

North Hertfordshire College

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: General further education college

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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. 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

North Hertfordshire College is a large general further education college. Its three campus sites are based in Stevenage and Hitchin. One of the Stevenage sites is a dedicated engineering and construction centre. The college also has two specialist centres for learners with high needs. These are in Letchworth and Watford.

The college provides education programmes for young people, apprenticeship programmes and adult learning programmes in most subject areas. At the time of the interim visit, 2,061 learners aged 16 to 19, 608 adult learners, 709 apprentices and 146 learners in receipt of high-needs funding were attending the college.

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 are proud of the culture of trust, support and reflection that has developed throughout the period when providers were only open to some learners due to COVID-19 restrictions. They recognise the heightened anxiety of staff and learners because of the pandemic. They felt that their main focus should be clear and frequent communication and attention to staff and learner well-being. They feel that they were careful to listen to the concerns of staff and learners, and are decisive and respond with creative solutions.

Leaders decided to close the college a week before the announcement of COVID-19 restrictions. They say that this allowed valuable time to plan. They were able to assess staff's and learners' ability to access and take part in remote learning. Leaders say that they provided training to remedy digital skills gaps and to share remote teaching strategies with staff. They ensured that staff and learners had technology and Wi-Fi access. Staff experts in remote teaching supported colleagues who were more accustomed to classroom learning. Leaders report that teachers have developed new skills with enthusiasm.

Leaders have monitored the participation of learners on a weekly basis. They recognise that all learners are vulnerable because of the pandemic. During COVID-19 restrictions, technicians and coaches, in addition to teaching staff, maintained regular contact with learners. This contact helped identify emerging pastoral needs and provided practical assessment coaching. Staff arranged for extra support according to individual circumstances. Leaders report that learner engagement in remote learning during COVID-19 restrictions was the same as during normal classroom attendance.

Leaders say that they considered staff's and learners' nervousness about returning to on-site college life. Leaders planned for a phased return to help to build confidence for returning to on-site learning. They opened one campus in June and piloted the plan for the wider college opening. They produced a variety of resources to inform everyone about the new safety arrangements.

Employers report that college leaders were quick to respond to COVID-19 restrictions. They say that leaders invested appropriately in virtual resources to move to remote learning. Leaders worked with employers to review and adjust the curriculum in response to changes in the workplace.

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 say that they sample remote learning to encourage teachers' reflection, innovation and skills development. This has enabled leaders and managers to identify good practice in learning and to take appropriate action to improve where approaches were less effective. They use learning walks to ensure that teachers maintain learners' motivation. Managers told us that they focus on tracking the progress of learners' skills and knowledge development.

Employers describe how responsive assessors are to current changes. They state that this has enabled most apprentices to continue their learning. Assessors made frequent coaching calls to support apprentices during COVID-19 restrictions. In food retail, employers and apprentices were able to agree short breaks in apprentices' learning. This enabled them to cope with the increased demands of the workplace.

Managers and teachers state that they have planned the return to on-site teaching with care. For example, they have planned small groups for classroom activities, and have higher staff–learner ratios and more frequent individual time with learners. Leaders reviewed the curriculum at the start of year to maximise the time learners are on site. They say this is so that learners can focus on the development of practical and digital skills. Teachers stress that their focus is on building relationships with new learners and developing small peer groups for remote working. They say that this will prepare learners effectively for potential future COVID-19 restrictions.

Leaders have worked with job centres to produce new online programmes for recently unemployed adult learners. The programmes include mental health topics and managing finances, as well as job-search skills.

Leaders view work experience as a challenge in the current pandemic. They have introduced the Give a Future initiative to help provide opportunities for learners to engage with employers. Employers are offering opportunities such as remote meetings and employer-led projects.

Leaders say that they continue to place careers guidance at the centre of their tutorial programme. The careers team works with teachers so that all learners receive an appropriate careers curriculum.

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

Learners feel that teachers and leaders have provided a safe, secure online and face-to-face learning environment. They say that teachers reinforce social distancing expectations where necessary. Learners feel that they have a sound understanding of how to stay safe in a COVID-19 world. Teachers are preparing learners for the new health and safety expectations of industry, for example where learners are required to wear a mask in kitchens and salons.

Managers have used their community links to support learners and staff during COVID-19 restrictions. For example, they have identified community support for staff and student carers. Managers say that they have contributed to the local authority risk assessments for learners with high needs. Leaders have worked with the police to produce online resources and training for local priorities such as county lines and domestic abuse.

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