

RNN Group

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Town Centre Campus
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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

RNN Group was formed following a merger between Rotherham College of Arts and Technology and North Notts College in 2016, and a further merger with Dearne Valley College in 2017. Apprenticeship programmes are delivered through the employer engagement department of the college, called RNN Training. RNN Group works with nine subcontractors.

At the time of the visit, there were 3,116 learners on education programmes for young people, studying courses from entry level to level 3, and 1,815 learners on adult learning programmes. There were 194 learners who have high needs. The group offers apprenticeships at all levels, and there are currently 901 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 and managers explained that they quickly adapted the curriculum to include online learning while maintaining face-to-face teaching for vulnerable learners and children of key workers. They had committed to a digital strategy before the pandemic. However, they believe that the pandemic has accelerated the transition to a blended approach, with a mix of online and face-to-face teaching.

Managers and staff have changed the sequence in which elements of programmes are taught due to the pandemic. For example, they have rescheduled work experience for many learners so that it takes place towards the end of their programme. They also work with employers to find ways to provide learners with remote exposure to real working environments.

Staff recognise the challenges that the pandemic has presented for learners' and apprentices' well-being. They offer student support services remotely and have introduced an out-of-hours help service. Leaders said that, since returning to college, learners have a more mature attitude to learning and greater independence in their study skills.

Learners who have high needs completed a summer project to support their transition to college. Staff now focus on developing the independence and digital skills that these learners will need to access remote learning in any future restrictions.

Employers believe that apprentices have continued to develop their knowledge and skills, except for a few who were furloughed. They welcome the move to online learning and value the regular communication with college staff. However, they recognise that face-to-face delivery is still important and is a preference for many apprentices.

Subcontractor staff adapted the way they teach the family learning curriculum in response to the COVID-19 restrictions. Staff worked with school leaders to identify vulnerable families and provided them with learning resources. They reported that over 980 families completed literacy challenges linked to the primary school curriculum. Staff believe that this has encouraged families to work and learn together during the pandemic.

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?

Staff adapted their programmes to meet the needs of learners during the pandemic. They extended delivery times to evenings and weekends, so learners could attend flexibly and to accommodate smaller group sizes. Staff believe that, in subjects such as construction and engineering, learners have benefited from smaller group sizes, which have enabled them to catch up with their practical work.

Leaders and managers recognise that, while online learning is helpful in enabling many learners to develop their knowledge, other learners find this approach more challenging. They identified that some learners on courses at levels 1 and 2 are less confident in engaging in online learning. They prioritised these learners for a full return to face-to-face teaching.

Learners reported that having access to both online and face-to-face teaching has helped them to continue to make progress. They said that the new approach to teaching is varied, interesting and often enjoyable, and is helping them to learn new knowledge and skills.

Leaders and managers explained that they have altered the way that they provide careers advice for learners. They have introduced a live chat function on a virtual

careers advice platform. Managers also adapted careers guidance to support apprentices who have been negatively affected by the pandemic. Apprentices were supported to find work or other pathways to completion if they had lost their jobs.

Leaders and managers explained how they evaluate the new arrangements for teaching the curriculum and use their evaluation to identify the training needs of staff. They believe that the pandemic has created an opportunity to stimulate more reluctant staff to develop their skills in online teaching.

Leaders and managers analyse attendance at face-to-face lessons and monitor learners' participation in online learning. They described the actions that they take to improve attendance and participation when needed.

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

Leaders and managers explained the actions that they have taken to mitigate risks identified during the pandemic. Prior to stopping face-to-face teaching, they identified vulnerable learners who were at risk and put measures in place to support them. Tutors worked with local authorities to provide appropriate support for learners who have high needs.

Leaders and managers have placed an increased emphasis on online safety. They said that learners and apprentices completed a thorough induction on how to keep themselves safe when online. For example, at the start of term, learners participated in a game produced by the National Crime Agency to learn about online safety in a fun and engaging way.

Learners and apprentices said that they feel safe at college and know whom to contact if they have a concern about their safety. They confirmed that tutors provide information on risks such as radicalisation and extremism, online safety and mental health and well-being.

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