



# Palmer's College

## Inspection Report 30 April – 4 May 2007

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## Background information

## Inspection judgements

### Grading

Inspectors use a four-point scale to summarise their judgements about achievement and standards, the quality of provision, and leadership and management, which includes a grade for equality of opportunity.

The descriptors for the four grades are:

- *grade 1 – outstanding*
- *grade 2 – good*
- *grade 3 – satisfactory*
- *grade 4 – inadequate*

Further information can be found on how inspection judgements are made at [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk).

### Scope of the inspection

In deciding the scope of this inspection, inspectors took account of: the provider's most recent self-assessment report and development plans; comments from the local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) or other funding body; and where appropriate the previous inspection report ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)); reports from the inspectorate annual assessment visits or quality monitoring inspection; and data on learners and their achievements over the period since the last inspection. This inspection focused on the following aspects:

- overall effectiveness of the organisation and its capacity to improve further
- achievements and standards
- quality of provision
- leadership and management.

## Description of the provider

1. Palmer's is a medium sized sixth form college serving all the 11-16 schools in Thurrock and welcomes learners of all abilities. Students are also enrolled from outside the local authority. The college offers a range of GCSE and A level subjects and intermediate and advanced level vocational programmes. A foundation level programme is also offered.
2. There are areas of intense deprivation within the borough and very few families in Thurrock have experience of further or higher education. The qualification levels of Thurrock residents lag behind those found nationally and the proportions achieving level 2 and level 3 qualifications are significantly below the national average. Levels of adult education are amongst the lowest in the country. After a long period of unsatisfactory GCSE results in Thurrock's schools, some improvements have been made recently. The proportion of school leavers who attain five or more A\* to C grades is still slightly below the national average.
3. In 2006/07, 1,880 students aged 16-18 are following full-time courses and 35% are in receipt of Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMA). Approximately 15% of the student population are from minority ethnic groups compared to 6.1% in Thurrock. The gender balance in 2006/07 is 54% female and 46% male. Separate adult education provision ceased in 2006 due to a withdrawal of funding by the Learning and Skills Council. Around 86% of students are enrolled on advanced level courses and 12% on intermediate programmes. There is a small cohort of students on the foundation programme and the small number of adult learners is enrolled on advanced level courses in the main.
4. There is a long-standing partnership between the college and the William Palmer College Educational Trust. The Trust is a charity established to benefit the education of young people in the ancient parish of Grays and gives substantial financial support to the college and its students every year.
5. The mission of the college is to aspire to excellence in the quality of its teaching and support for all learners. The college aims to ensure that, in the pursuit of learning, learners are engaged and successful in achieving their goals.

## Summary of grades awarded

Effectiveness of provision	Outstanding: grade 1
Capacity to improve	Outstanding: grade 1
Achievements and standards	Good: grade 2
Quality of provision	Outstanding: grade 1
Leadership and management	Outstanding: grade 1
<i>Equality of opportunity</i>	<i>Outstanding: grade 1</i>

## Overall judgement

Effectiveness of provision

Outstanding: grade 1

6. Palmer's is an outstanding college. Students' achievements and the standard of their work are good. Success rates overall are well above national averages for learners from all backgrounds. Retention rates are above the national average and students' attendance is good. Value added scores on level 3 advanced courses show that students make very good progress in comparison to their starting points.
7. Teaching and learning are good. Students' additional learning needs are very effectively identified and provided for. The monitoring and reporting of students' progress are effective. There is a rigorous internal lesson observation process, but the observation of group tutorials is underdeveloped.
8. A good range of courses has been developed to meet students' needs. The range of enrichment activities is outstanding. The college's approach to educational and social inclusion is excellent, as is its promotion of equality of opportunity. The college recognises that the provision of work experience for students is underdeveloped.
9. Students receive excellent guidance and support. Initial advice and guidance and induction are very effective. Individual support for students is outstanding. The support from tutors is highly effective. The setting of goals and targets within reviews of progress is underdeveloped. Careers advice and guidance are very good.
10. Leadership and management are outstanding. Governors and the principal provide a very clear strategic direction. The college is strongly committed to inclusion, equality and diversity. There have been improvements across a range of performance criteria. Staff are highly valued. Quality assurance and the use of high quality data to improve performance are very effective. Resources are used very effectively. The college's self-assessment report identifies accurately many strengths and most areas for improvement. The college provides good value for money.

