

City of Wolverhampton College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number: 130484

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Visit date(s): 21 to 22 October 2020

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

City of Wolverhampton College is a general further education college, with four campuses in Wolverhampton and surrounding areas. The college offers full-time and part-time courses from entry level through to higher education, including vocational training, A levels and apprenticeships. The provider currently has 2,018 learners aged 16 to 18 enrolled, 2,579 adult enrolments and 798 apprentices; of these, approximately 50% are on standards, with a high proportion of learners in engineering, construction, retail 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?

Leaders explained that the college moved to online learning at the time of the lockdown, providing in-depth training in the use of an online learning platform and ensuring that staff and students had access to equipment to be able to work from home. Strategies were adopted to ensure that teaching continued. These included a three-phase approach to reopening. During phase one, the college opened to learners who have special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), and phase two and three followed to support assessment, mainly in construction and hairdressing.

Leaders made the decision to follow the government guidelines, reopening in September with face-to-face contact. Risk assessments informed strategies to ensure that staff and learners were safe in the college, introducing mandatory mask wearing at all times, temperature checks and hand sanitising. Where possible, learners were placed into zones to minimise movement around the college.

Curriculum teams were supported to develop the most appropriate teaching models for their learners, with the majority adopting a 'hybrid' approach of condensed time in college and required online learning. Learners on entry level and level one courses had more time in college, and some adult courses provided a more flexible approach.

Managers explained that they had started to develop and implement approaches to ensure that learning would continue in the event of another closure, including changing teaching models to focus on practical work. Detailed plans are being developed to allow learners who have SEND to continue to attend college should this occur.

Stakeholders described a positive experience of working with the college. This included clear lines of communication, support for learners and planning to get apprentices who were furloughed back on track. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) value the partnership with the college and are working with them to develop a Youth Hub to engage with government strategies to support young people affected by COVID-19.

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?

Managers outlined approaches used to establish learners' starting points – both those learners progressing within the college and new starters – taking into consideration the wider impact of the lockdown on learners' development. They revisited and extended initial assessment and introduced early mock examinations. They use a risk-rating process to monitor the progress of individual learners against a range of factors, including progress against targets, attendance and behaviours. They agree methods to support individual learners.

Teachers continue to develop new teaching strategies. In addition to improving the use of technology to support online learning, they are also introducing new classroom-based approaches. For example, teachers merge theory and practice in construction. They are working closely with learners in vocational areas that have been most affected by COVID-19 restrictions, such as creative industries, to provide reassurance and develop new skills that will mirror changing practices, including online performances.

Managers and teachers stated that they felt supported throughout, both with their own well-being and in being able to contribute to curriculum planning and adapting their teaching practices to support learners needing to study more flexibly. They described a range of continual professional development that started during lockdown and has continued as staff and learners have returned to more face-to-face teaching and learning. For example, Defining Future Learning promotes good practice for online teaching.

Teams described new practices that they have adapted and would take forward in the post COVID-19 environment, including hybrid learning and virtual recruitment activities. They also identified opportunities to develop the provision in order to deliver more 'niche' qualifications nationally, with a fully online learning model, for example the apprenticeship standard in journalism.

The delivery of careers advice and guidance takes place both virtually and face to face. Alongside usual recruitment activity, the apprenticeship team is working with employers and the DWP to support apprentices who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic.

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

Senior leaders stated that they have kept up to date with safeguarding practice, sharing best practice with local safeguarding boards. They described how mental health issues were escalated, as well as describing the use of in-house counsellors as a first step for learners, and they used a traffic-light system to prioritise learners who identified as being more vulnerable. They discussed how they completed weekly case reviews for each learner, giving examples of how personal tutors had worked closely with learners that they identified as being at potential risk, providing support and re-engaging them in learning.

They outlined the implementation of the COVID-19 risk assessment, to ensure that staff and learners were able to return safely to learning on site. Learners told inspectors about the range of physical measures that are in place across the college campuses. These include hand-sanitation points around the college and guidance on wearing face coverings, in addition to signage promoting social distancing and handwashing. Learners stated that they felt safe.

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