

# Somerset Skills and Learning CIC

Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 1220982

**Name of lead inspector:** Helen Flint, HMI

**Visit date(s):** 14–15 October 2020

**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.

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

Somerset Skills and Learning (SSL) is a community interest company (CIC) which delivers a wide range of education programmes to young people and adults across Somerset and the wider area. SSL operates from four dedicated training centres across the county, as well as providing learning in the workplace which includes apprenticeships.

Around 7,000 learners participate in community and family learning, and qualification-based courses, across Somerset and in neighbouring counties. Many learners are studying with one of SSL's 30 subcontractors. These are specialists in providing training and education to learners such as those with acute mental health issues, those recovering from addiction or cancer, or families from very deprived backgrounds. SSL also provides traineeships, and apprenticeships in childcare, supporting teaching and learning in schools, management and business administration.

### **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?**

Senior leaders identified the need to adapt their curriculum to support the people of Somerset in rapidly changing circumstances. They work closely with local employers, subcontractors and organisations such as Jobcentre Plus. They provide a range of courses and apprenticeships to help improve people's life chances. They continue to support more-vulnerable adults and young people through specialist courses, which are designed to be flexible and accessible for these learners.

SSL offers around 20 new level 2 specialist courses online, such as mental health in children. They plan to offer more of these specialist courses to meet high demand from learners. SSL also provides new online taster sessions in English and mathematics for less-confident learners to try out these subjects and has recently launched basic digital skills courses.

Leaders secured funding to buy and loan laptops to learners who could not afford these. Staff at a subcontractor, Heads Up, took activity packs to the homes of learners with dementia so that they could continue learning.

Managers are developing sector-specific traineeships, for example in childcare, which will give trainees the opportunity to gain a level 1 qualification and move onto an apprenticeship. Leaders told us about their plans to develop their curriculum further. For example, they plan to deliver their own hair and beauty apprenticeships and offer family and employability courses in Bath.

As soon as they considered it safe and practical, leaders opened centres so that learners who needed more face-to-face contact were able to attend sessions with their teachers. To support more learners this way, leaders plan to open small shop-front learning centres in several Somerset towns.

### **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?**

At the start of the pandemic, leaders moved most training online and most teachers taught their learners remotely in virtual classrooms. This included most subcontractors, although a few of these were unable to offer online teaching due to the practical nature of their courses. In these cases, learners were not able to complete their learning at that time.

Teachers now use a blend of face-to-face and virtual classroom teaching for most learners and apprentices. Leaders are planning more of this 'blended' learning in future, including for apprentices. Learners on traineeships returned to classroom teaching as soon as managers considered it safe to do so. Many subcontractors have resumed lessons at their centres, although in much smaller groups. Managers feel that trainees, new learners, those on entry-level courses and many vulnerable adult learners all benefit from physically attending sessions, where they can receive face-to-face support. Learners with additional learning needs and apprentices who are preparing for their end-point assessments also attend some sessions in person.

Managers use different ways to check that learners are continuing to learn appropriately. They evaluate teachers' lesson plans, talk to learners and staff, and identify learners who are falling behind so that they can provide more support.

Managers have developed new systems to help staff focus on learners' progress and their career or life plans. For example, teachers now have more discussion time with

learners about their future plans and how they could achieve these. Managers expect all staff to contribute to advising learners on their next steps and provide staff with advice and training to help them do this.

Managers have also given teachers training so that they can plan and teach classes online. Teachers share ideas and resources with each other. They told us that they had learned new skills and were confident in using online tools, such as whiteboards and chat bars.

Most learners have remained on their courses and their attendance online or in person is generally similar to pre-lockdown. Teachers encouraged initially-reluctant learners to participate more fully with online lessons by using their web cameras. Some teachers dressed up in different costumes, including as a dinosaur, to encourage learners to log in to see that day's costume.

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

Leaders recognised the potential negative impact of lockdown on learners' well-being. They shortened the duration of lessons to give teachers additional time with individual learners, either face-to-face or online, to discuss concerns or problems. Leaders and managers identified that moving to teaching and learning online meant they had to review their teaching practices. They developed online standards, which teachers use to maintain safe virtual environments. These include the acceptable use of web cameras, virtual waiting rooms where access into sessions is controlled, and setting an appropriate background for video calls.

Leaders keep updated on current safeguarding issues through attending regional virtual conferences and local networks. Leaders share local intelligence and updates on safeguarding themes with their subcontractors, staff and learners. Staff stay in regular, direct contact with 16- to 18-year-old learners. Learners told us that staff regularly remind them how to stay safe online.

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