Capacity to improve

Outstanding: grade 1

11. The college demonstrates an outstanding capacity to improve. College targets are challenging and have been exceeded. There is clear recognition by governors and staff of the potential for further development. Quality assurance systems are thorough and promote improvement successfully. The self-assessment report is analytical and is largely accurate. It identifies clearly departmental variations in performance. Managers take effective action to improve underperforming areas. The overall quality of provision is excellent. The lesson observation scheme ensures a rigorous focus on the quality of teaching and learning. Staff use management information very well to analyse and improve performance. Human and physical resources are deployed very effectively. Planning is underway on new buildings to replace less satisfactory accommodation.

The effectiveness of the steps taken by the college to promote improvement since the last inspection

12. The college has taken outstanding steps to improve. All the key weaknesses identified at the last inspection have been tackled. The strategic objectives of the college are now communicated clearly and well understood by staff. The college's obligations under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act have been implemented. Access to buildings for those with restricted mobility has been enabled with the exception of the first floor of the library. Plans to develop new buildings to improve access further are underway. Retention rates on level 2 courses have improved and are now high. The lesson observation system is rigorous. Good practice is identified and shared across college. The incidence of unsatisfactory teaching has been reduced to low levels and none was observed on inspection.

## Key strengths

- excellent leadership and management
- outstanding individual support for all students
- high and improving success rates for students from all backgrounds
- outstanding commitment to social inclusion, equality and diversity to raise the aspirations of students
- highly effective use of data to improve performance
- wide range of provision responding to students' needs.

## Areas for improvement

*The college should address:*

- insufficient focus on learning in some lessons
- underdeveloped setting of actions and goals to develop independent learning.

## Main findings

### Achievements and standards

Good: grade 2

13. Achievements and standards are good. Overall success rates are well above national averages and have improved since the last inspection. The rates on level 1 and 2 courses have fluctuated but are now above national averages. Success rates on level 3 advanced courses improved well in 2005/06. Pass rates are well above national averages on most courses and the proportion of higher grades achieved is around national averages.
14. Retention rates are above the national average. According to college data there have been further improvements on most programmes during the current year. On the level 1 course, retention is below the national average. This is a small cohort of students. College data show significant improvements on level 2 programmes. Retention on A level and one-year advanced vocational programmes has improved to well above national averages. On two-year advanced vocational programmes, retention is below the national average. College data suggest that strategies to improve retention on these programmes are having a positive effect.
15. Students generally make very good progress on A level programmes but performance is variable in a number of subjects at both AS and A level. The progress made by students on GCSE and other level 2 programmes is marginally above average, given students' starting points. Progression rates to employment and higher education are good.
16. Students from all backgrounds do well. There are no significant differences between the achievement rates of students from different ethnic backgrounds or between males and females. Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those who have additional learning needs, also do well. The small number of adult students enrolled on advanced courses progress well.
17. Most students told inspectors they were enjoying their time at the college and that they were making good progress. Students on A level programmes value particularly the opportunity to broaden their education through the additional opportunities and qualifications provided by the college. The take-up of key skills qualifications is small and focused on the level 1 programme. All other students are encouraged to achieve good passes at GCSE English and mathematics.
18. The college target for attendance of 89% was exceeded last year. Attendance rates have improved since the last inspection and are very good

overall. College data suggest this improvement has been maintained. However, punctuality and attendance were less impressive in the lessons observed during the inspection.

