

Firebrand Training Ltd

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	1278573
Name of lead inspector:	Penny Fawcus, HMI
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Type of provider:	Independent learning provider
Address:	Firebrand Training Centre Wyboston Lakes Great North Road Wyboston Bedford MK44 3AL

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 (SEND).

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 apprentices.

Information about the provider

Firebrand Training Limited (Firebrand) operates from a centre at Wyboston Lakes, near St Neots. It provides residential, online and blended training to apprentices as part of their programme. Apprentices work in locations across the country. Firebrand does not use subcontractors.

At the time of the interim visit, Firebrand had 612 digital apprentices. All were studying standards-based apprenticeships. 215 apprentices were studying at level 3 and 397 at level 4. Apprenticeship programmes include software, networking, cyber, data and business analysis.

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

Leaders state that the pandemic has had no impact on the range of programmes they provide. They intend to remain focused on delivering digital courses. The main impact of the pandemic has been on how they now provide training. During the national lockdown all theory training moved online. Before, this had been predominantly taught in the classroom as a part of the residential training. Much of the skills development was already provided online, alongside workplace coaching and mentoring.

Staff say they increased their contact with employers and apprentices during lockdown. They told us they use feedback from employers and apprentices to support and improve the changes they have made. They believe they have improved their agility and resilience as an organisation.

Employers are continuing to recruit. Apprentices report that training staff are more accessible. Leaders describe how staff work with employers to ensure that apprentices have the technology to work from home. Leaders have also provided apprentices with equipment, where necessary.

Leaders have enhanced attendance tracking processes for monitoring online learning. Learning mentors join lessons to take a register of attendance. They describe how they are quick to contact any absent apprentices to secure their attendance, where possible. Managers report positive attendance and highly motivated apprentices, despite the national lockdown.

Managers state that the move from classroom to online learning has given them more time to develop staff skills in remote teaching. They have been able to observe more classes because travel was no longer an issue. Instructors have received more training in the use of the technology for remote learning approaches.

Leaders state that Firebrand intend to continue to provide a hybrid model for theory training. Apprentices and their employers can elect to attend face-to-face or continue to join remote online learning. Firebrand believes that this approach offers greater flexibility and benefits to apprentices.

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 believe that their current methods of identifying gaps in apprentices' knowledge are robust. Employers describe how Firebrand staff have worked with them to find creative solutions for apprentices working from home. For example, apprentices use Firebrand's virtual labs. They can then experience the full range of workplace duties and skills they need to complete their learning successfully.

Leaders have established a 'camera on' policy to monitor apprentices' participation in the lesson. They state that this also identifies any welfare concerns or difficult home situations affecting apprentices' learning.

Instructors say the reliability and quality of the home-based technology for some apprentices can be a challenge. They spend time guiding apprentices on the use of their equipment. They have developed apprentices' skills to participate in learning online. Apprentices now raise their hand and use the chat tool to ask questions. Instructors say that maintaining concentration for a few apprentices is a challenge. Instructors monitor reduced learner engagement during taught sessions through the use of technology. Reduced interaction with learning results in a follow-up discussion with the apprentice.

Staff and apprentices agree that the barriers to remote learning are often around the social dynamic in the home, such as children in the learning space and sharing

technology. Apprentices have been able to access the training centre if the home environment is not conducive to learning.

Managers and staff have taken care to enable apprentices with SEND to access online learning. This care includes one-to-one sessions to build apprentices' personal confidence to join group sessions.

Learning mentors tell us they have continued to provide careers advice and guidance for apprentices. At reviews, they discuss with them the skills needed to gain promotion in the work place. Apprentices are aware of what qualifications and professional development training they need to progress. Apprentices complete online learning in topics such as self-awareness, resilience and growth. Staff say they encourage apprentices to use social media business platforms as a matter of course.

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

Leaders state that support for apprentices with safeguarding issues has not changed. Staff describe teaching apprentices how to stay safe online at the start of their course and as part of their ongoing review discussion. Leaders have added pandemic-related topics to their welfare programme.

Apprentices say staff focus on their mental health and well-being more because of the pandemic. Learning mentors told us they have regular contact with work mentors to resolve issues or concerns. They often act as an advocate for less-experienced apprentices.

Staff say they have regular Covid-19 and safeguarding updates. Managers make regular checks on their welfare. They support staff to be flexible when working at home, to accommodate pressures such as childcare.

Apprentices know how to report any safeguarding concerns.

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