Learning Curve (JAA) Limited

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	57881
Name of lead inspector:	Jonny Wright HMI
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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 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

Learning Curve (JAA) Limited is based in Spennymoor, County Durham. It is one of the largest training providers in England of distance learning and training for learners in the workplace. It provides apprenticeships, classroom-based provision and flexible learning provision to learners and apprentices in health and social care, uniformed services, construction, information and communication technology, preparation for life and work, business administration, and hairdressing and beauty. Learning Curve has seven skills centres, located in some of the most deprived areas in the north and Yorkshire, where it provides vocational skills training to the long-term unemployed and young people at risk of disengagement from education and employment. At the time of the visit, there were 3,480 learners and apprentices on programme.

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 consider that their biggest challenge during the pandemic has been the availability of funding to meet the increasing demand for online learning. They explained how they have maintained some programmes at full cost to the business to ensure that learners could complete their courses.

Leaders took account of the need for social distancing and of learners' concerns regarding COVID-19 as they responded to the challenge of getting learners back to face-to-face learning. Managers carried out risk assessments at delivery venues to ensure that they could open and provide learners with a safe return to face-to-face learning.

Leaders and managers planned the curriculum for the return to learning in response to local needs. They talked to regional partners, analysed local job vacancies and adapted

the curriculum accordingly. Managers believe there is further demand for flexible learning programmes and support for people who are made redundant.

Staff worked with employers to adapt teaching methods for apprenticeships and to maintain apprentices' programmes during lockdown. They developed a flexible approach to learning, including a fully online model for social care apprentices. Employers appreciate the flexible model, and leaders say that apprenticeship recruitment has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Leaders encouraged staff to become involved in charitable events during lockdown. Staff donated spare personal protective equipment used on hairdressing and beauty courses to local care homes, provided free school meals during the school holidays, and donated tablet computers to the local hospital so that patients could video call their families. Leaders believe that this had an uplifting effect on staff well-being and a positive impact on local communities.

Leaders explained how they check the quality of teaching and its impact on learners. They complete remote observations of teaching, check learners' attendance and monitor the number of learners who leave their course early. Leaders analyse feedback from learners and employers and use it to evaluate how well the curriculum meets their needs.

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 explained how the pandemic accelerated their move to using technology to track learners' progress. Managers believe this has been helpful in providing an oversight of the progress that learners make when learning remotely.

During the pandemic, managers had to focus on knowledge-based elements of courses as it was not always possible to teach elements that focused on development of skills. This meant that when learners returned to face-to-face learning, some had skills gaps that needed addressing. Staff prioritised the assessment and development of learners' practical skills in areas such as construction and hair and beauty to enable learners to catch up.

Tutors have provided learners who have additional needs with resources in alternative formats to enable ease of access. Staff have created resources in large print and on coloured paper. Learners use specific computer software to give them flexibility in the completion of online assessments.

Managers recognise that changes to assessment methods posed a challenge for some staff and learners. They adapted assessment methods for programmes to ensure that learners' knowledge could be assessed appropriately. This included the use of online assessment.

Leaders and managers discussed the benefits of an online approach to apprenticeship delivery. Assessors are able to spend more time with apprentices due to the reduction in their travel time. They report increased attendance in workshops because apprentices can attend online from the workplace.

Staff adapted the way that they provide careers education to learners during lockdown. They used video calls to link with employers and other agencies who provide support. Learners participated in online meetings with the army to learn about the recruitment and application process.

Managers recognise that some learners missed face-to-face delivery. They prioritised a return to learning for learners with the greatest needs. This included providing courses in art for learners experiencing challenges with their mental health.

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

Leaders and managers identified additional safeguarding risks arising from COVID-19 and considered the impact of these risks on learners and apprentices. Leaders responsible for safeguarding amended safeguarding policies in the light of the pandemic. They made staff aware of the changes and of the implications of the pandemic, particularly relating to learners' mental health and online safety.

Staff described how the additional safeguarding training that they received has helped them to protect learners when working online and as they return to face-to-face learning. Learners and apprentices say that they receive regular support and guidance about how to stay safe.

Leaders continued to engage with external partners and agencies. They have used information from their partners to adapt policies to cater for the changed circumstances brought about by the pandemic. Staff and learners understand how to raise any concerns that they have about safeguarding issues, whether these arise on or off the provider's or their employer's premises.