

# Shrewsbury Colleges Group

Interim visit report

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**Unique reference number:** 130800

**Name of lead inspector:** Peter Nelson Her Majesty's Inspector

**Visit date(s):** 17–18 November 2020

**Type of provider:** Further education

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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.

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

The Shrewsbury Colleges Group is a designated sixth-form college providing tertiary education on three campuses covering Shropshire, Telford, Wrekin and the Welsh borders. The college is the largest provider of post-16 education and training in the region. The college offers a wide range of academic and vocational qualifications across a broad spectrum of subject areas and levels.

At the time of the visit, the college provided education and training to 3,548 students aged 16 to 18, 867 adults, 365 apprentices and 187 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?**

At the beginning of the COVID-19 restrictions, leaders and managers rearranged courses so teachers could migrate to teaching online. This enabled students to study at home, with minimal disruption to learning.

In the early stages of the restrictions, managers audited students' access to computers and the internet. They issued laptops and provided internet access to around 150 students, who would otherwise have been unable to study online.

During the closure period, leaders and managers put in place measures so more vulnerable learners could continue attending college safely. In June, they then

extended those measures to enable most students to return to college, following appropriate social distancing guidelines. Since then, managers have put in place flexible teaching strategies, so education can continue should a member of staff or student need to isolate at home.

Prior to the second phase of restrictions in Wales in October, leaders organised for around 250 students who are resident in Wales to continue attending college, despite the Welsh restrictions.

Leaders and managers identify several benefits that have emerged due to the restrictions. They feel that staff have embraced online technology successfully. Teachers have collaborated closely, particularly across the different campuses, working together to find suitable strategies to develop more flexible teaching approaches. Staff have also demonstrated their initiative and commitment to overcome other challenges, such as developing virtual open evenings and representing the college at virtual careers events. They have also continued to deliver a programme of careers and higher education advice and guidance.

Local stakeholders confirm that staff at the college have been particularly responsive to changing needs. For example, teachers have designed and delivered additional training for trades union representatives nationally, so they can support the high proportion of employees across the country who are facing redundancy as a consequence of COVID-19.

### **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?**

Prior to the COVID-19 restrictions, teachers indicate they received effective support from senior colleagues throughout the transition to remote delivery. This included training on how to teach remotely using online techniques. Since returning to face-to-face delivery in June, teachers feel increasingly confident about using a blended learning approach. They appreciate the benefits of teaching face-to-face in classrooms. However, they are suitably prepared to return to further remote teaching, should the need arise.

Teachers in more vocational subject areas state they were swift to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of learners by re-ordering the curriculum. For example, teachers restructured their programmes to teach the more theoretical course components first. This was particularly important for apprentices, many of whom were furloughed and unable to develop their practical skills while away from the workplace and college premises. Once the college re-opened, students and apprentices returned to college to complete the practical components of their course.

During the period of remote learning, staff believe that they successfully continued to engage most learners. Since students returned to college, staff have provided additional support and guidance for those learners who made slower progress over

the period. Following a recent comprehensive progress review, teachers are confident that most students remain on track, despite the challenges of the previous few months.

Staff have provided appropriate support and guidance for learners who have special educational needs and/or disabilities and those who have education, health and care plans. Teachers have carried out additional risk assessments and taken actions to mitigate any risk, so these learners can continue to learn and make progress. For example, during the closure period, teachers made special travel arrangements for more vulnerable learners who otherwise would not have been able to attend the college.

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

Students and staff have received guidance to help assure their safety when studying online and since returning to college. For example, teachers have advised students about the risks of cyber bullying and safe messaging and communication techniques. Students have also received practical guidance on the safe use of public transport and appropriate social distancing rules around the college.

Since the COVID-19 restrictions began, staff have provided additional support to learners to help assure their health and well-being. During the closure period, tutors regularly contacted students and provided additional support where required. Over more recent months, leaders have introduced additional measures to support the growing number of learners with increased anxiety because of COVID-19. In response to the increased incidence of students requiring support, leaders have appointed two additional emotional health and well-being tutors. Students and staff appreciate this increase in capacity to help and support learners more thoroughly.

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