

Fircroft College Accountability Agreement 2024/2025

(includes Statutory Duty to Review how well the education we provide meets local needs)

Statement of Purpose

Fircroft offers a uniquely intensive and supportive educational experience, as the only residential Institute of Adult Learning in the Midlands. Ofsted’s 2023 inspection report recognises that we are “skilled in reaching learners who are furthest from the labour market” and that “leaders use their knowledge of skills gaps and shortages to shape their curriculum”. That curriculum is holistic in blending academic and vocational skills with functional skills and also the personal and social skills required to thrive in life and at work. Skills provision has doubled since devolution in collaboration with a wide range of partners. The college now leads on the development of Green Skills regionally and nationally. Judging Fircroft Good overall, Ofsted graded the change in the behaviour and attitudes of learners who have been failed elsewhere as Outstanding. Despite starting further back, our learners progress to employment and education at rates comparable with the rest of the sector. In addition they describe the impact on their confidence, health, aspirations and relationships as “transformational”:

“I know the person who first arrived at Fircroft and I am a completely different person now. I now have a direction and a purpose and a sense of self-worth”

The college was established by George Cadbury Jnr in 1909, inspired by the Danish Folk High School model of adult residential education and rooted in social justice principles. We have re-established those transnational links and extended those principles to include climate and environmental justice. We were the very first college in the country to declare a climate emergency.

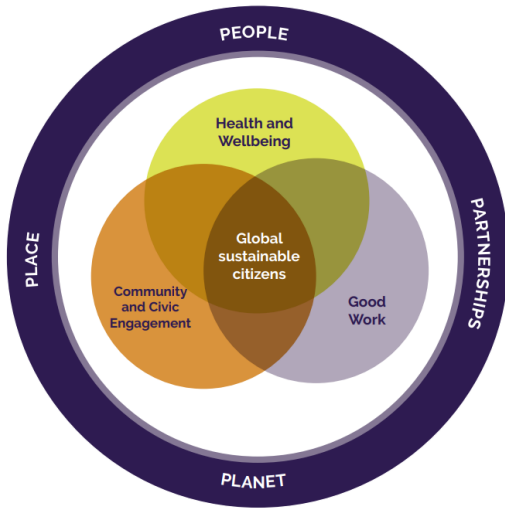
The College mission is: “To promote social and climate/environmental justice by providing adults with an excellent learning environment for personal, professional and political development.”

Our values were refreshed and embedded in 2023 as illustrated:



The college has one strategic goal which was launched in September 2023 as part of our new Strategic Plan [Towards 2030 and Just Transitions:](#)

“To support the development of global sustainable citizens through residential adult education” .



Our sector leading strategy shows that global sustainable citizens exist at the intersection of good work, health and well-being and civic and community engagement. Our strategic goal will be delivered through our strategic foundations of people, place, partnerships and planet.

In 2023-24 an internationally respected researcher helped us develop a bespoke impact framework for the college aligned to this strategic plan. This identifies 9 outcomes in relation to Health and Wellbeing, Good Work and Community and Civic Engagement. We are measuring these by adapting existing quality processes and through an annual impact survey. These are then included in the Impact section of our Self-Assessment Report.

