

# Inspection of West Suffolk College

Inspection dates: 12 to 15 November 2024

## Overall effectiveness

## Outstanding

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

## Information about this provider

West Suffolk College is part of the Eastern Education Group. It is a large general further education college in Suffolk that also serves the surrounding counties of Norfolk, Cambridgeshire and Essex. There are three large sites in Bury St Edmunds: the Sixth Form Campus, the University and Professional Development Centre and the Built Environment Campus. There are several small learning centres spread across the region, including at Haverhill, Sudbury, Thetford and Ipswich. These focus on adult and community learning.

The college offers courses across a broad range of vocational areas from entry level to degree level. At the time of the inspection, there were just over 3,500 students on education programmes for young people, including T levels, of whom over half were studying at level 3. There were around 340 students with high needs, of whom around half were studying vocational courses and half were on pathways preparing them for adulthood, employment or independence. Around 1,600 apprentices were training in a wide range of subjects. There were around 2,500 adult students, most of whom were on courses preparing them for employment and developing their basic language and numeracy skills.

The college works with two subcontractors offering a small number of health-related apprenticeships.

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

Many students and apprentices join the college with low aspirations, negative experiences of education and often highly challenging personal backgrounds. They make exceptional progress in developing resilience, positive behaviours and confidence. As a result of their time at college, they become highly ambitious and positive about their next steps and aspire to be the best they can be.

Students and apprentices thrive in the purposeful and calm environment at the college. They are polite, respectful of each other and their staff and highly motivated to succeed. They are rightly very proud to be members of the college community.

Students and apprentices benefit significantly from state-of-the-art, industry-standard resources with which they develop the skills they need to be highly confident and successful in the professional setting. For instance, students and apprentices have access to an 'extended reality lab' that prepares them very well to adapt to the fast-changing technical landscape.

Students and apprentices benefit from the comprehensive support staff provide. They work in close partnership with their teachers, who understand their learning and personal development needs well. This support contributes significantly to the excellent progress they make towards achieving their personal, educational and training goals. Their attendance at learning and training is very high.

Staff work closely with employers and other stakeholders to enable students and apprentices to gain the high-quality practical skills, knowledge and confidence they need to move on to employment, further training or higher education. For instance, catering students enhanced their practical skills when they went to the Jockey Club, where they prepared and served dinner to high-profile clients.

Students participate in a very broad range of interesting and exciting activities beyond their main area of study. These activities very successfully broaden their subject knowledge and enable them to become active citizens in their communities and gain a greater appreciation of the wider world. For instance, travel and tourism students have deepened their understanding of the industry through visits to Colchester Zoo and National Trust sites and a Turing-funded trip to Nepal.

Students with high needs lead their lives with far greater independence and gain valuable new skills which support them into employment or further education and training. They feel valued and respected. These students achieve even better than their peers. For instance, performing arts students with high needs received unconditional offers to study at highly prestigious drama institutions.

The lives of very many adults are transformed by their time at college. Not only do most of them achieve their qualifications, but they also develop their personal and social skills rapidly and securely. This ensures they can flourish and prosper in their local communities.

Apprentices quickly develop knowledge, skills and behaviours that they apply very effectively in their workplaces. They benefit from the curriculum being closely aligned to local employment needs. As a result of their training, they bring expertise and add great value to their workplaces. They achieve exceptionally well.

Students on education programmes for young people rapidly learn the skills to study effectively. They demonstrate a strong awareness of the knowledge and abilities they are gaining, and they become resilient to setbacks. Students produce work of a very high standard, often beyond the level required for the course. They achieve extremely well and move on to overwhelmingly positive destinations.

Students and apprentices, including those with high needs, feel safe at college, online and in their workplaces. They know who to contact if they have any concerns about their safety or well-being. They are confident staff would act quickly, appropriately and sensitively should they raise any concerns. They rightly value the role site staff play in helping them feel safe.

## **Contribution to meeting skills needs**

The college makes a strong contribution to meeting skills needs.

Leaders and managers have a thorough understanding of local and regional employment priorities and the current and emerging skills needed by students and apprentices. They engage very effectively with a broad range of partners to plan a relevant curriculum which gives students and apprentices the skills and personal attributes that they need to enter future employment or progress into further education or training. Leaders carefully align their priorities with those of the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP). For instance, in partnership with the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority and the Chatteris Business Cluster, leaders have identified this region of the Fens as a 'further education cold spot'. In response, they have opened the North Cambridgeshire Training Centre. As a result, local communities now have access to adult vocational courses and apprenticeships in advanced manufacturing, which aligns with the LSIP priorities.

Stakeholders regard the college as central to skills development across the region, and they see that leaders and managers play a pivotal role in shaping the skills ecosystem. For instance, leaders work, alongside employers, with other education partners in the region such as schools, other colleges and higher education institutions to raise aspirations and awareness among children and young people, including in deprived and isolated areas of the region. Staff work closely with charities such as the Suffolk Refugee Centre and the local Ukrainian Centre to provide wraparound care and support for students, many of whom have previously faced traumatic circumstances. They work with employers to enable students to train during their working day. In this way, they support employers facing recruitment challenges and enable students to improve their language skills while earning.