## Quality of provision

Outstanding: grade 1

19. Teaching and learning are good. Managers have recently introduced a rigorous internal lesson observation process, which has yet to have sufficient impact on improving the required focus on learning. Observation outcomes inform appraisal and staff development systems very effectively. Action plans for underperforming teachers are very valuable in raising standards by promoting the sharing of good practice. The college has been very successful in reducing the proportion of inadequate teaching and learning. The observation of group tutorials is underdeveloped.
20. In the best lessons, students experience a good mixture of interesting individual and group activities. Learning takes place at a challenging pace and engages all students. Teachers check thoroughly that learning has occurred and students enjoy their lessons. Relationships and respect between students and teachers are of a high order. In the less effective lessons, the pace is slow and teachers talk excessively while students are passive. Opportunities to use information technology and other resources to aid learning are missed. Lesson plans lack appropriate ideas on differentiation and how to check that learning has taken place.
21. The identification of and provision for additional learning needs are very effective. The initial diagnosis and assessment of students' needs start well before students join the college and involve schools, parents and students. The very good relations with partner schools and others aid the smooth transition from compulsory education to college. Managers ensure that additional support is in place promptly. Students receive excellent support from the 'study plus' and 'maths plus' centres and from classroom-based learning consultants.
22. The college informs parents, carers and guardians of students' progress frequently, efficiently and effectively. Although parents receive detailed data on students' attainments and can compare these with previous performances, they do not have advice on how their child might best improve. College staff involve parents very well when students' attendance or performance fall below expectations. Equally, they invite parents to join in celebrations of students' success.

23. Teachers and tutors monitor and record students' progress thoroughly. Students know their targets and their current achievement, effort and attendance measures in each subject. The introduction of a minimum target grade is very recent and it is too soon to judge its effectiveness in motivating students to reach higher standards.
24. Teachers mark students' work thoroughly and in most cases correct grammatical and spelling errors. However, the quality of feedback on students' assessed work is inconsistent. In the best examples, often on BTEC first and national diploma courses, comments are comprehensive, thoughtful and very constructive. They enable students to improve their next assignments. In the less effective cases, the summative feedback is insufficient, lacks detail and does not provide sufficient formative guidance to help students produce better work.
25. The promotion of educational and social inclusion is outstanding. Students feel safe in the college environment. The college has an outstanding range of provision which is highly responsive to students' needs. The range, depth and variety of subjects and courses are wide. They meet the needs of students from a large geographical area and from a wide range of backgrounds and abilities. They cater very well for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as well as for gifted and talented students. The college uses high quality materials to attract students. These are informative and free from stereotyping.
26. The excellent range of enrichment activities includes additional qualifications and voluntary work. Academic and sporting options are available as well as those which improve students' citizenship, employability and life skills. However, not all students can access all the options because of timetabling constraints. The provision of work experience for students is underdeveloped.
27. College staff enjoy excellent relationships with primary and secondary schools, local partnerships and external organisations. The college provides very successful Cambridge University and excellence days for gifted and talented students aged 14 -16.
28. Guidance and support are outstanding. Students receive very effective advice on choosing the right course. They settle in quickly to the college with the help of a well planned induction programme, and activities organised by other learners make them feel welcome. Support for individuals is outstanding. The study centre has an extremely high profile within the college and very large numbers of students receive highly effective additional support there with their studies and with personal and

health issues. Students have very good access to higher education and careers advice and guidance.

29. Students receive excellent support through the tutorial programme. Group tutorials foster effectively team working and provide good opportunities for students to explore topics such as health and careers. Tutor group representatives play an active part in the planning and delivery of the sessions and provide an effective way for students to contribute to college life. Tutors monitor progress very well and set high standards for attendance and work. A highly effective electronic system keeps them fully informed, both of any concerns and of achievements. Progress is reviewed effectively at regular intervals through individual meetings. The use of targets and individual plans to help improvement is not yet well developed.

