

Access Further Education Limited

Address: 26 Hulme Street, Manchester, M1 5BW

Unique reference number (URN): 50313

Inspection report: 12 May 2026

Exceptional	
Strong standard	
Expected standard	
Needs attention	
Urgent improvement	

Safeguarding standards met

The safeguarding standards are met. This means that leaders and/or those responsible for governance and oversight fulfil their specific responsibilities and have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and concerns are actively identified, acted upon and managed. As a result, learners are made safer and feel safe.

How we evaluate safeguarding

When we inspect providers for safeguarding, they can have the following outcomes:

- Met: The provider has an open and positive culture of safeguarding.
- Not met: The provider has not created an open and positive culture of safeguarding. Not all legal requirements are met.

1. Inclusion, and leadership and governance

Expected standard	
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Expected standard

Inclusion

Expected standard

Leaders place a high priority on providing an inclusive culture for students and apprentices with barriers to learning, disadvantage or special educational needs and/or disabilities. They embrace individual differences and routinely remove barriers to participation for students and apprentices across the provision.

Leaders and staff identify students' and apprentices' needs early and put support in place from the beginning of their courses. Staff encourage students and apprentices to declare learning difficulties, disabilities, health concerns and disadvantage as part of their application. Staff then implement support quickly and effectively, such as braille adaptations for students with a visual impairment.

Leaders provide training for staff that helps them to assess, plan and review support arrangements skilfully. Staff mostly review and adapt support for students and apprentices to reflect their changing needs. For example, students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder benefit from decreasing levels of in-class support as they develop strategies to work more independently. However, leaders rightly recognise that teachers need further training to review and adapt the support that they provide systematically.

Leaders work well with local partners to enhance their support for students. They liaise with local authorities and social workers to update personal education plans and support for care experienced learners. Staff help set and agree targets that help students to deal with and overcome anxieties, improve their attendance, manage emotional challenges and deal with bereavement.

Leadership and governance

Expected standard

Leaders and those responsible for governance are ambitious for their students and apprentices. They have a clear vision to meet employment needs in the creative industries and sport and to prepare students for mastery of their craft and their next steps. Leaders prioritise an inclusive approach by providing an accessible curriculum where all students, regardless of disadvantage, barriers to learning or support needs, thrive and make progress towards achieving their potential.

Leaders and those responsible for governance generally know the strengths and areas for development across the provision, including at their subcontractor. They use a suitable range of quality assurance activities to identify strengths and priorities for improvement and support, to share good practices and to inform staff's development activities. Leaders have invested in resources to provide students and apprentices with industry-standard facilities and resources that mirror sector environments.

Leaders employ sector and industry experts in teaching roles. They provide bespoke professional development and qualifications that help teachers to maintain their sector expertise and to develop and enhance their teaching skills. Many teachers are dual professionals. They remain active in their industries, working as sports coaches, musicians and vocal artists, photographers, videographers, events managers and band managers.

Staff are proud to work at Access Further Education. They mostly feel that managers are mindful of their workload and wellbeing. Staff benefit from an employee assistance programme providing access to legal, financial, health and wellbeing resources and advice. They access counselling and wider benefits that include support for family members. A few staff highlight concerns around high workload.

2. Education programmes for young people

Expected standard

Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard

Most students, including those at subcontractors, achieve their qualifications. A large proportion achieve merit and distinction grades. Students who have barriers to learning achieve at least in line with their peers. However, achievement for the very few students who complete functional skills English and mathematics is too low.

Students develop and apply a range of industry-relevant skills effectively. On music courses, students confidently compose their own music. They develop music production skills using digital audio workstations and sequencer software to mix and edit music tracks. On sports courses, students frequently demonstrate high-level coaching skills and gain part-time coaching jobs while studying. Students produce work of an appropriate standard for their level and stage of study. Most students make at least expected progress.