Employers and stakeholders collaborate closely with leaders to design and implement courses which give students and apprentices access to the education and training they need to be successful in the local and regional job market. Leaders work proactively with employers and stakeholders to embed the development of skills at all levels of study. They use stakeholder feedback highly effectively to refine courses progressively and to develop new provision that anticipates the changing contexts and future skills needs. For instance, students on the T-level digital course designed a mobile app, in conjunction with Haas Automation UK, to optimise factory productivity by tracking machine wear and efficiency. This app was subsequently adopted by the host organisation.

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

Leaders have a strong vision to promote social mobility through high-quality training, education and support. They actively seek to work with the most disadvantaged individuals and groups to ensure nobody is left behind. They are highly ambitious for their students and apprentices.

Staff use their very secure understanding of the local and regional economic context to make carefully considered decisions in the selection and development of the curriculum. Consequently, learning closely corresponds to the needs of students, apprentices and other stakeholders. For instance, staff align courses in English for speakers of other languages very closely to the varying needs and abilities of adults who have settled here. In so doing, adults rapidly develop the skills to integrate into their communities and to support their next steps.

Staff plan and sequence learning logically and very effectively. This enables students and apprentices to develop knowledge and skills over time and very often with high levels of fluency. For instance, level 2 carpentry apprentices learn about different joints, increasing in complexity, before constructing a frame with the joints in the right order.

Highly qualified and experienced staff use their expertise to plan and teach relevant and interesting lessons and training sessions in which students and apprentices readily participate. Staff model specialist language successfully so students and apprentices become confident and competent in using appropriate terminology. They are adept at explaining key concepts. They use demonstrations with considerable skill to ensure students and apprentices make rapid progress. For instance, in GCSE mathematics, teachers explain theories clearly by breaking down complex equations into step-by-step directions, which enables students to complete work independently.

Teachers focus on activities that ensure students and apprentices quickly develop new knowledge and skills. They use a range of highly effective teaching activities, including role play, demonstrations and scenario-based questions. For instance, in T-level health, teachers use a hypothetical scenario about health assessment to

explain clearly how to interact with patients and to reinforce the importance of being positive, friendly and helpful.

Staff understand students' and apprentices' needs, interests and aspirations exceptionally well. They identify students' and apprentices' starting points and make highly effective adaptations to learning as a result. For instance, specialist teachers make very well-considered use of the education, health and care plan targets of students with high needs. They then tailor personalised strategies that ensure these students make exceptional progress.

Staff use assessment to check, correct and consolidate learning very effectively. When staff identify students' misconceptions, they intervene quickly and successfully. For instance, in level 3 performing and production arts, students work in a loop of 'perform, feedback, improve', which mirrors professional practice and helps them to improve their techniques quickly and securely.

Staff work closely with employers, which contributes to enabling apprentices to make outstanding progress. Employers speak very highly of the positive relationships they enjoy with college staff, which ensure they are well informed about apprentices' progress. Staff ensure apprentices' on- and off-the-job training are closely aligned. This contributes substantially to apprentices' development and mastery of the knowledge and skills they need to become better at their job roles.

Leaders are highly committed to supporting adults back into education and training. They purposefully work with many adults who come from disadvantaged and transient groups and who join the college with few or no qualifications. They are taking very sensible and rapid action to resolve a few concerns they have identified in the adult learning provision. The positive impact of learning on adult students is profound. For instance, adults on the Building Heroes course who have left the armed forces with few prospects gain hugely valuable essential skills in basic construction and health and safety. This enables them to secure employment or higher levels of training.

Leaders understand extremely well the strengths of the college and where further improvement is needed. They have effective oversight of the quality of teaching and the outcomes students and apprentices achieve. They talk to students and apprentices and respond to their views. Leaders use the information they gain to take swift and effective action that further improves the quality of teaching. They provide staff with plentiful high-quality opportunities to refine and hone their teaching. As a result, staff maintain the currency of their skills, enabling them to provide consistently high-quality teaching and support.

Careers leaders ensure students and apprentices, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, receive very helpful and relevant careers advice and guidance. This enables students and apprentices to make well-informed decisions about their future learning and work choices.

Leaders have implemented a highly effective personal development curriculum for students that prepares them exceptionally well for life in modern Britain. Students demonstrate fundamental British values through their behaviours and attitudes in classrooms and workplaces as well as in their interactions with their staff and peers. Leaders have instilled a culture of tolerance and mutual respect throughout all aspects of college life. However, leaders have not ensured all apprentices are aware of the potential risks in their local communities, and a few younger apprentices do not thoroughly understand of what constitutes healthy relationships.

Leaders have a clear rationale and justification for the work they undertake with their two subcontractors. They conduct appropriate checks to assure themselves of the quality of the training.

Governors have a broad and relevant skill set that they use to support leaders very effectively. They play an active part in many aspects of college life. They work closely with senior leaders to set the college strategy and then monitor its implementation carefully. Governors hold leaders to account and challenge them successfully to continue to improve the quality of education and training.

## **Safeguarding**

The arrangements for safeguarding are effective.

## Provider details

<b>Unique reference number</b>	130818
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<b>Contact number</b>	01284 701301
<b>Website</b>	<a href="http://www.wsc.ac.uk">www.wsc.ac.uk</a>
<b>Principal, CEO or equivalent</b>	Dr Nikos Savvas DL
<b>Provider type</b>	General further education college
<b>Date of previous inspection</b>	1 to 4 March 2022
<b>Main subcontractors</b>	North West Anglian NHS Foundation Trust West Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust

## Information about this inspection

The inspection team was assisted by the deputy principal, as 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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