

Inspection of Buckinghamshire College Group

Inspection dates: 19 to 22 November 2024

Overall effectiveness **Good**

The quality of education	Good
Behaviour and attitudes	Good
Personal development	Good
Leadership and management	Good
Education programmes for young people	Good
Adult learning programmes	Good
Apprenticeships	Good
Provision for learners with high needs	Good
Overall effectiveness at previous inspection	Good

Information about this provider

Buckinghamshire College Group is a general further education college located on three campuses in Aylesbury, Amersham and High Wycombe. Around two-thirds of learners study at the Aylesbury site. The college provides courses in a wide range of vocational subjects from entry level to level 4. The largest subject areas include construction, creative arts and media, health and social care, business, and employability courses. Learners also study T-levels in education and childcare, health, laboratory science, business management, digital production, design and development and digital support services. The college has recently introduced T-levels in media, broadcast and production and legal services.

The college works with three subcontractors that provide courses for around 175 young learners. These include courses in vocational and employability studies for learners with high needs, animal science and jewellery making. There were also 12 adult learners completing short courses in distance learning provision where the contract has now ceased. The number of learners studying in subcontracted provision has reduced significantly in the past two years.

At the time of the inspection, there were 2,511 learners on education programmes for young people. Of these, almost two-thirds were studying courses from entry level to level 2. The remainder were on level 3 study programmes. Approximately one-third of learners were studying GCSE English and mathematics.

Around 470 adult learners were studying a range of full- or part-time courses from levels 2 to 4 or short courses, predominantly at the Aylesbury campus. This included access to higher education (access), accountancy, counselling and construction courses. A small number of learners were also in training at a Skills Bootcamp in property maintenance.

There were 356 apprentices receiving training on level 2 and 3 apprenticeships, 290 of whom were studying construction trades. Sixty-six apprentices were studying apprenticeships in motor vehicle, health and social care, hairdressing and early years. Almost two-thirds of apprentices were 16 to 18 years old.

There were 326 learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) in receipt of high-needs funding. Almost half of these learners were studying a range of vocational courses. Ninety-three learners were studying in specialist pathways provision at Aylesbury or Wycombe campuses. Fourteen learners were on supported internships. A further 91 learners with high needs were studying in subcontracted provision.

What is it like to be a learner with this provider?

Learners and apprentices value greatly the welcoming and inclusive learning environment that leaders and staff have created. They feel part of a friendly and diverse community at each campus. Learners and apprentices quickly adopt the college's values of ambition, innovation, integrity and respect staff model and communicate very well. They develop new knowledge and skills quickly, and most produce work of a high standard. Learners and apprentices enjoy their studies, and most attend well.

Learners and apprentices demonstrate positive and respectful behaviour and attitudes. They listen carefully to their peers and teachers, share ideas and work hard in lessons. They often participate in positive activities beyond their studies. In so doing, they make a valuable contribution to their local community. Construction learners and apprentices built a sensory garden for a charity that supports people with brain injuries. Art and design learners created vibrant murals to improve public spaces.

Most young learners develop substantial new knowledge and skills because of the high-quality teaching and support they receive. For example, level 1 plumbing learners master how to make a water-tight joint in copper piping and pressure test it. Most young learners benefit from relevant work-related experience and activities that help them develop valuable work-readiness skills. They enjoy the opportunity to work with their peers and employers at the college's 'Velocity' event to design and pitch real-world business ideas. Learners often benefit from specialist masterclasses. In level 3 special effects and media make-up, industry professionals help learners create advanced 3D effects in liquid latex. Consequently, most young learners achieve well and progress to positive destinations.

Learners with high needs benefit from an ambitious curriculum that helps them to make good progress towards their goals. They learn how to communicate effectively and work in teams. For instance, learners help their peers put on aprons and check they use the correct equipment in kitchen tasks. Learners develop their independence and employability skills successfully through helpful activities such as creating a realistic plan and budget for a leisure trip. Learners with high needs who study vocational courses achieve as well as or better than their peers.

Adult learners gain significant skills and confidence. They value the opportunity to learn with others. For instance, learners on the property maintenance Skills Bootcamp discuss how to wire a ceiling light rose correctly. They give helpful feedback on each other's practical work. Most adult learners pass their qualifications and move on to further learning or work successfully. Learners on access courses achieve particularly well. They develop essential research and study skills that enable them to produce work to high standard.

