

Richmond Upon Thames Borough Council

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: Local authority

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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

Since the previous inspection, Richmond Upon Thames Borough Council has ceased to deliver adult learning programmes. They subcontract apprenticeship provision to Achieving for Children (AfC). AfC is a community interest company, which also contracts with other local London boroughs.

At the time of the visit, there were 82 apprentices studying a range of apprenticeship standards and frameworks from levels 2 to 5. Around two thirds of apprentices are aged under 24 years old and a fifth are aged 16 to 18 years old. They study apprenticeships in customer service, children and young people's workforce, business administration, supporting teaching and learning in schools, team leading and management.

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?

Managers in AfC have considered how they deliver the curriculum and best support apprentices while restrictions are in place. In response to rising unemployment, managers in the council and AfC work together to ensure that a curriculum strategy is in place to meet the training needs of young people in the area.

At the outset of the pandemic, managers responded by implementing the full curriculum online. They used a range of online platforms to help apprentices to continue participating in learning. During the period when providers were closed, managers in AfC procured a new virtual learning platform. They report that this enabled assessors to use a range of teaching methods to make the training interesting and to keep apprentices engaged in it. For example, assessors use the

new platform to post video clips, quizzes and links to websites, and use breakout rooms for groupwork.

Managers say they ensure that assessors make frequent contact with apprentices and employers to check on the progress that apprentices make. Assessors have responded to the changing working patterns of apprentices by being available to talk to them outside of normal business hours. They adapt the training to ensure that apprentices stay on track with their studies. They report providing extra support to apprentices when they fall behind in their training.

Managers draw on staff expertise within other departments in AfC to enrich the curriculum. For example, they report using experts in human resources and finance to teach sessions to management apprentices. In addition to the core modules that apprentices study, managers promote a suite of courses to encourage apprentices to develop their wider skills and interests. These include courses such as knitting, public speaking and how to become a social media influencer.

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 and assessors worked with leaders and employers to ensure that the very few apprentices without the necessary technologies to learn online got them. For those apprentices whose circumstances made it difficult for them to study at home, managers made their offices and training centre available, under COVID-secure guidelines.

Managers and assessors explained how they have adapted the sequencing of the curriculum to better meet the changed circumstances of apprentices. For example, they added new content on the supporting teaching and learning apprenticeship about how COVID-19 impacts upon schools and pupils.

Managers continue to check on the quality of the curriculum. For example, they sample electronic records of learners' work and of assessors' schemes of learning and evaluate teaching sessions. Staff receive training to support the move to online teaching. They have learned about the tools and features of new platforms and how to adapt teaching, so it is more suitable for an online environment.

Assessors have adapted practical assessments in light of the pandemic. For example, they use video calls to observe receptionists' skills at work and listen to telephone calls remotely. At the start of training sessions, assessors check to see what apprentices remember from previous learning using games and quizzes.

Managers and assessors recognise that the move to homeworking did have an adverse impact upon the breadth and scope of the work that apprentices could do. They continue to work with employers to ensure that apprentices have a meaningful role if they are not physically attending work.

Apprentices continue to receive careers advice and guidance from qualified staff during their apprenticeship. For example, management apprentices are encouraged to consider leadership pathways in the different departments of AfC.

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

Managers conducted a well-being survey to ascertain how well apprentices were coping when the provider was closed. They believe that they maintain an up-to-date understanding of the safeguarding risks to apprentices through frequent contact with apprentices and employers. They have put in place a range of measures to mitigate these risks. They say they have increased oversight of vulnerable apprentices, for example those with special educational needs, or those whose anxiety has increased because of the pandemic.

Apprentices have been given information from assessors about how to stay safe when working and learning online. Assessors have been trained to deliver online lessons safely. They have learned about using waiting rooms, password-protected platforms, and contacting learners only through their work phones.

Apprentices know who they can contact if they have any worries or concerns about their own safety or welfare.

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