

Nova Training

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	53682
Name of lead inspector:	Stuart Collett HMI
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Type of provider:	Independent learning provider
Address:	3 Lower Lichfield Street Willenhall West Midlands WV13 1PX

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. Following changes to government guidance and the imposition of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, we made this visit remotely to reduce pressure on the provider.

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

Founded in 1992, Nova Training (Nova) is an independent learning provider with its head office based in Willenhall in the Metropolitan Borough of Walsall. Nova operates from 15 centres throughout the West Midlands and seven in the East of England.

At the time of the visit, there were 1,867 learners in learning. Apprenticeships accounted for 662 learners, of which 339 were studying at level 2, 314 at level 3, and nine at level 4 and above. New apprentices enrol on standards, while existing apprentices are following a mix of both standards and frameworks. 1,165 learners were undertaking study programmes. Of these, the provider receives funding for 137 learners with high needs. Three learners were on traineeships. Nova offers training in several vocational areas, including motor vehicle, construction, business administration, customer service, warehousing, retail, and 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?

Leaders discussed how they had started to implement a strategy to deliver some courses online before the pandemic. As a result, they felt well-placed to teach online when the initial period of national restrictions made this necessary.

Teachers described how they were given training and support on the move to teaching online and were allocated a development coach to help them develop their skills. They also discussed how online communication tools, such as video

conferencing, had accelerated the sharing of best practice across the provider's geographically dispersed sites.

Leaders stated that the barriers to assessment for apprentices throughout the pandemic – such as furlough, redundancy and lack of safe assessment opportunities – resulted in a significant number of apprentices being unable to complete their programme within the planned time. As a result, teachers are continuing to work with this group of apprentices until they can be assessed safely.

The availability of work experience for learners on study programmes declined rapidly throughout the pandemic and leaders took the decision to replace this temporarily with an employability qualification. They have provided learners with work experience opportunities internally, as well as working with social action groups – where possible – to provide learners with volunteering opportunities. Leaders described how they had centralised their careers advice service, and how it had been adapted to reflect the current situation.

Stakeholder employers report that the provider has taken steps to adapt to their needs and those of apprentices during the period of restrictions. They discussed how teachers offered more flexible meeting times, as the demands on their business increased, to ensure learners were still able to engage while meeting work pressures.

Stakeholders from local authorities reported that the provider had offered valuable flexibility, which allowed them to expand support for learners with high needs. This included more regular communication, targeted support for learners and support in pathway selection.

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?

Before the pandemic began, the provider had recently modified their quality assurance systems to create roles for development coaches to support the development of the curriculum, and to help develop teachers' skills. The development coaches supported teachers in the transition to online teaching and provided guidance on the creation of online resources.

Leaders increased the frequency of internal meetings to monitor learners' progress, attendance and engagement, and the quality of teaching and learning. Teachers found that this regular communication resulted in rapid feedback and decision making, which allowed them to provide timely support to learners.

Leaders and teachers stated that some learners with learning difficulties/special educational needs benefitted greatly from the use of online learning tools. For example, teachers found that learners with high levels of anxiety can engage with their learning from a comfortable and familiar environment. They were able to engage with their teachers and peers using the parts of the technology with which

they were most comfortable. For example, the use of 'text chat' was found to remove social barriers to group interaction sometimes found in face-to-face teaching.

Managers explained the differing approaches they took to ensure all learners received the resources they needed to make progress if they did not have access to appropriate technology. They discussed sending paper resources through the post, and – where this was not possible – they arranged for safe drop-off and collection points.

Teachers and managers also reported how they assessed learners' progress online using quizzes and set assignments. They told inspectors how the relaxations offered by the end-point assessment organisations had allowed some learners to continue to achieve their apprenticeship during the period of restrictions.

Teachers informed inspectors how learners' engagement remained high throughout the pandemic. They described how increased contact helped to support learners' well-being and to motivate them to continue with their learning.

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

Teachers stated how they supported vulnerable learners. They worked closely with 22 local authorities and met weekly with them to identify any concerns. They placed learners identified as at risk into supported learning hubs. Learners were allocated a support worker who contacted them twice each day to check on their mental health and well-being. Support workers also contacted family members and carers to ensure learners were safe.

Leaders told inspectors that a number of managers had recently completed designated safeguarding lead training, and that all staff had received training on the most recent statutory guidance.

Learners said that they enjoy learning online and talked about the information they received about how to stay safe online, for example the dangers of sharing personal information. They explained the process used to support them to return to the provider's premises, and the steps that have been taken to ensure they feel safe.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
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