Staff prepare students well to move quickly and confidently on to their next steps. After their courses, students typically go on to positive destinations, including further education, employment and freelance work.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard

Leaders generally have an accurate understanding of the quality of the curriculum across their national campuses. They co-design their courses with employers to reflect current and emerging skills, with a clear focus on preparing students for their chosen career after achieving their qualifications. Leaders have a clear rationale for their curriculum offer to meet the skills gaps in the creative and sports industries. They offer study programmes with clear progression pathways to higher education, employment and freelance careers.

Leaders make sure that their curriculum is accessible to all young people, including those with barriers to their education. Staff support students enrolling onto courses through early

engagement activities, such as summer programmes, welcome weeks and pre-season activities. This helps students to feel better prepared for their course and helps staff to get to know their students well. Staff consult with schools and parents effectively to facilitate a smooth transition for students with education, health and care plans or additional learning and support needs.

Teachers sequence curriculums logically so that students build on what they have already been taught. They generally use a range of appropriate teaching strategies. They check what students learn using frequent recapping, quizzes, polls and questions from previous examination papers. Teachers allow sufficient time for students to practise their new skills through assessments, assignments and projects. Students mostly develop and consolidate their new knowledge and skills, develop fluency and feel well prepared for their examinations. However, in a very few instances, teachers do not challenge students who are disengaged effectively to ensure that they do not distract or disrupt others.

Teachers typically explain topics clearly to students. In media classes, they explain and demonstrate techniques in photoshop editing effectively, such as how to remove the background noise from a recorded podcast. Teachers use contextualised examples effectively to ensure that students understand complex topics, such as profit and loss in the context of footballers advertising for clothing manufacturers. However, in a few instances, teachers do not explain topics and activities clearly enough. Students in these sessions ask for additional clarity multiple times, delaying their progress.

Participation and development

Expected standard 

Leaders provide students with a broad curriculum that develops their understanding of health, wellbeing and personal safety and allows them to understand better the steps needed for success. Students are well prepared to move into work and further study.

Students benefit from extensive opportunities beyond the curriculum to develop their industry skills. Students in sports coaching use artificial intelligence coaching tools to reflect on team formation, while students in music work with vocal coaches to develop techniques to protect their voices during performance. Many students on creative courses work together to produce industry-quality concerts, shows and performances. Students develop their confidence, ready for moving on to their chosen industries.

Students recognise the high expectations that leaders set for attendance. In many cases, students are highly committed to attend their lessons and to achieve their qualifications. They behave well in lessons and in study centres. Where students have health and personal issues that create temporary barriers to their attendance, staff work sensitively to support them to return to study. Attendance has improved over time.

Staff support students effectively to understand and be prepared for their next steps through tailored career guidance and information on potential pathways into industry. Teachers support students with preparing portfolios for university applications and with football highlight reels to support international scholarship applications.

3. Adult learning programmes

Expected standard	 
Needs attention	

Expected standard

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard 

Leaders design adult curriculums well to meet student, employer and local needs across the creative industries and sport. They work closely with employers to update and adapt the curriculums to meet emerging needs, such as incorporating the use of technology in music performance as well as in production. In the personal training curriculums, leaders co-design and co-teach bespoke topics on business planning with a focus on net loss and net gain to prepare students for industry.

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of their adult learning provision and support staff to improve their practice. Leaders and teachers have designed a curriculum that is accessible and builds effectively from students’ starting points. They support students to use newly-learned content about music theory to underpin the development of their knowledge and skills in the use of music and sound for visual media. Students develop their fluency, using complex musical modes when producing sound for a piece of video.

Teachers are appropriately qualified, experienced and knowledgeable in the subjects that they teach. Many remain active in their sectors. They are passionate about their industries and share their expertise readily with students. Teachers mostly teach effectively, supporting students to apply new knowledge and theory to practice. They support students to grasp new and difficult concepts well, making theory relatable with links to practice that bring what they teach to life.

Teachers provide useful feedback that helps students to refine and improve the quality of their work. Students take pride in their work and mostly produce work of a high standard.

