

Voyage Group Limited

Interim visit report

Unique reference number: 5819

Name of lead inspector: Bev Ramsell HMI

Visit date(s): 18-19 November 2020

Type of provider: Employer

Address: Wall Island
Birmingham Road
Lichfield
Staffordshire
WS14 0QP

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 apprentices, parents, employers and government understand how providers are meeting the needs of students and apprentices in this period, including apprentices with high needs and those with special educational needs and disabilities. The focus of these visits is on the themes set out below.

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

Voyage Group Limited – known as Voyage Care – is a large employer supporting over 3,450 individuals in residential and community settings across the United Kingdom. They have over 30 years of experience in supporting people with a wide spectrum of needs, including learning disabilities, physical disabilities, acquired brain injuries, autistic spectrum conditions, or challenging behaviours. In 2010 they started their first cohort of apprentices. At the time of the visit they had 315 apprentices. Some 135 were studying adult care worker standards, and 180 were studying lead adult care worker standards.

What actions are leaders taking to ensure that they provide an appropriate curriculum that responds to the reasonable needs of apprentices and stakeholders and adapts to changed circumstances?

Leaders explained how a 'business continuity test', based on a fictitious pandemic, had prepared them well for the onset of COVID-19. They explained the removal of assessors from the service centres three weeks prior to the start of restrictions, and how they decided to run the provision on a skeleton staff to limit physical contact.

Leaders described the use of a detailed risk assessment to identify the most vulnerable apprentices and staff. Apprentices with a high-risk rating took furlough, but had the opportunity to carry on with their studies. However, some decided to

take a break from learning due to their heightened stress levels. Leaders told inspectors how they used the risk assessments to support the apprentices who were still working. For example, some apprentices wanted shorter, more frequent meetings due to their changing shift patterns.

Leaders told inspectors how they worked with external agencies, such as the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, and attended webinars from government information sites to stay up to date. They explained their close working relationship with Care England and how this connection benefited them as an organisation. They discussed their involvement in the COVID-19 testing, rapid-flow testing and the vaccination programme. This involvement helped them to stay current and focused in a very challenging situation.

Stakeholders discussed the move from face-to-face teaching to teaching through an online medium. They identified an increase in the level of support and visits the apprentices receive. They said the changes in the teaching methods were more effective than those employed before the restrictions. They acknowledged that some apprentices missed the social interaction from face-to-face contact but said that 'everything else was actually much better' for them and their service. They stated that the relationships between the apprentices and the assessors had been a big influence on the success of the transition.

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 apprentices?

Leaders told inspectors how the existing quality assurance processes have remained in place throughout the pandemic. These give them assurance that apprentices were still progressing with their apprenticeship. These include regular one-to-one meetings between managers and assessors to complete an individual review of progress, in addition to regular team and standardisation meetings.

Leaders and managers emphasised the support they had received across the business to make sure learning was able to continue. This support included discussing how, at times, face-to-face assessments were possible following thorough risk assessments and regular COVID-19 testing for assessors and apprentices.

Assessors highlighted the need to be flexible and to continue to offer the provision to apprentices, some of which were working under extreme pressure. They discussed how the relationships they had with apprentices' managers were vital to ensure that learning could continue in a suitable manner. They also told inspectors that they had often changed their working hours to suit the needs of apprentices more closely during this time.

Leaders and managers stated how much learning had taken place through the use of technology throughout the pandemic, and that they plan to continue to use these technologies, where appropriate, in the future. Assessors discussed how the new

methods of teaching are beneficial for some apprentices, in part because of their flexibility. However, some still prefer personal interactions.

Assessors reported how they had modified the sequencing of the curriculum to support some apprentices. Where work pressure made studying the theoretical elements of their apprenticeship difficult, they used observation of practice to keep apprentices on track, while removing some of the pressures around learning theory. They explained how they select units at the start of their programme to meet apprentices' career aspirations and then review these throughout their programme.

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

Leaders reported how they worked closely with regulatory bodies to enable them to provide face-to-face training, where this was mandatory and essential, after the period of initial lockdown. They increased testing to a weekly frequency for those staff and apprentices who needed to engage in this contact, following rigorous risk assessments.

Apprentices told inspectors about the extra safety measures that had been put in place to monitor and support their health and welfare throughout the pandemic. They informed inspectors about the company intranet, which is used to relay important information about their safety and contains information on who they should go to if they need help.

Leaders informed inspectors that the designated safeguarding lead regularly keeps up to date with local, national, and industry-specific topics and shares these regularly, both with apprentices and the staff more widely across the organisation.

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