facilities. Four toilets for people with disabilities are appropriately sited throughout the college. Two computer desks are adjustable for use by wheelchair users. Resources are used flexibly. For example, a learner recovering from an operation has been lent a laptop to use at home. The college has had a health and safety audit and implemented the recommendations made.

39. The complaints policy and procedure are satisfactory. They are clear and are understood by staff and learners. Complaints are dealt with promptly. Formal complaints are documented and actions recorded.

40. There is insufficient action-planning for the college's equality of opportunity targets. For example, a well-written racial equality policy is in place, with appropriate strategies and actions detailed, but responsibilities and timescales have not been allocated. Clear targets have been set to remedy the under-representation of men in each of the three programme areas. However, there is no action plan to progress this initiative. An action plan has been drawn up for weaknesses on the short course programme relating to equality of opportunity, but some actions are not sufficiently specific and there are no individual target dates for the actions identified. The college has recognised that the staff and governors are not representative of the community they serve, although there is no action plan to remedy this. The new committee for equality of opportunity has been successful in proceeding with these developments, although its role in monitoring and implementation is not fully established.

41. Data on learners' participation in programmes are not always monitored. This was not identified in the self-assessment report. Equal opportunities data are recorded, but not monitored and analysed, for those who are unsuccessful in their application for a place or those who do not complete their course. On short courses, data are only monitored for the overall programme and not by individual courses. Although data on

the age of learners are monitored, this is restricted to two categories of 19-24 and 25 and above. It does not provide information on participation by older learners. The college effectively monitors learners by gender, ethnicity and disability for participation, progression and achievement.

Quality assurance   Contributory grade 3

42. The college's quality assurance framework is planned to an annual cycle. This is clearly linked to key organisational processes such as self-assessment, staff appraisal and development, programme and performance reviews and the setting of organisational objectives. Self-assessment is a continuous process and the development plan is reviewed and updated during the year. Although the recently revised quality assurance framework is not yet fully established, it contains a clear and detailed policy and well-designed procedures. It also identifies each of the key groups involved in quality assurance and self-assessment. All staff take part in the self-assessment process. Learners' course evaluations and views are used in the self-assessment process. The college has taken part in a national survey of learners' satisfaction and staff's views. The results of this survey were used as part of the self-assessment process and also to improve the college's course evaluation questionnaire.

43. The arrangements for quality assurance of the college's programmes are incomplete. This was identified in the self-assessment report. Much of the internal moderation for the full-time access programme is carried out at the end of the programme. All the internal moderation for the part-time programme takes place at the end. The college recognises that internal moderation for both these programmes is not fully evaluated. A recent audit of the short course programme has identified shortcomings in the checking of lesson plans and teaching materials before courses start. The policy for internal moderation has recently been changed, but it is too early to judge the impact of the new procedures. The college has a comprehensive system of observations of teaching and learning. It is based on peer assessment, and most teaching staff have received training on its use. There is no external validation of the observation of teaching and learning process. The level of sampling is carefully designed to cover teaching by all staff, including visiting tutors. However, **not all** tutors on the part-time programme have been observed. Although the college has recognised that this programme is not sufficiently covered by the quality assurance arrangements, no actions have been identified to deal with this. The college's standards committee is developing a stronger focus on quality assurance, for example by monitoring the outcomes of internal moderation. Monitoring of the quality assurance arrangements is at an early stage, but it is carried out thoroughly. Development planning for quality assurance is thorough.

AREAS OF LEARNING

Humanities   Grade 2

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Adult and community learning	74	2

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Strengths

- good retention and achievement rates on the full-time course
- good attainment of personal skills
- good teaching and learning
- good systems for monitoring learners' progress
- very responsive curriculum design and programme planning
- good learning support for learners on the full-time course

Weaknesses

- poor retention and achievement rates on the part-time course
- some poor attendance and punctuality
- insufficient access to IT for part-time learners in the community
- insufficient recognition of some part-time learners' individual needs

Achievement and standards

44. In 2002-03, 91 per cent of learners on full-time courses were retained, and 74 per cent achieved the full award. Individual progression and attainment are good. More than 70 per cent of learners who finish the course start at level 1 or below and achieve level 3 on completion. Learners reach level 2 in some of their assignments at an early stage of the course. They acquire new knowledge and skills by completing well-planned tasks and assignments and by contributing fully to discussions in seminars and tutorials.