Participation and development

Expected standard 

Leaders create respectful and calm learning environments where students, including many with barriers to learning and vulnerabilities, feel accepted and belong. Students who previously struggled to find friends and a support network feel supported, safe and reassured. They demonstrate professional and respectful behaviours, participate enthusiastically in learning and thrive on their courses.

Leaders have high expectations for attendance. Students’ attendance is high and improving. In the small number of cases when students struggle to attend, teachers provide appropriate

pastoral support and make external referrals where needed. They support students to rejoin lessons and help them catch up quickly.

Students benefit from an age-appropriate personal development curriculum. They learn about topics including emotional wellbeing, online safety and radicalisation and extremism. Students mostly link what they learn about these topics to their own context. Students in music talk about Martyn’s Law and the requirement for public venues and events to prepare for and mitigate the risk of terrorist attacks.

Students mostly benefit from tailored careers education, advice and guidance that prepares them well for their next steps. Teachers challenge any misconceptions or stereotypes that students may hold about careers and provide information about different pathways to employment. Personal trainers learn about specialist pathways, such as pre- and post-natal training.

Needs attention

Achievement

Needs attention 

Achievement on access to higher education courses is too low. There has been a consistent decline in the achievement outcomes across the last 3 years. Leaders and managers have taken effective actions to arrest the decline, and this has had a positive impact on the retention of students. However, it is too early to see the full impact of these actions. Students who remain on their courses achieve well, in particular those on personal training programmes.

Students gain valuable new knowledge and skills that prepare them well for their next steps. Leaders and teachers prepare and support students well to move on to their next steps. Students typically produce work of a high standard, which improves quickly and substantially over time. Students who complete personal training qualifications are highly sought after by employers. Those who complete courses across the creative curriculum and in access to higher education mostly go on to study at university.

4. Apprenticeships

Expected standard



Expected standard

Achievement

Expected standard

Apprentices who remain on their apprenticeship mostly achieve in the expected time. Just under three quarters achieve merit or distinction grades on their final assessments.

Apprentices mostly make sustained progress from their starting points and consistently produce work of an appropriate standard. They learn new practical skills, such as ensuring that electrical connections are safe and adhering to health and safety practices at work. Lighting apprentices work in pairs and use safety harnesses when working at heights on cherry pickers. They quickly develop the knowledge and skills that make them safe and ready to work in their chosen sector.

Apprentices make positive contributions to their workplaces. They understand how to adapt event and stage venues to meet customers' requirements, providing ramps, adjustable microphones and stewards for events for people aged under 18 and people with physical disabilities.

Apprentices are prepared well for their next steps. They go on to positive destinations, including self-employment.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard

Leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of the apprenticeship provision. They align curriculums to meet regional and national skills priorities, mainly in the creative industries sector.

Leaders and staff plan apprenticeship curriculums effectively to include additional industry-specific content and qualifications that equip apprentices with knowledge and skills for immediate and future success. For instance, apprentices on the screen lighting technician pathway benefit from valuable additional electrical qualifications and cherry picker licensing that makes them more employment-ready.

Trainers sequence training content thoughtfully, logically and incrementally. They ensure that apprentices build their knowledge on firm foundations so that they work effectively in their jobs. Trainers use their extensive industry experience to teach apprentices up-to-date practices. Apprentices learn the 3 steps of sound reinforcement systems so that they know how to make sure that the sound at events is of a high quality. They make at least expected progress.

Trainers mostly teach new concepts well and check apprentices' understanding effectively. They make sure that apprentices remember what they have been taught and correct any misunderstandings. Trainers use their expertise to prioritise and teach the technical language, terminology and vocabulary required for the creative sector. Apprentices learn about the average hearing ranges for human beings and the impact of this on setting up the sound equipment at a venue. Trainers introduce industry-specific terms related to lighting equipment, ensuring that apprentices can communicate effectively on site. Apprentices

develop communication skills and key technical knowledge that makes them more effective at work.

