

Watertrain Limited

Interim visit report

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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

Watertrain Limited was established in 2010, having previously worked in partnership, with a further education college and a training organisation since 2007. Watertrain Limited specialises in delivering the level 3 standard apprenticeship in water process technician. At the time of the interim visit, there were 101 apprentices aged 19 years or older and three apprentices aged 16 to 18. Watertrain Limited works across the country with several large employers. They are based in Yorkshire, Northumbria, Essex, Suffolk, Portsmouth, Kent, South East and South West.

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?

Prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, all teaching was face-to-face through workshop and small-group sessions. At the start of the COVID-19 restrictions, leaders transformed their teaching practices and moved all learning online. They acted quickly to review teaching resources, creating online delivery materials and work packs. Leaders moved the topics that were easier to teach online to earlier in apprentices' programmes. Employers are complimentary about the changes leaders have introduced, noting apprentices have continued, with little disruption, their learning throughout the pandemic.

Leaders identified that remote working has increased the contact they have with employers. Leaders have been responsive to the changing needs of the industry. When employers identified staffing issues, brought on by COVID-19, leaders offered flexible support for apprentices and employers. Apprentices and stakeholders appreciate this personalised support.

Leaders have continued to monitor the quality of the provision by refining quality assurance processes. They have modified progress trackers to monitor and record apprentices' progress. Leaders and employers tell us that these records have been invaluable in identifying any gaps in learning. Employers contribute to quality assurance by checking the suitability of online learning resources. Leaders continue to monitor staff performance through virtual 'drop-ins' during remote learning sessions and gathering feedback from employers and learners.

While many staff have embraced remote working a few staff have noted that they have struggled working from home. They miss face-to-face contact with learners and colleagues and feel socially isolated. Staff appreciate the frequent contact that leaders make to check on their mental health and well-being.

Leaders are positive about how the changes made so far will support any future COVID-19 restrictions. They have begun to reintroduce face-to-face sessions but will continue to use a mix of workshops and online learning.

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?

Learning development coaches (LDCs) appreciate the training and support they received from managers to develop online learning packages. LDCs believe that their digital skills have improved significantly, and they now share hints, tips and good practice with their colleagues. LDCs report that apprentices' digital skills have improved. Apprentices are supported by their peers and LDCs to further improve their digital skills.

Apprentices' personal learning plans help LDCs identify and address any gaps in their learning. Managers told us that apprentices' personal learning plans are updated frequently and that they provide an accurate picture of apprentices' progress. Apprentices who fall behind in their learning receive additional help from their LDCs.

Leaders and managers have much closer working relationships with employers than before the pandemic. They develop bespoke training packages for apprentices. Watertrain staff develop curriculum plans collaboratively with employers and decide together on the most appropriate training methods. They plan the sequence of modules to fit with the employer's work programme.

LDCs have adapted the curriculum delivery, ensuring that apprentices understand and can apply the technical aspects of the programme. They deliver the technical-based units, for example waste water treatments, first. Apprentices are then given virtual tours of the workplace to see how the theory is implemented and enhance their understanding.

Managers carefully monitor apprentices' attendance at off-the-job training, contacting employers promptly when apprentices fail to attend their classes. They say that attendance at off-the-job training has been high during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Leaders describe how the recruitment of apprentices has improved early support and intervention. The identification of apprentices' starting points is completed remotely and much earlier in the programme than pre-COVID-19. LDCs say that this enables them to develop an individual learning plan for each apprentice quickly.

Careers advice and guidance continued throughout COVID-19 restrictions, during apprentices' reviews, training sessions and one-to-one interviews.

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

Leaders and managers described the steps that they have taken in assessing risks as apprentices continue online learning and begin to return to face-to-face training. Managers check that resources and activities are appropriate to use in online learning sessions. Leaders work closely with employers to check that training environments are safe. For example, one employer has converted the conference suite to a classroom, ensuring that desks are two metres apart and installing plastic screening so that apprentices adhere to social distancing measures.

'Ten-minute learning' sessions and the use of 'toolbox talks' provide apprentices with training and updates, including information about risks relating to COVID-19, etiquette in online learning sessions and online risks such as phishing scams and identity theft. Apprentices appreciate the frequent welfare checks that they have with their LDCs. They feel that they can freely discuss worries and concerns, including social isolation and maintaining good mental health.

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