

WS Training Ltd

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Rebecca Perry, HMI

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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Interim visit

Context and focus of visit

On 17 March 2020, all routine inspections were suspended due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. As part of our phased return to routine inspections, we are carrying out 'interim visits' to further education and skills providers. Interim visits are to help learners, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of learners and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below. We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below and the findings are based on discussions with leaders, managers, staff and learners.

Information about the provider

WS Training Ltd is a medium-sized independent learning provider located in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk. It has four sites located around Ipswich and in Colchester. Apprentices and learners are recruited from a wide range of localities in the East of England. At the time of the visit, there were 237 adults and young people on apprenticeships. In addition, 72 learners were on study programmes, 30 learners were on specialist courses for learners with high needs and five learners were on newly introduced traineeship programmes. WS Training Ltd works with one subcontractor to provide a specialist residential programme to two learners with complex needs.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of learners and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

Leaders say they have put the welfare of learners at the heart of their curriculum plans. Staff told inspectors that they see this as an essential factor in ensuring that learners stay in learning.

Staff in all apprenticeship areas have moved to facilitate online learning and assessment. Apprentices in engineering, information technology and business have continued with their learning programmes relatively uninterrupted. Employers reported to inspectors that there has been minimal impact on their learners' progress. Leaders say that they provide frequent training for staff in the use of technology for learning. Staff recognise the useful informal support from their peers and managers.

Leaders and managers identify the need to prioritise the gaps in hairdressing apprentices' skills and knowledge. Most of these apprentices were furloughed during lockdown. Their final practical assessments and examinations were suspended.

Assessors are implementing revised individual action plans for all returning apprentices. Hairdressing employers told inspectors that they appreciate that apprentices continued to learn their theory elements remotely, even when furloughed.

Leaders and managers recognise the difficulties of arranging appropriate work placements for young learners and those with high needs. Managers report that fewer employers are now able to offer placements as a result of COVID-19 restrictions. In response, managers and staff have explained how they had redesigned elements of the curriculum to include virtual experiences of work, for example running an online shop rather a physical one.

Leaders state that they are finding fewer new apprentices starting with them. They identify that too many employers are not able to take on new staff. However, they have seen an increase in the number of learners with complex needs referred to them from the local authority.

Managers acknowledge that many apprentices are anxious about their future employment prospects, particularly in hairdressing. Assessors and careers advisers told inspectors that they ensure that careers advice and guidance continue. Managers say they are planning a virtual careers fair.

What steps are leaders, managers and staff taking to ensure that the approaches used for building knowledge and skills are appropriate to meet the reasonable needs of learners?

Staff felt involved in building the exit strategy from the lockdown. Managers reported to inspectors that they appreciated staff's positive approaches to redesigning the curriculum for this academic year. Staff consider that the pandemic has accelerated their development of providing blended learning. Staff have redesigned the curriculum for young people to enable greater flexibility of learning at home and in the workplace. They say that they have taken account of individual learners' requirements, particularly for those with high or complex needs, for example through differing amounts of face-to-face and online learning.

Staff say that all learners completed a detailed assessment of their skills and knowledge at the start of this year's learning. They checked the progress learners made during the lockdown, when learning was wholly online, and have identified gaps in learners' knowledge. Staff report that they have agreed individual plans with learners to reflect their assessment needs.

Teaching staff and assessors use a range of technology to involve learners and apprentices in their learning. They feel that they understand the importance of helping learners maintain their practical skills. For example, hairdressing apprentices make use of video and photography for assessment. Staff say that they are supporting those apprentices who have limited access to technology with more frequent recorded conversations. Staff have trained family members and carers to

provide support for learners with high needs. They told inspectors that they deliver hard copies of work to vulnerable learners with restricted internet access.

Apprentices interviewed who had little experience of work or had been furloughed found the absence of opportunities to apply their learning in the workplace frustrating. They found it more difficult to grasp mathematical concepts by online learning alone. Staff reported that they provided frequent support with these topics. Intervention coaches have been appointed to help action these specific skills deficits.

How are leaders ensuring that learners are safe and well informed about potential risks, including from online sources?

Leaders feel well informed about the welfare of their learners. Staff hold frequent welfare calls with all learners. Leaders recognise how this support has helped learners cope while continuing their learning. Managers say that they have clear routes for identifying, actioning and monitoring concerns.

Staff told inspectors that they work with learners, employers and parents to help them navigate and understand the new restrictions. They say that this has helped learners' families cope with the pressures brought about by the pandemic.

Designated safeguarding leads report feeling knowledgeable about the possible risks to learners and apprentices. They help staff identify vulnerable learners and ensure that staff intervene swiftly. Leaders regularly check on the welfare of staff. Tutors value this care and feel well supported by managers.

Staff say that they have improved e-safety training for learners and apprentices. For example, they describe how they have introduced agreed etiquette for video calls, lists of trusted websites for independent research, and webinars for parents on e-safety.

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