Trainers and employers plan on- and off-the-job training effectively so that apprentices consolidate their new knowledge and skills, practising and applying them at work. Apprentices benefit from working across a range of venues, theatres and open-air sites. They routinely gain the breadth and depth of experience needed for working in the sector.

Participation and development

Expected standard 

Leaders and trainers provide apprentices with a welcoming and supportive learning environment. They have high expectations for apprentices' behaviour, attendance and participation. Apprentices are motivated to learn and mostly have high rates of attendance at training and work. They demonstrate professional behaviours and are respectful to staff, colleagues and peers.

Trainers contextualise and embed fundamental British values within the curriculums. Apprentices work well with colleagues and customers. They understand the importance of treating others with respect and tolerance. For example, when apprentices work at venues hosting conferences, they understand and respect the reasons for no alcohol being served in accordance with the attendees' beliefs.

Leaders provide apprentices with a range of wider learning opportunities to support their personal and professional development within the creative industry sector. Apprentices learn about key topics, including resilience and mental health, staying safe online, body confidence and self-esteem.

Trainers provide apprentices with appropriate tailored careers education, advice and guidance. Apprentices visit sector-specific careers events on topics such as cinematography and film. They attend masterclasses about working in film, theatres and live events. Apprentices value the wider opportunities that help them to discover niche industry opportunities within their chosen sector.

5. Provision for learners with high needs

Expected standard



Expected standard 

Achievement

Expected standard 

Students with high needs largely make sustained progress from their starting points and achieve their qualifications. They develop and apply new knowledge, skills and behaviours

effectively. Students on music technology courses gain skills in music production, learning how to mix and edit tracks using specialist software.

Students typically make at least the planned progress towards achieving their education, health and care plan outcomes. A few make strong progress in developing their social and communication skills, which helps them in their personal lives.

Students, including those at the subcontractor, are prepared well for their next steps. They set up professional portfolios and use professional networking platforms to promote their skills for future work and freelance opportunities.

Staff work effectively with students to help them highlight their skills and achievements when writing university applications. Students mostly progress to positive destinations, including higher education and employment.

Curriculum and teaching

Expected standard 

Leaders provide students with high needs with an ambitious and well-designed curriculum that supports them to achieve their academic and vocational goals, as well as their education, health and care plan outcomes. They have put in place thorough processes to help potential students to disclose their support needs prior to the start of their courses. This helps staff to identify and implement support quickly and remove barriers to learning and progress.

Staff sequence the curriculum well to help students build on what they already know. Students on music technology courses learn about familiar current recording techniques and methods before studying historic and future techniques to broaden their knowledge. Students on esports courses learn the history and origins of esports. They then learn about coaching and the skills needed to be a successful esports coach. Students gain the knowledge and skills they need for their potential next steps within industry.

Teachers mostly teach students well. Students confidently explain what they have learned and the skills they have developed since starting their course. They develop high levels of creative skills in areas such as 3D games, design and illustration. Students on music production courses demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of key technical terms, such as 'velocity', 'ostinato' and 'equalisation'.

Teachers provide students with useful verbal and written feedback that identifies what they have done well and how they can improve their work. Students act on feedback and improve the quality of their work and grades over time.

Staff make learning accessible and make suitable adaptations to teaching and assessment to help students to achieve and succeed. For example, students benefit from completing presentations with a small group of chosen peers and staff to reduce anxieties. They complete assessments using adaptive technologies, video and voice recordings to make activities accessible.

Leaders provide an effective personal development programme for students with high needs to support their wider development and prepare them for adulthood. Students receive training on age-appropriate healthy relationships, mental health, online safety and the risks associated with radicalisation and extremism.

Leaders set high expectations for attendance. Students mostly attend well and are punctual. Where students cannot attend due to ongoing health issues, they benefit from support to catch up through additional one-to-one sessions, access to learning materials and supported study in the learning resource centre.

Leaders and staff foster an inclusive culture. They provide safe and welcoming learning environments and make sure that students are respectful to others. Students demonstrate professional behaviours and participate well in lessons. They report that there is no bullying or poor behaviour and are confident that staff would deal with this should it occur. Students feel safe and happy in college.