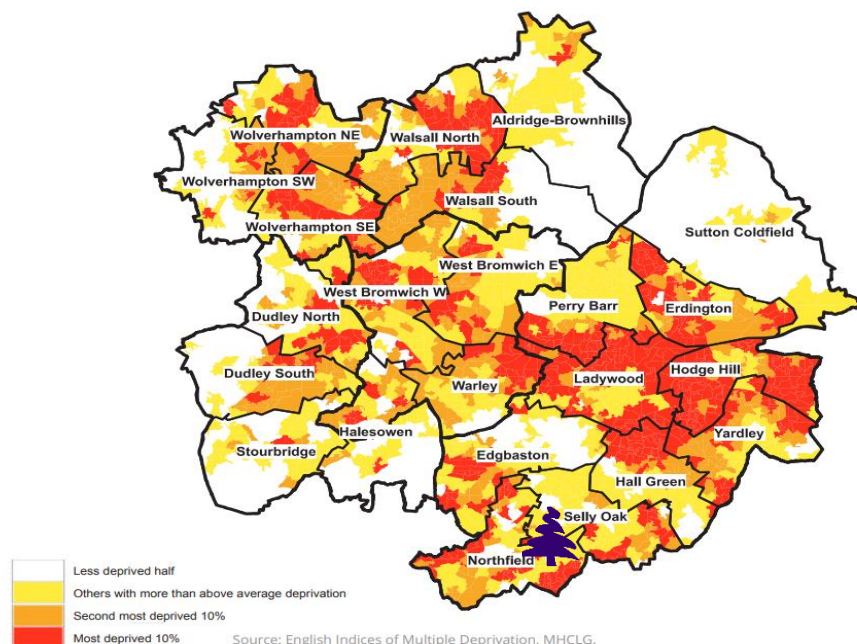
Context and Place

Fircroft is an Institute for Adult Learning so all our learners are 19+. We are a registered charity. In August 2023, we changed our legal status from an Un-incorporated Trust to a Company Limited by Guarantee.

Following the devolution of our funding to West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), 99% of our learners now live in the West Midlands Combined Authority region. We have a small ESFA contract for learners who live outside the West Midlands region. In line with National Skills Priorities we drew down Free Courses for Jobs Funding for the first time in 2023/24 for our Access to HE students

We are located in the Weoley and Selly Oak ward of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK, which is in the 10% most deprived in the country. Only 9% of our learners come from that immediate area because we are a residential college. We are easily accessible by public transport being on the A38 Bristol Road. 81% of

students live in the Birmingham local authority area. 63% of learners come from the most deprived wards (with IMD score 2 or below). We are working with WMCA to develop new provision in 2024/25 in South West Birmingham Output Areas they see as “cold spots”.



Birmingham is a City of Sanctuary and Fircroft was in the first wave of colleges nationally to help develop and then achieve College of Sanctuary status. The 2021 Census results show it is a young city with 25.1% of the population aged 0-17 compared with 20.8% nationally. In the 2011 Census 4.6% of all residents self-reported that they could not speak English well or at all, compared with 1.9% nationally. Where demand for ESOL has exceeded the regional funding available, Fircroft has organised unfunded volunteer-led provision.

West Midlands Combined Authority has the lowest employment rate (70.3%) and highest unemployment rate (6.5%) of the 10 combined authorities. 27.5% of the population are economically inactive, mostly due to disability and ill health. Through our partners, Fircroft has been particularly successful at engaging this group, who make up 45% of our enrolments. Many residents are in low paid or insecure work. Many businesses report skills shortages, with 51% of all vacancies in 2022 classed as 'hard to fill' and 35% vacant because of a lack of skills, qualifications or experience among applicants.

Around 1 in 10 adults in the region have no formal qualifications, while just three-fifths are qualified to at least level 3, compared with two-thirds nationally. 1 in 4 working age adults have poor literacy and numeracy skills. Over half of adults (56%) across the West Midlands lack the fundamental digital skills required for work and the region has the highest proportion of employers finding it difficult to hire applicants with the necessary digital skills (38%)

The Department of Work and Pensions WMCA Area Based Plan (January 2024 version) shows that Leadership and Management, Care and Teaching are amongst the vacancies most frequently posted. The Common skills most frequently posted include communications, management, customer service, teaching, leadership and problem solving which residential education is particularly good at addressing. In terms of the skills offer, the DWP WMCA plan identifies sector specific qualifications in Management and Professional, Health and Digital as gaps in provision.

In their 2024 Employment and Skills Strategy WMCA set out a vision for an integrated employment and skills system for the region. This focuses on 4 pillars and the college has mapped its curriculum offer against these:

- building strong and inclusive communities
- providing a good education up to level 2.
- supporting residents into-employment and supporting career progression.
- meeting future skills needs at level 3 and above through upskilling and reskilling.

Fircroft has had a significant Community Learning allocation. According to the WMCA's strategy, strong communities, made up of healthy, resilient, connected and proactive citizens are the basis for strong economic development and inclusive growth. Adult learning delivered in or by communities, helps connect individuals and families, improves their resilience, supports mental and physical health, engages those furthest away from civic and community life, and provides access to good work. Poor mental health, in particular, can have a devastating impact on the working age population, with almost 14.3m working days lost annually due to mental ill health nationally.