45. Learners' achievement of personal skills is very good. They increase their confidence to carry out new tasks, and improve their self-esteem and motivation through being a member of a group and sharing ideas. Learners speak highly of the personal progress they have made. They confidently seek employment in roles previously seen as being out of their reach. For example, one past learner is now a residential social worker, having started the access course with no formal qualifications, and later completing a diploma in social work. He provides a positive role model for the children he works with, and has a positive effect on their school learning and achievement.

46. On the part-time programme only 32 per cent of learners were retained and 28 per cent achieved the full award in 2002-03. Many learners withdraw from their programme

for family or work reasons, despite the flexibility of the provision. Some re-enrol the following year. Others are not given adequate pre-entry advice and guidance and are not fully prepared for the extent and level of the work. Some learners withdraw after being offered places in higher education or finding employment. Many learners achieve at least one unit of accreditation.

47. During the inspection, the attendance rate on the full-time course averaged 66 per cent. At times it was only 50 per cent. This is poor for residential provision. In some classes, learners' punctuality is very poor. Learners are sometimes confused about whether they need to attend a session. Staff are aware of the issue. Many of the learners concerned have not developed the discipline of regular attendance and punctuality in their early life experience. Learners are given clear codes of practice for attendance and punctuality at the beginning of the course. Attendance is monitored and discussed at course team meetings and interviews with learners.

Quality of education and training

48. Of the nine lessons observed, seven were good or better. Lessons are well planned and have clear aims and objectives. Tutors set challenging goals for learners and are highly skilled at enabling them to relate their own ideas to background knowledge. Learners value the opportunity to relate personal life experiences to what they learn on the course. Tutors actively engage learners' interest. One group used the task of designing a community to identify and explore the network of relationships in their own lives, and those of other groups, and evaluate how these have changed. Effective use is made of a range of teaching styles and methods to meet individual needs. In particular, group work is used very effectively, especially in support workshops. There is a significant strategy to promote independent learning in classes as a preparation for entry to higher education. Full-time learners make good use of IT to develop their skills. Some tutors use the college intranet to distribute learning materials, and receive completed assignments by e-mail. Learners value the supportive and sensitive nature of much of the teaching. It successfully encourages learners who have not participated in formal learning since leaving school. Weaker sessions have a more limited range of teaching methods. Tutors in these sessions do not always provide differentiated tasks for learners who have a diverse range of abilities and skills.

49. Learners make good progress in achieving their learning goals. All learners are given sufficient information to allow them to plan assignments and achieve the full award. On the full-time course, individual learners' progress is monitored effectively through the careful recording of marked assignments and units achieved. At the start of the course, learners are given clear guidelines and dates for the submission of work. Staff are very active in ensuring that deadlines are kept. Learners who are falling behind with their work are quickly identified. Their situation is discussed at student issues team meetings, and individual action plans are put into place. Personal tutors and the course co-ordinator ensure that effective support is given individually or at support workshops. Part-time learners have their progress logged by the tutor and monitored by the course co-ordinator. Individual tuition is used effectively to support learners completing

assignments.

50. Programme development is flexible and responsive. Most learners intend to progress into community development, social work or teaching. The course content prepares them well for those careers. Course evaluations completed by full-time learners identified the need for clearer progression routes. Improvements to the courses have created sufficient flexibility in the timetable to meet learners' needs for general study skills. There are teaching sessions available for learners to gain the mathematics and English units essential for entry into teaching or social work. Those who need GCSEs in science for entry into teaching are taught through arrangements with another college. Learners have sufficient time for independent study and personal tutorials. The part-time course is very effective in enabling learners to balance learning with family and work commitments. The curriculum is planned to include a wide range of opportunities for study. For example, learners can study during the daytime or evening, drop in by arrangement or take part in distance learning. Many study using a combination of these opportunities. The course is designed to offer maximum flexibility and ease of access, especially for learners with childcare commitments.

