

Newcastle upon Tyne City Council

Interim visit report

Unique reference number: 53504

Name of lead inspector: Charles Searle HMI

Visit date(s): 18–19 November 2020

Type of provider: Local authority

Address: Westgate Community Centre
West Road
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE4 9LU

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 in this period, including those 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.

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

Information about the provider

Newcastle City Learning is part of Newcastle upon Tyne City Council's Children, Education and Skills Directorate. It provides courses at three main sites in the city. At the time of the visit, there were 1,497 adult learners, of whom 859 were on community learning courses. There were 71 apprentices and 65 learners aged 16 to 18, of whom 16 were learners with high needs.

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?

Senior leaders describe their response to the pandemic as following two stages. The first was a coping stage, between the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions and the end of the summer term. Senior leaders' priorities at that time were that all learners and staff were kept safe and that teaching continued, either online or through the distribution of paper-based resources.

The second was an adapting stage that began before the new academic year started and continues to the present. It involves senior leaders flexing teaching models continually in response to changing COVID-19 restrictions. For example, learners aged 16 to 18 attend classes every day as they benefit most from face-to-face contact and support. Adult learners on access to higher education courses complete all their studies online as this gives them the flexibility they like without exposing them to unnecessary travel and social contact.

Senior leaders took the strategic decision to invest in capital adaptations to their three main campuses, so that they could safely bring back learners aged 16 to 18 as early as possible. This was the group they identified as most at risk of regressing in their learning during the pandemic. They organised a summer camp where returning learners could catch up on the work they missed in the previous term and new learners could benefit from an extended induction.

Curriculum managers recognise that they face some specific challenges as the term unfolds. For example, they worry that this year's learners and apprentices will not be able to replicate the high levels of progression into further education and employment of previous cohorts.

Senior leaders plan to respond to the negative impact of the pandemic by developing a traineeship programme to prepare young people for when employment opportunities and apprenticeships increase.

Senior leaders believe that there have been a number of benefits from the lockdown. For example, learners on courses in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) have become more able to develop their skills independently.

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 ensured that all teachers and learners were prepared for the adoption of remote learning by training them intensively during the summer term in how to use the service's new virtual learning platform.

Teachers continue to adapt to the many ways that learners prefer to learn online. For example, they changed the cursor arrow to a luminous dot, so learners could follow it more easily on their mobile phones.

Managers recognise that some learners have arrived at the beginning of the autumn term with gaps in their knowledge and skills. They extended the period of induction, so that they could identify more accurately the starting point of learners. Teachers provided intensive support to those who had fallen furthest behind.

Teachers have changed the order in which they teach the curriculum. They help learners who were unable to develop their skills due to the initial COVID-19 restrictions or are unable to practise their skills during the current restrictions. For example, learners with high needs on internships complete the knowledge components of their qualifications first while they wait to take up their work placements.

Teachers recognise that they are still developing new ways to assess learners' work online. Some use chat facilities and quizzes to check what learners can recall, while others use sophisticated online applications to provide instant feedback while learners carry out mathematical calculations.

Managers check the quality of remote teaching and the progress that learners make online through virtual walk-throughs. They can access teaching areas and break-out rooms online to review the standard of learners' work.

Managers ensure that learners continue to receive careers advice through the combination of a designated advisor for learners aged 16 to 18 and advice from an external agency for learners on ESOL courses.

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

At the start of the pandemic, managers identified the main concern as the anxiety of learners aged 16 to 18 caused by the lack of routine from not attending face-to-face learning. In response, tutors and pastoral staff carried out regular welfare checks on the most vulnerable learners to ensure that they were safe.

Staff ensured that learners on free school meals carried on receiving their entitlements, and they provided other learners with vouchers for food banks.

When learning restarted, managers prioritised online safety as part of an extended induction programme. This was followed up a few months later to check how much learners remembered about what they had been told. One group of learners was given additional training to reinforce their understanding of how to stay safe online.

Staff monitor learners' access to websites and social media to identify inappropriate usage. An instance of cyber bullying between two learner groups was picked up and defused through staff intervention.

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