Students benefit from appropriate advice and guidance on future careers and their next steps. They complete CV writing and letters of application for jobs. Students visit universities and take part in workshops with guest speakers from industry to understand what it is like to work in their chosen vocational sector.

What it's like to be a learner and/or an apprentice at this provider

Students and apprentices study in highly supportive, positive and inclusive learning environments where their individuality is embraced and celebrated, enabling them to flourish. They develop the confidence to take ownership of their education. Students and apprentices feel safe, respected and heard. They are confident that they will be listened to and supported, regardless of their concern.

Students and apprentices work together effectively, both in the classroom and in their wider activities. They give peer feedback with respect and consideration, work in teams to help develop their coaching skills, produce monthly magazines, perform in bands and work together to raise money for local charities. Students and apprentices understand the benefit of being active citizens in their communities.

Students and apprentices are well supported by enthusiastic staff who are experts in their industry. They benefit from opportunities to work with cutting-edge technology and processes and develop industry-ready skills beyond the requirements of their qualifications.

Students and apprentices gain communication and employability skills and independence through opportunities such as coaching, media production and work-related experiences. Employer engagement and access to industry-standard equipment help students and apprentices to understand workplace expectations and prepare for their future careers effectively. Students and apprentices access high-profile professional experiences, including opportunities linked to events such as the Brit Awards and Reading and Leeds Festivals.

Students and apprentices enjoy attending their courses and training. They feel cared for and know how to access support and help should they have any concerns or barriers to their learning.

Students and apprentices value the new skills and knowledge they develop and appreciate the expertise and experience of their teachers. They mostly attend well, participate actively in lessons and display positive attitudes to learning. Students and apprentices feel proud of their work, motivated and well prepared for higher education or careers in creative industries and sport.

Many young students are disadvantaged or face barriers to learning. Students with financial barriers receive bursaries. This helps them to participate fully in college life, wear the correct kit and travel to college. Students with disadvantage benefit from effective support to access a variety of extra-curricular activities. They travel to countries, including the USA, Finland, Italy and Spain, through the Turing scheme. Young students talk about travelling abroad for the first time and experiencing cultures and countries they thought would not be accessible for them.

Adult students mostly gain high levels of new skills and knowledge, such as adeptly applying music theory to music production. They develop their confidence and are excited to share their new knowledge and skills. Adult students enjoy their courses. They express a deep sense of belonging at Access Further Education. However, too few adult students complete their access to higher education courses.

Apprentices enjoy and benefit from calm and respectful learning environments in their online sessions. They have their cameras on and actively participate in training. Apprentices are mindful and welcoming of each other's opinions and points of view. They are motivated and keen to learn.

Students with high needs learn critical thinking skills, which helps them to produce work of a high standard and prepares them well for further and higher study. At the subcontractor, they set up professional portfolios and use professional online networking platforms to promote their skills for future work and freelance opportunities. Students with high needs enhance their digital skills, attending workshops on specialist software to help them create digital content.

Next steps

- Leaders should continue to improve the retention of adult students on access to higher education courses and make sure that they achieve well.
- Leaders should ensure continued improvement to curriculum implementation so that students and apprentices benefit from a consistently high-quality curriculum and expert teaching and training.
- Leaders should ensure a consistent and persistent focus on attendance and participation for students and apprentices.
- Leaders should enhance professional learning so that staff systematically review and adapt the support that they provide for students and apprentices.

- Leaders should ensure that students and apprentices consistently make extensive progress from their starting points.
 - Leaders should make sure that the few students who study functional skills English and mathematics achieve these well.
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About this inspection

Following our updated inspection framework, all inspections are now led by His Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) or by Ofsted Inspectors (OIs) who have previously served as HMIs.

Inspection activities:

Inspectors spoke with governing board members, leaders, managers, teachers, trainers, students, apprentices, line managers, stakeholders and employers during the inspection.