In response the college has set out these first two Accountability objectives:

1. Support the physical and mental health recovery of adults in the WM to assist work/life progression
2. Support student progression into good employment

As part of Colleges West Midlands, Fircroft College was involved in the development of the West Midlands and Warwickshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (WM&W LSIP). The Final version of the WM&W LSIP focuses on the cross-cutting themes of digital and green skills and associated leadership and management capabilities.

The WMCA strategy says that they “will continue to improve **digital inclusion** by providing access to devices, data and learning opportunities in community settings to help residents develop the skills they need to successfully access online support for health, welfare, training or employment”. The LSIP quotes an Employer Skills survey saying that 49% of employers in the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP anticipated that digital skills need enhancing. Basic IT skills such as MS Office were a major constraint. Fircroft has been a partner in Colleges West Midlands projects to address this through the Strategic Development Fund and the Local Skills Improvement Fund. We have been working to WMCA’s 2021 Digital Roadmap 2021, and Birmingham City Council’s 2021 Digital Inclusion Strategy. WMCA’s West Midlands Plan for Growth has Digital and Skills as a priority growth cluster.

The WMCA employment and skills strategy highlights that as “reflected in our Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP), **leadership and management skills** have never been in greater demand as our regional economy and businesses grapple with the challenges and opportunities brought about by Brexit, the transition to net zero and rapid technological change”. It quotes a Chartered Management Institute report on West Midlands Prosperity saying that a large proportion of the 600,000 managers in the region do not receive the support and guidance they need from their employer to develop the skills required. WMCA want to focus public funds on groups which Fircroft is well placed to access: “accidental leaders” who have been promoted internally without support and aspiring leaders in low pay or insecure employment, from racialised communities, women or with disabilities. Fircroft has some excellent practice to share coming in the top 20 employers nationally when last awarded Investors in People Gold.

The WM&W LSIP uses the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) definition of **green skills** as the “knowledge, abilities, values and attitudes needed to live in, develop and support a sustainable and resource-efficient society”.

In relation to Green skills, the WM&W LSIP identifies that it is those companies in the region who have not yet taken measures to reduce their environmental impact that identify knowledge information and skills as the barrier. Their interviews with local businesses already operating in this sector show there will be a great need for retrofit skills and for climate change risk management. The LSIP quotes a 2022 YouGov poll saying that 56% of public had not heard of green jobs, 62% didn’t understand what the term green skills meant and 65% reported they didn’t have access to green skills training. The same report by the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment and Deloitte identifies an increased need for green skills in non-specialist roles and a transition of workforces from unsustainable sectors.

Birmingham City Council declared a climate emergency in 2019 because of the city's carbon emissions and the need to reduce them by 12.8% each year. Their Route to Net Zero Action Plan acknowledges that "education has a vital role in play in raising climate awareness" and also talks about the importance of maintaining Birmingham's green spaces. Fircroft sits in 6 acres of grounds which gives us a particular opportunity and responsibility.

Since November 2023, the college has led a £837K wider greens skills project, one of six regional projects funded through the Learning and Skills Improvement Fund (LSIF). To date the project has included a wider green summit for employers and colleges, research to understand the current post 16 offer of green skills courses across the West Midlands and Warwickshire and the development of a green skills road map. The college developed and delivered a green skills teacher training programme called Green Changemakers and is be working on a Green skills digital tutor hub which will launch in April 2025. The college is also building an exemplar eco-classroom during the second year of LSIF funding. The college is also part of the Birmingham Innovate UK partnership, working with SME's to develop their green skills. Fircroft won a coveted Green Gown Award for our sustainable approach to catering. We were the first college in the country to become a Cycling UK Cycle Friendly Employer (Gold) in recognition of a range of initiatives which included working with a local co-operative to set up a City and Guilds accredited qualification in Cycle Mechanics.

In terms of National Skills Priorities, Digital and Technology and Health and Social Care are 2 of the 8 sectors identified, with Green jobs as a growth area.