51. Learners receive highly effective personal and academic support from all staff. They view the supportive environment they work in as highly conducive to learning. Full-time learners have a comprehensive induction and initial assessment out of which individual learning plans are developed. Learners are given strong support to keep to these plans through literacy, numeracy and language workshops. The plans are monitored at staff meetings and personal tutorials. One group had identified numeracy learning needs and the tutor arranged workshops to help them with the main mathematics unit. A learner with dyslexia was given a laptop computer to support his learning. Learners on both programmes receive good advice and guidance throughout. Many learners remark on the continuing support and commitment they receive from staff, even after completing their course.

52. Learners on the part-time programme have little or no access to IT facilities in the community to support learning and develop skills essential for entry to higher education. Learners can use IT at the main college, but are some are unaware of this. Others are unable to make use of the college's facilities as the college is too far away. Other resources are satisfactory for both courses.

53. There is no systematic initial assessment and identification of support needs for part-time learners. Learners self-assess their additional learning needs. The initial identification of literacy and numeracy needs is not always detailed enough for learning plans to be developed. Study skills are part of the course, but differentiation is seldom possible in classes and is left for personal tutorial sessions later in the course.

Leadership and management

54. The leadership and management of this area of learning are satisfactory overall. The management of the full-time course is good, but for the part-time course it is weaker. Staff have a role in determining the strategic direction of the college and are fully

involved in the self-assessment process. The curriculum is well managed, and designed to respond to learners' needs. The full-time course has recently been reorganised to give clear progression routes, and a co-ordinator has been appointed to provide strategic direction. Effective use is made of data about learners for equal opportunities monitoring. Managers and course team members also use data to monitor the progress of learners and to take appropriate action. There is good communication between staff, and all work together to support the learners

55. There are systematic quality assurance procedures. Course evaluations are used regularly throughout the course. Particular attention is paid to learners' evaluations in shaping the curriculum. A satisfactory process of peer observation of teaching has been introduced, and feedback is given to tutors in a supportive and encouraging way.

56. Nearly all of the staff have teaching qualifications or are working towards them. Staff make full use of the training opportunities offered by the college, and use them to support further course development for learners.

57. The part-time course makes good use of specialist staff to ensure learners are offered a range of subjects. Good use is made of partnerships to develop and maintain the part-time course in the community. However, almost all the weaknesses for this area of learning relate to the part-time programme.

Community development   Grade 3

Programmes inspected	Number of learners	Contributory grade
Adult and community learning	34	3

The following strengths and weaknesses were identified during this inspection:

Strengths

- very good attainment of personal skills
- highly responsive provision which reflects cultural and community needs

Weaknesses

- insufficient literacy, language and numeracy support
- some inadequate feedback to promote effective learning

Achievement and standards

58. Learners gain a great deal of confidence in their ability to learn, and become much more flexible in their views. Their ability to respect and listen to other people's point of view increases as a result of their experiences at Fircroft College. One learner developed the confidence to become a leader in her community and her temple. She overcame her fear of speaking to large groups and is now very confident, sometimes speaking to audiences of more than a 100 people. The residential experience greatly benefits learners in a number of ways. Learners use their improved interpersonal skills in their communities and families to build successful relationships. One group of young women developed the skills and confidence to take over the management of their underused community rooms. The rooms are now thriving and fully booked.

59. All short courses are accredited and most offer the potential for achievement at levels 1 to 3. Courses are residential and the retention rate is very good. Achievement rates are satisfactory overall. In 2002-03, there were very good achievement rates on 63 per cent of voluntary sector courses. Eighty-eight per cent or more of learners achieved in these courses. However, some courses have poor achievement rates. Fifteen per cent of learners do not achieve at all on their three-day residential course. In a minority of courses, accreditation is not available at all three levels, and some learners are unable to reach the required standard. Some learners do not submit work for accreditation.