Most apprentices develop their practical skills and professional behaviours quickly. They add value to their workplaces. For example, level 3 senior healthcare worker apprentices provide effective person-centred care for vulnerable patients with

dementia. Level 2 carpentry apprentices gain skills to fit kitchens. They use tools safely and competently. They are supported well by trainers and their employers. In a small minority of instances, apprentices do not benefit from targets that identify the specific knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to develop, which slows their progress. Most apprentices, including those with SEND, pass their qualifications, often with merit and distinction grades.

Learners and apprentices feel safe at college and in the workplace. They know how to report concerns if they need to. They value the high-quality support staff provide for their welfare and well-being. Staff make sure that most learners and apprentices, including those with high needs, understand local risks such as criminal exploitation. However, a significant minority of learners and apprentices do not remember what they have been taught about the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism. This means they are unclear about how to protect themselves from these risks.

Contribution to meeting skills needs

The college makes a reasonable contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders, managers and governors work effectively with a wide range of stakeholders and employers to identify skills priorities at local to national levels. They play a central and proactive role in the local authority's strategic skills groups. This helps to ensure that leaders have an up-to-date and detailed understanding of the local economy and needs of people in the region. Leaders review their curriculum offer to respond effectively to these needs, such as in developing green skills net zero provision.

Leaders work collaboratively with stakeholders to meet gaps in provision identified in the local skills improvement plan. For example, they are working with a local university and further education college to co-create a high-quality engineering curriculum for a new engineering hub. As part of this, leaders and stakeholders have carefully mapped progression routes for learners who wish to progress to higher education. Leaders have worked closely with the NHS and dentists in the region to plan and design a new level 3 dental nurse apprenticeship that is celebrated as an example of health partnership innovation.

To align the curriculum to priority needs, leaders have invested in high-quality resources that mirror those in industry. At Aylesbury, learners and apprentices on health courses benefit from a new simulated health wing, dental surgery and immersive learning suite. They become proficient in measuring and monitoring patients' blood pressure, oxygen saturation, pulse and temperature using industry-standard equipment and manikins. Learners and apprentices quickly develop the knowledge and skills they need in the healthcare sector.

Managers and staff work well with relevant stakeholders on most courses to make sure the curriculum provides the essential knowledge, skills and behaviours employers need. They have established employer boards to understand the needs of specific sectors such as digital and IT, creative media and childcare. However, on a

small minority of courses, input from stakeholders is in the early stages of development.

What does the provider do well and what does it need to do better?

Leaders, managers and staff are ambitious for their learners and apprentices, including those from disadvantaged groups or with high needs. Since the previous inspection, the new principal and leadership team have significantly improved provision for learners with high needs. They have worked closely with a centre for excellence in SEND to redesign carefully the specialist high-needs curriculum. As a result, learners with high needs experience much-improved teaching, learning and support that meets their individual needs and aspirations.

Leaders and teachers plan and teach the curriculums effectively. They make sure that learners and apprentices develop their knowledge and skills progressively and securely. For example, level 2 carpentry apprentices learn how to measure accurately and use hand tools safely before they cut wood for joists and skirting boards. T-level education and childcare learners study attachment theory in year 2 when they have a secure knowledge of child development. This helps them understand how childhood trauma affects children's expected patterns of development and behaviour. As a result, most learners and apprentices build their knowledge and skills over time and make positive progress.

Teachers and trainers are highly qualified and experienced. Those who are new to teaching are supported by advanced practitioners well to develop their skills. Most teachers and trainers use a range of effective strategies to help learners and apprentices understand and apply what they have learned. For instance, in level 2 beauty therapy, teachers expertly model the skills and behaviours learners need to acquire in manicure treatments. They use high-quality demonstrations to help students practise their skills with one another. They check students' knowledge and skills carefully with useful questions and observations. This prepares students very well to work with clients to a professional standard.

Most teachers routinely recap previous knowledge and use questioning effectively to help learners remember and extend their learning. Most teachers use assessment well to identify gaps in learners' knowledge and support them with further teaching and research activities. In access courses, teachers use videos and quizzes to help learners consolidate their understanding of different theories, such as Carl Rogers' humanistic approach. In level 3 business, teachers use past exam papers to check learners' knowledge carefully and close any gaps. However, in a small minority of instances, teachers do not consistently identify what learners already know and can do at the start of their course. They do not routinely adapt their teaching to fill gaps in learners' knowledge and skills. As a result, a small minority of learners do not make the progress of which they are capable.