These cross-cutting themes of Green and Digital and Leadership and Management Skills are already strategic priorities for the college. For our 2024/25 Accountability objectives these are expressed in terms of:

3. Support a sustainable transition, climate justice action and green skills
4. Reduce digital exclusion amongst students through our curriculum offer
5. Extend our Leadership and Management offer to close the skills gap (NEW)

The college recognises that we have some further work to do in our curriculum offer in order to stay responsive to national and regional priorities as they are further developed. Whilst we have started to work with employers and wider stakeholders to develop our courses, we need to extend this throughout our curriculum offer as one of our post-Inspection actions. It also reflects the acknowledgement within the DfE's 2023/24 national priorities of the role of the Institutes of Adult Learning (IALs) like Fircroft in delivering essential skills up to level 2 in English and Maths and level 1 in digital skills. This also highlights the importance of the IAL's curriculum offer of progression routes into national and regional priority areas.

Our final Accountability objective for 2024/25 is:

6. Increase employer/wider stakeholder engagement in curriculum offer and course design

Contribution to national, regional, local priorities

Here is the progress we have made against our previous Accountability Agreement and the plans we have put in place as a result of the local skills duty to review.

Objectives	What we did 2023/24	What else will we do in 2024/25
1. Support the physical and mental health recovery to assist work/life progression	69% of 2023/24 learners declare they have a health problem Enrolments on “Coping with” short course programme Enrichment includes meditation, singing and bike rides	Extend number of non-residential Community Learning courses delivered off-site at community venues (including South Birmingham cold spots)
2. Support student progression into good employment	Individual Learning Plans and work-based scenarios on every course Career planning units or sessions on all longer courses Head of Student Services qualified to Level 7 in Career Development Strong relationships with job centres Jobs and volunteer fairs	Admissions pick up in Individual Learning Plans Extend National Careers Service 1:1s to all longer courses Careers space and enrichment sessions in Digital Hub 25% of learners progressing to good employment
3. Supporting a sustainable transition, climate justice action and green skills	Progress against RAG rated Climate Action plan and our 4 Green pledges Led LSIF Green Skills strand across Colleges West Midlands: summit, Changemakers programme, tutor conference Across all courses 45% of 2023/24 students are naming Outdoor and Sustainability as learning gains	Further develop teacher training offer Green skills curriculum audit and embedded across curriculum areas Eco classroom build linked to this
4. Reduce digital exclusion amongst our students	Among first providers to deliver new Functional Skills IT qual Developed digital hub as part of LSIF Essential Digital Skills using links to National Digital Inclusion Network. 14% of all students 2023/24 highlight Digital as a key skill they have taken away	LSIF Yr 2 capital for devices to extend accessibility to our essential digital skills training. Increase to 30% the % of all students saying they have developed their Digital skills
5. Extend our Leadership and Management offer	<i>NEW</i>	Take our L&M offer up to Level 4 and add new topics

to close the skills gap		Target aspiring leaders in under-represented groups and accidental leaders Develop specialised provision (e.g. in civic leadership or green skills)
6. Increase employer/wider stakeholder engagement in curriculum offer and course design	Stakeholder strategy group developed 3 tier model (planning, delivery, progression) Mapping stakeholders and opportunities against that. Working with employers around IT and Health initially Joined Greater Birmingham Chamber	Extend to Leadership and Management Some engagement with an employer on every long course Knowledge transfer through Innovate UK from April 24 to 10 SMEs

Approach to developing the annual accountability Statement

We have an established cycle for curriculum planning which already involves Governors in agreeing a set of objectives. Our 2024 Accountability Statement has been developed in parallel with a new Strategic Plan for the college. It covers all our DfE funding, including the funding devolved to West Midlands Combined Authority.