Leadership and management

Outstanding: grade 1

*Contributory grade:*

*Equality of opportunity*

*Outstanding: grade 1*

30. Leadership and management are outstanding. The governors and principal have established a very clear strategic direction. Their strong commitment to equality of educational opportunity, raising students' aspirations and pursuit of excellence is embraced by teaching and support staff. The needs of students come first.
31. Arrangements for quality assurance are highly effective and have developed significantly since the last inspection. The self-assessment report identifies accurately many strengths and most areas for improvement. This includes variations in performance within and between faculties. Lesson observations by inspectors did not wholly coincide with the high quality of teaching and learning identified in the college profile. The college collects comprehensive data on performance and students that are easily accessible to all staff. Staff value the accessibility of data and use it very effectively in supporting students' progress and in raising levels of performance.
32. Staff feel valued. They believe the college offers good opportunities for professional development and career progression. Mutual supportiveness amongst staff is impressive. There is strong emphasis on effective teams. Communications are good. Staff turnover and absence are low. Induction arrangements for new staff are comprehensive.

33. The college is strongly committed to inclusion, equality and diversity. There is rigorous monitoring of student progress. There are regular student satisfaction surveys. The outcomes are generally positive. The college has responded positively to the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2002. There is active commitment to child protection and health and safety with appropriate policies in place.
34. Governors take a pride in the college and have carefully considered its future development. They understand their responsibilities very well. Regular presentations and performance data inform their work very effectively. There are four vacancies on the corporation. Arrangements for governor induction and evaluating the effectiveness of the corporation are underdeveloped.
35. There are some fine buildings and facilities which are well maintained. The college recognises that some areas of accommodation are unsatisfactory and is planning a building programme. There is significant investment in information technology.
36. Financial management is very good. Resources are used highly effectively. Overall college success rates are good. The progress made by most students compared with their previous attainment is very good and in some subjects exceptional. The college gives good value for money.
37. The college is held in high esteem in the local community where it plays an important role in raising educational aspirations. Working relationships with other educational establishments, including partner schools, are highly effective. Links with the local business community are less well developed.

## Learner's achievements

Table 1\*

Success rates on mainstream level 1 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
1 Long	03/04	26	69.2	66.6	2.7				
	04/05	113	80.5	64	16.5				
	05/06	24	71						
GNVQs and precursors	03/04								
	04/05	15	93.3	73.5	19.8				
	05/06								
NVQs	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
Other	03/04	18	66.7	66.4	0.3				
	04/05	98	78.6	63.3	15.3				
	05/06	24	71						

\* Blank cells: either fewer than 15 starts, or data not applicable

Table 2\*

Success rates on mainstream level 2 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	Diff
2 Long	03/04	941	81.9	74	7.9				
	04/05	891	78.2	73.1	5.1	23	21.7	55.3	-33.6
	05/06	651	81						
GCSEs	03/04	443	82.2	77	5.2				
	04/05	503	76.3	77.8	-1.5				
	05/06	494	82						
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	109	65.1	72.5	-7.4				
	04/05	119	66.4	74.3	-8.0				
	05/06	23	78						
NVQs	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
Other	03/04	389	86.4	67.7	18.6				
	04/05	269	87	61.8	25.2	20	10	51.1	-41.1
	05/06	134	78						

\* Blank cells: either fewer than 15 starts, or data not applicable

Table 3\*

Success rates on mainstream level 3 qualifications, by qualification type, expected end year and age, 2004 to 2006, compared to the national rates for colleges of a similar type.

Notional Level	Exp End Year	16-18				19+			
		Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>	Starts – Transfers	College Rate	National Rate	<i>Diff</i>
3 Long	03/04	4058	79.5	80.4	-0.9	24	75	57	18
	04/05	4434	79.8	82.1	-2.3	24	66.7	58.8	7.8
	05/06	4254	86			16	94		
A/A2 Levels	03/04	1087	92	91.3	0.7				
	04/05	1165	91.3	91.9	-0.6	16	80	75.9	4.8
	05/06	1305	96						
AS Levels	03/04	2251	74.1	75.9	-1.8				
	04/05	2485	74.4	77.7	-3.4				
	05/06	2451	81						
GNVQs and precursors	03/04	650	77.1	68.1	8.9				
	04/05	599	77.1	74.5	2.6				
	05/06	276	87						
NVQs	03/04								
	04/05								
	05/06								
Other	03/04	70	82.9	64.1	18.8				
	04/05	185	88.1	71.6	16.5				
	05/06	222	83						

\* Blank cells: either fewer than 15 starts, or data not applicable