

Specsavers Optical Superstores Limited

Interim visit report

Unique reference number: 1223881
Name of lead inspector: Ann Monaghan HMI
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Type of provider: Employer

Address:

Forum 6
The Forum
Parkway
Whiteley
Fareham
Hampshire
PO15 7PA

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 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

Specsavers Optical Superstores Limited provides optical and audiology services to customers in the UK, northern Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

Specsavers began their apprenticeship provision in the UK in 2015. They provide standards-based apprenticeship programmes in customer services and optical assistant at level 2 and spectacle making at level 3. At the time of the visit, there were 310 apprentices, with the vast majority studying on the optical assistant apprenticeship. Half of apprentices are aged 16–18. A small number are studying functional skills English and/or mathematics.

Specsavers are currently working on trailblazer groups to provide an apprenticeship route for some of the more clinical roles, such as dispensing optician and optometrist.

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 responded to the pandemic by reviewing their in-store operating model. They placed apprentices on furlough as they needed to ensure that the minimal staff on site could offer a full service to customers. Three quarters of apprentices decided that they wanted to continue with their learning and the others requested a break in learning.

Leaders outlined the rapid changes they made to their training strategy. They evaluated their existing online learning courses and identified the priorities for all apprentices. The majority of apprentices had remote learning designed to build their knowledge and skills. Those apprentices who were ready for final assessments had mock assessments and

detailed feedback. Leaders also recognised the importance of good mental health for all and introduced new support modules.

Leaders encouraged the coaching team to introduce online learning sessions so that apprentices could continue to develop their knowledge and skills. One coach used an existing online resource to remind learners of key knowledge points on different ocular conditions before developing this further to explore macular degeneration. Leaders ensured that team meetings included sharing effective remote learning strategies.

Leaders instigated 'Get Set and Go' sessions to secure the safe and confident return to work of apprentices. Leaders have adapted the topics offered and introduced a series of pathways so that individual learners can agree with their managers the most appropriate route to take.

Leaders have worked with staff and apprentices to review the revised ways of learning. They have made adaptations as they have gone through this period and they plan to maintain many of the adaptations longer term such as online learning modules.

Leaders have continued to work with their external partners to review and evaluate their provision. They have worked with the awarding body to ensure that plans for the final assessments are thorough and effective remotely.

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 worked with coaches and employers to reconsider the order they teach different modules. Leaders have designed a new core module, 'Build', for all apprentices which introduces the demands of apprenticeship study. Employers are now more involved in selecting the order of modules taught. For example, one store manager wanted an apprentice to learn spectacle collection first as there was a need for this in her store. Apprentices and their coaches enjoy the flexibility this approach gives to their learning.

Leaders have trained staff to develop their skills to teach remotely. They worked with the apprenticeship coaches to make sure that everyone was confident and ready to start teaching online. Staff teams meet weekly and share experiences and good practice teaching strategies. Apprenticeship coaches report how helpful they find these meetings.

Apprenticeship coaches have developed knowledge-based online learning resources and worked together to share ideas on how to develop apprentices' skills remotely. Through this sharing of ideas, coaches introduced the use of role play, witness testimonies and video recording to help apprentices provide evidence of new skills. For example, one apprentice used family members to demonstrate her skills in fitting spectacles. The coach watched this live over a video link and recorded it for evidence.

Apprenticeship coaches recognised that many apprentices' motivation fell during furlough and so introduced more frequent contact. They used survey findings to adapt teaching strategies and find out what apprentices found most useful. They shortened sessions and introduced a variety of activities so that apprentices felt more confident about their learning.

As apprentices returned to stores, coaches completed an initial scorecard to find out what they could remember and identify any gaps in knowledge or any welfare concerns. Coaches now work with apprentices and store managers to update the scorecard on a monthly basis, or more frequently if there are concerns.

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

Leaders work with external organisations to make sure that they are up to date with the potential risks caused by the pandemic. They established a working group with other employer providers and used this forum to discuss experiences and share good practice.

Managers, coaches and apprentices talked in detail about the range of support they receive and the guidance they follow so that they can work and study safely remotely and online. They follow clear protocols on dress codes and use of cameras when teaching or learning online.

Coaches monitor their apprentices and make referrals according to their needs. For example, a coach referred an apprentice who was at risk of being homeless at the start of the COVID-19 restrictions to social services, so they could access accommodation and wider support. During the frequent monitoring meetings with apprentices, coaches identified a significant increase in welfare concerns and, therefore, increased the frequency of contact.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
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E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
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