Senior leaders have been involved in meetings with Corin Crane as the Chamber led on the LSIP. This year we have joined Greater Birmingham Chamber and made good use of our membership: strategic introductions, employers looking at our offer and talking to our students, joining their Good Business Forum As most of our funding is devolved, Fircroft College staff all levels meet regularly with West Midlands Combined Authority. Based on their 2022-25 AEB Strategy, WMCA's 2023/24 Strategy and Delivery Statement sets out their priorities for the region, an outcomes framework for community learning, and we have discussed how Fircroft College as a residential college can best contribute to these. We meet regularly with DWP Partnership Managers for the Black Country and Birmingham. Together we have piloted a response to the specific recruitment needs of Supported Housing employers and run a Jobs Fair at college involving local employers. Fircroft College employs a Partnership Officer in constant dialogue, particularly with 3rd sector employers and service providers,

Fircroft College plays a full role in two provider networks which are important in the region:

- Colleges West Midlands. Together we have agreed priorities for collaboration, including; Digital, Pre-employment Training, Sustainability, Anti-Racism, Safer Students. We share and publish data, and have developed a common approach to outcomes. Through the Sustainable Development Fund our colleges have researched and responded to skills needs in the areas of Digital and Health. Our Principal chairs the CWM Sustainable Futures Partnership and has previously led the work on ESOL in the region.
- West Midlands Adult and Community Learning Alliance. ACLA gives us access not only to the Heads of Adult Education services in the region but also their local authorities. We have worked with ACLA on a regional set of Community Learning outcomes and that is acknowledged in WMCA's AEB Strategy.

We are members of the corresponding national bodies (Institutes of Adult Learning, Association of Colleges and HOLEX (the lead body for adult education) as well as EAUC (The Alliance for Sustainability Leadership in Education), an ESOL Regional Leads network and the Black Leadership Group.

We have strong links through our governors with the University of Birmingham, the University of Wolverhampton and Coventry University. A progression agreement is in place with Newman University. Other HEIs in the region including Warwick, Coventry and Worcester run workshops for students or attend our HE fair.

The college is also part of the Global Folk High School Movement. This builds on Fircroft's roots and still current pedagogical practice. The Global Folk High School Movement offers a global platform to link practitioners and researchers from across the world to build relationships and share ideas about curriculum and pedagogy. Our involvement in the Global Folk High school movement has enabled and supported the development of both teacher training and curriculum in the College which supports the first of our objectives.

Board duty to review

The governing body of Fircroft college undertook a review of its contribution to local skills in February 2024. The board also undertook an external review of governance between November 2023 and March 2024. The board believes that the future of work of the college is indissolubly linked to the ability of individuals and communities to respond to the most pressing challenges of climate and other environmental/social changes of our time. This commitment has been evidenced in the college leading the LSIF Green skills project in 2023-2025. The board recognises the college's contribution to the key objectives in the WMCA's Employment and Skills Strategy 24-7. In particular the strategic priorities of building Strong and Inclusive Communities and Providing Good Education up to Level 2.

The review demonstrated that the college offers a good range of skills development at several levels and which are relevant to our particular student base. There is the opportunity to progress through the diversity of our programme, and we help and support students navigate their way to meet their needs. We reach students that other entities do not, and we motivate students to achieve at levels many did not know they could reach. We give good guidance on their next steps after their courses. The board review highlighted that the key objectives outlined above in the accountability agreement, reflect both the college's strategic planning and the WMCA's key priorities. It also highlighted that extending the college's offer in certain curriculum areas, particularly digital and in terms of additional support in terms of careers guidance will require additional funding.

The governing body recognises that in order to better meet local skills needs, the college needs to extend its work and engagement with employers (and trade unions) which is reflected in the objective in the accountability agreement, 'Increase employer/wider stakeholder engagement in curriculum offer and course design'. The College has extensive links with regional partners (primarily public sector/charities) and the introduction of the Partnership Officer position has been a very positive development in the last few years. This development is also reflected in the college's post inspection Quality Improvement Plan increasing engagement with the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and the Innovate UK project funding.

Corporation statement

On behalf of the Fircroft college corporation, it is hereby confirmed that the college plan as set out above reflects an agreed statement of purpose, aims and objectives as approved by the corporation at their meeting on 22nd of May 2024. It fulfils the statutory skills duty.

The plan will be published on the college's website within three months of the start of the new academic year and can be accessed from [this hyperlink](#).



Geoff Layer

Chair of Governors



Melanie Lenehan

Principal and CEO

Links to supporting documentation:

- [WM&W LSIP](#)
- College Strategic Plan [Towards 2030 and Just Transitions](#)
- [Colleges Financial Statements](#)
- [Ofsted inspection report](#)