Most teachers and trainers provide helpful feedback on learners' and apprentices' work. They routinely give them clear feedback on how to develop their draft

assignments to achieve high grades. Teachers in level 3 creative media production explain to learners precisely how to refine their film editing to achieve distinction grades, which almost all subsequently do.

Most teachers and trainers help learners and apprentices develop the literacy and numeracy skills they need for further study or employment. On the Accelerate programme, teachers support young learners in writing professional letters to businesses and working out the costs of their enterprise projects. In level 1 plumbing, learners calculate accurately the distance between pipes and appliances for a bathroom design plan. In GCSE English, teachers support most learners to become confident at reading and writing in their studies and lives outside college.

Leaders use the funding they receive for learners with high needs effectively. Managers and staff make sure that learners have swift access to the specialist support they need to participate in learning such as speech and language therapy and physiotherapy. Teachers set relevant targets for learners to help them develop their knowledge, skills and independence over time. Most learners with high needs meet their goals, make effective progress and achieve very well.

Leaders work effectively with Job Centre Plus and community partners to design courses that enable adult learners to secure employment. They have successfully increased the proportion of adults who come from disadvantaged areas identified in the council's 'Opportunity Bucks' project. Leaders have responded quickly to low achievement in the first phase of the Skills Bootcamp in property maintenance by redesigning the course. It is too early to see the full impact of these improvements.

Leaders have taken appropriate action to review and improve apprenticeship provision. For example, the leadership team has taken positive steps to improve quality in health and construction apprenticeships, where in the past, too many apprentices withdrew from their apprenticeship. Trainers work closely with most employers to plan apprentices' training in and away from the workplace effectively. They monitor apprentices' progress carefully. Most apprentices make effective progress and achieve well.

Leaders and staff make sure that learners and apprentices receive effective careers advice and guidance. This includes information from guest speakers and employers. Staff provide effective support to level 3 and adult access learners with their higher education options and university applications. Most learners and apprentices are prepared well for their next steps in further study, apprenticeships or employment.

Leaders and managers have a detailed picture of the quality of education and training they provide across the college, including in subcontracted provision. Where they identify issues, they take quick and appropriate actions and monitor these closely to bring about sustainable improvement.

Leaders and managers provide staff with useful development opportunities. For example, they provided specialist training to help staff meet the needs of learners with complex SEND. Leaders are considerate of the workload of staff and listen

carefully to their ideas and suggestions. Leaders introduced dedicated time for staff to participate in well-being activities such as yoga and mindfulness. Staff feel valued by leaders and well cared for by their managers.

Governors use their wealth of experience and community links to provide leaders with effective support in the development of the curriculums. They have an accurate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the college's provision and the areas leaders are working to improve. Governors use their significant skills to support and challenge leaders to secure improvements such as in the redesign of specialist high-needs provision. Governors support continuous and sustainable improvement in the college very well.

Safeguarding

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

What does the provider need to do to improve?

- Identify what young learners know and can do when they start their course, and address gaps in their knowledge and skills as they learn in a small minority of subjects.
- Set targets for apprentices that specifically identify the knowledge, skills and behaviours they need to develop.
- Provide ongoing training for learners and apprentices so they know how to keep themselves safe from the risks of radicalisation and extremism.

Provider details

Unique reference number	130607
Address	Oxford Road Aylesbury Buckinghamshire HP21 8PD
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Website	www.buckscollegetgroup.ac.uk
Principal, CEO or equivalent	Jenny Craig
Provider type	General further education college
Date of previous inspection	9 to 17 November 2021
Main subcontractors	British Academy of Jewellery Free to Learn Limited New Meaning Training Limited Tiggywinkles, The Wildlife Hospital Foundation

Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the vice-principal for curriculum and quality, as nominee and the vice principal for commercial and partnerships as skills nominee. Inspectors took account of the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans, and the previous inspection report. The inspection was carried out using the [further education and skills inspection handbook](#) and took into account all relevant provision at the provider. Inspectors collected a wide range of evidence to inform judgements, including visiting learning sessions, scrutinising learners' work, seeking the views of learners, staff and other stakeholders, and examining the provider's documentation and records.

Inspection team

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