

bemix

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Emma Barrett-Peel HMI

Visit date(s): 17-18 November 2020

Type of provider: Independent specialist college

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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 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

Skillnet Group began operating in 2001 and became bemix in June 2018. It is an independent specialist college. Based in Kent, bemix runs projects which support people with learning difficulties and/or autistic spectrum disorder to learn skills, gain qualifications and become more confident and independent. It works with employers, businesses and services in the local area. It provides supported employment opportunities to students aged 16 to 24 who have education, health and care (EHC) plans and who reside in Swale, Medway and the surrounding areas. At the time of the interim visit, there were 50 learners on a supported internship.

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 explained how they had adapted the content of the curriculum as a result of the pandemic. For example, they added topics such as COVID-19 awareness training, first aid and keeping safe online to the start of learners' programmes. They felt these changes would help learners understand how to keep safe and improve their readiness for employment. Leaders told us how they moved quickly at the start of COVID-19 restrictions to teach remotely. They explained how this gave learners more structure to their day and motivated them to continue their learning.

Leaders talked about the challenges they and their learners had faced with work placements during the pandemic. Most learners were unable to attend work because employers had closed temporarily or were working from home. Leaders spoke about

how they had introduced vocational qualifications and a job club. They told us how these changes helped prepare learners to return to work placements and future jobs. Leaders explained how staff developed new work placements for learners in sectors such as healthcare and retail in response to possible changes in employment patterns in the future

Leaders explained how they had worked with employers to support learners unable to complete their work placements before summer. They agreed learners could return for a second year to develop further the skills they needed to secure permanent employment. Employers spoke positively about the support that learners received from work coaches when on work placement.

Leaders told us how they had benefited from their contacts with local groups, charities and other independent specialist colleges. They explained how this helped them to improve resources and share good practice. They spoke about how useful it was to talk to colleagues in other specialist colleges about the challenges they faced.

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 explained how the initial COVID-19 restrictions increased learners' anxieties and disrupted their routines. They talked about the increased support they gave to learners at this time. Leaders and managers felt that, while a few learners were still very anxious, most had become more resilient during the pandemic.

Leaders and managers explained how they improved staff and learners' technology skills to prepare them for remote teaching and learning. Teachers spoke positively about the 'easy learning' guides developed by leaders that had given them confidence when teaching online.

Teachers talked about the benefits of the move to remote teaching. They spoke about how enthusiastically learners approached online learning. Teachers felt that they met as a group more frequently and shared good practice more easily because of online staff meetings.

Staff recognised that the academic and social progress of some learners had slowed as a result of being away from the classroom. They talked about how they used frequent meetings with learners to identify and fill gaps in their knowledge and skills. Staff talked about the increased time they now spend with learners to help them identify and research employment opportunities and prepare for their next steps.

Staff were pleased that they were able to provide stability and social interaction for learners as a result of returning to face-to-face teaching in September. They commented on learners' high levels of attendance and their motivation to learn. They spoke about how learners valued the regular routine that college gives them. Learners who had been at college earlier in the year spoke with confidence about learning remotely should there be more restrictions to face-to-face teaching.

Although learners said that they had enjoyed working remotely, they greatly preferred being in the classroom with their teachers.

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

Staff talked about the personalised risk assessments they carried out for each learner to check they were safe. They contacted learners quickly at the start of the pandemic to check their well-being and identify the support that they needed to help them to continue with their remote learning safely.

Staff explained the training that learners received during their induction to keep them safe online. They talked about how they help learners use social media safely and report any inappropriate behaviour when online. Staff developed resources to help learners feel safe when using public transport to get to college and their workplace.

Learners we talked with knew how to stay safe at college or when on placement. They felt safe and knew who to contact if they had concerns. They understood how to stay safe online. Learners explained how helpful they had found the counselling sessions that staff had arranged for them.

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