

# Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 54267

**Name of lead inspector:** Bev Ramsell HMI

**Visit date(s):** 30 September - 1 October 2020

**Type of provider:** Local Authority

**Address:** Tipton College  
Alexandra Road  
Tipton  
DY4 7NR

## 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 students and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities. 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

Sandwell Adult and Family Learning (SAFL), is an adult and community learning provider working across the borough of Sandwell. The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) funds SAFL to provide community learning courses up to level 2, to help adults to develop their skills in preparation for life and work. At the time of the visit, the provider had 163 learners enrolled in classroom-based programmes and 56 learners on distance-learning courses.

### **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?**

In response to the pandemic, leaders brought forward and began to put in place their strategy for digital learning. At the point of lockdown, the service had no online delivery and staff had limited access to information technology (IT). Leaders accelerated the implementation of a new IT infrastructure which resulted in the teaching staff receiving laptops and mobile phones, supporting them to work from home. However, leaders did explain that they see 'digital poverty' – learners' lack of access to a computer or to the internet – as a fundamental barrier to learning.

Leaders appreciate the financial support they have received from the WMCA, in getting their full-year allocation of funding. This support has enabled them to maintain their staffing levels and recruit new staff.

Leaders and managers explained how they have benefited from working with external organisations, such as other regional local authorities. They have been able to share best practice and discuss issues they face with their counterparts. They have liaised with a national organisation for adult learning and have benefited from

their support. As a result, leaders have embarked on a new partnership with a digital skills provider and now have the capability to widen their curriculum through distance-learning packages. They feel this will help future-proof their delivery, if another lockdown were to occur.

Stakeholders have identified some of the impact COVID-19 has had on their services. As an example, Jobcentre Plus has not been able to use community venues to support service users with job clubs. They described how joint-working arrangements are being used to support service users. Examples include using the provider's delivery sites, and working together to offer support to those seeking work. A joint initiative is underway to create a digital loans scheme to support those in digital poverty.

**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?**

Leaders have made sure that staff have access to training, to allow them to develop the skills to provide blended and online learning. Managers have supplied in-house training on using digital tools to teach, issue assignments, and mark learners' work. Tutors have also accessed webinars and courses on these topics and shared good practice with each other. Tutors now feel more confident to deliver their courses on the new platforms. Managers hold regular and frequent curriculum meetings with tutors to discuss how they are implementing training.

Leaders and managers described a variety of methods used, such as email, Skype, and WhatsApp, to maintain contact with learners. However, they are also aware that contacting some learners was a challenge and they were not always successful. As a result, they have looked at, and reviewed strategies, that they believe will help minimise these issues in the future.

Managers and tutors monitored those who had insufficient evidence for assessment. They ensured that teachers had frequent contact with these learners, where possible. Tutors have undertaken progression interviews by phone. They have also given pastoral support and welfare advice to learners. Managers and tutors maintained contact through postal services with those learners who did not have access to IT resources.

Managers identified one of the biggest challenges they face is in re-engaging with community learners. Some community learners are still cautious about returning to classrooms, and some community hubs have remained closed due to the pandemic. Managers stated that, where appropriate, other facilities are being used to accommodate teaching. However, they understand this can mean additional travel for some learners, which is an added barrier to learning.

Current learners, whether returning or new, receive an assessment of knowledge. As part of these meetings, learners receive careers advice and guidance to make sure they are on the right course.

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

Managers state they have enhanced the focus on safety in learners' induction. They have added detailed induction notes for tutors on how learners can keep safe in the current climate. Teachers explained the new safeguarding, IT awareness, and health and safety training they have completed during lockdown. They have found it beneficial and they also continue to receive regular updates.

Since September 2020, learners say they have been given detailed and specific instructions on keeping safe when attending classroom sessions, social distancing, wearing masks, and how to keep safe online. Learners say they feel safe and know who to contact should the need arise.

Tutors explained how they supported learners through the pandemic, with regular calls to check on their welfare. On returning to education, a review of their personal learning has taken place. This resulted with changes being made to their current delivery plan.

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