60. Standards of work are satisfactory overall. Inspectors observed some imaginative work and creative approaches to providing evidence of achievement. Most learners achieve at an appropriate level. However, some find it difficult to complete their learning diary for assessment during the course. Some portfolio work is inadequate for the level 3 award.

Quality of education and training

61. Staff are very responsive to learners' views and cultural differences, and courses reflect this. Learners often have the opportunity to renegotiate learning outcomes to make them more relevant to their needs. In some cases, groups of learners are involved in planning their course from the design stage. They discuss their learning needs with the college, and return a few weeks later to complete the course. Partner organisations are very satisfied with the flexibility of staff in responding to the training needs of community groups. Some staff at partner organisations have themselves been learners at Fircroft College. They chose the college to provide training to other staff or learners, as a direct result of their own very positive learning experiences there.

62. Teaching and learning are satisfactory on balance. Six out of 10 teaching and short-course learning sessions observed were good or better. One session was outstanding and four very good. Some inspiring and challenging work effectively supports learning. Learners enjoy their learning. Effective strategies are used to encourage active participation in sessions. Some of the best teaching and learning sessions use group learning plans that learners develop together. In one session, designed to develop effective teamwork, learners wrote mottos to capture the feelings of their team. They then sang a song or recited a poem to illustrate their team identity to the rest of the group, and made mobiles from junk materials as a symbolic visual representation of the group. Learners were keen to explain the cultural significance of the symbols used in their mobiles. Learning points are very clearly identified from the tasks.

63. Four of the 10 lesson observations were unsatisfactory. Some lesson planning is inadequate. It does not identify clear learning outcomes or plan a range of teaching and learning strategies for learners with different levels of ability. In some lessons, there is a heavy reliance on tutor-led questions and answers, over an extended period. The strategies used in these sessions are not varied enough to ensure active participation, to respond to different learning styles, or to encourage learners to take control of their own learning.

64. The support and guidance given to learners are satisfactory. End of course guidance includes a specially designed short, residential course to help learners plan progression routes. The college is beginning to group short courses together to create coherent, longer programmes. Some lead to nationally recognised qualifications. The college has started to produce well-designed course leaflets and to direct learners to the college's guidance service. However, tutors do not yet use a consistent house style when presenting information.

65. Strategies to assess and support learners' literacy, language and numeracy needs in short courses are not well developed. Some, for example, family learning classes, have been matched to the core curriculum, but this is not the case for most courses. Schemes of work, lesson plans, and individual or group learning plans do not generally take account of learners' literacy, numeracy and language needs. The college has not yet found meaningful ways of initially assessing these needs for short courses, and tutors are

often not informed about the differing levels of literacy, language and numeracy within their group. Some materials use complex language and concepts. They are not always appropriate for open recruitment courses where learners may have differing needs.

66. Some feedback from assessment is inadequate to promote improvements in learning. There are examples of good practice in providing feedback about learners' work, but written feedback to learners is often too brief. It does not provide sufficiently constructive comments about the aspects of work that are good and those that require further improvement, for example spelling and grammar.

Leadership and management

67. The leadership and management of the short course provision are satisfactory overall. Team management is satisfactory. A **short-course facilitator** has recently been appointed. Team meetings are regular, well planned and clearly recorded. Minutes identify clear responsibility for action. Curriculum development responds to community needs. Some courses are arranged for particular community groups, and are only open to members of those groups. Others are open to anyone. A minority of open courses do not offer accreditation at all the three levels. The college is working to develop other levels, and to identify the required learning for any courses only available at higher levels. A development plan has been prepared to deal with external moderators' concerns about the standard of some work presented for level 3, but it is not clear what the effect of the planned changes will be. Full- and part-time staff are actively involved in self-assessing the area of learning and preparing action plans. The self-assessment report identified both the key strengths in this area of learning, and one of the weaknesses. Staff have a clear awareness of equality and diversity issues.