The inspectors confirmed the following information about the provider:

Access Further Education is a national independent learning provider with headquarters in Manchester. The provider is made up of Access Creative College, Access Sport and Access Industry. Access Creative College specialises in creative education, with courses in computing, games, esports, media and music, at centres in 7 cities: Birmingham, Bristol, Lincoln, London, Manchester, Norwich and Plymouth. Access Sport offers vocational sport provision across 26 sites nationwide. Access Industry provides apprenticeships in business, digital, creative and sport sectors. All are part of the Access Education Group. The group includes dBs Institute, providing higher education courses, and a single subcontractor, Confetti College in Nottingham, which is part of Nottingham Trent University.

Access Further Education predominantly provides education programmes for young people, with smaller provision for adults, apprentices and students with high needs. Leaders offer specialist, industry-aligned vocational curriculums with a focus on progression to employment, apprenticeships and higher education.

At the time of the inspection, at Access Creative College and Access Sport there were 4,708 students aged 16 to 18 on study programmes, including 842 at Confetti College. Most study at level 3, with a small proportion at level 2, and very few students at level 4 at Access Creative College. Most students study music, games, media, computing or sport. A significant proportion continue to study English and mathematics as part of their study programme.

There were 222 adult students. Seventy-three share their classes with younger students, 50 study access to higher education courses and just under 100 study level 3 personal training short courses.

There were 127 apprentices, the vast majority studying at level 3. There were approximately 80 apprentices on creative and digital apprenticeships, with a further 40 on apprenticeships in business and administration.

There were 143 students with high needs, including 53 at Confetti College. They study creative and sports courses at levels 2 and 3, sharing classes with students on education programmes for young people.

Lead inspector:

Alastair Mollon, His Majesty's Inspector

Team inspectors:

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Kim Bleasdale, His Majesty's Inspector

Alison Whatsize, Ofsted Inspector

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Helen Morgan, His Majesty's Inspector

Rachel Butt, Ofsted Inspector

Nicola Welland, Ofsted Inspector

Victoria Wickington, Ofsted Inspector

Susan Gay, Ofsted Inspector

Victoria Sylvester, Ofsted Inspector

Facts and figures used on inspection

The data was used by the inspector(s) during the inspection. More recent data may have been published since the inspection took place.

 This data is from 12 May 2026

Number of learners

Total learners

5,200

Education programmes for young people

4,708

Adult learning programmes

222

Apprenticeships

127

Provision for learners with high needs

143

Percentage of learning aims successfully achieved

Education programmes for young people

Year	This provider	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25	85	84	Close to average
2024/25	85	84	Close to average
2023/24	87	83	Close to average
2023/24	87	83	Close to average
2022/23	84	81	Close to average
2022/23	84	81	Close to average

Adult learning programmes

Year	This provider	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25	74	87	Below
2024/25	74	87	Below
2023/24	79	87	Close to average
2023/24	79	87	Close to average
2022/23	82	87	Close to average

Year	This provider	National average	Compared with national average
2022/23	82	87	Close to average

Apprenticeships overall achievement rate

Year	This provider	National average	Compared with national average
2024/25	61	65	Close to average
2023/24	65	60	Close to average
2022/23	62	55	Close to average

Apprenticeships pass rate

Year	This provider	National average
2024/25	100	98
2023/24	100	98
2022/23	100	97

Our grades explained

Exceptional

Practice is exceptional: of the highest standard nationally. Other providers can learn from it.

Strong standard

The provider reaches a strong standard. Leaders are working above the standard expected of them.

Expected standard

The provider is fulfilling the expected standard of education and/or care. This means they are following the standard set out in statutory and non-statutory legislation and the professional standards expected of them.

Needs attention

The expected standards are not met but leaders are likely able to make the necessary improvements.

Urgent improvement ●

The provider needs to make urgent improvements to provide the expected standard of education and/or care.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspects services providing education and skills for children and learners of all ages, and inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people.

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