

Bishop Auckland College

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: General further education 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 and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and 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

Bishop Auckland College is a medium-sized general further education college. Its main campus is on the edge of the market town of Bishop Auckland. The college serves the County of Durham and parts of Darlington. At the time of the visit, there were 608 learners aged 16 to 18, 661 adult learners, 159 apprentices, 50 learners with high needs and 44 learners aged 14 to 16. There are no subcontractors.

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' priorities during the initial COVID-19 restrictions were the welfare of learners and ensuring that learners remained engaged in some form of learning. The local authority acknowledges the college's contribution in providing support to some of the county's most vulnerable learners, particularly those aged 14 to 16.

At the start of the pandemic, senior leaders recognised that they did not have a virtual learning platform that could cope with the demands of live online teaching. In time for the start of the autumn term, a new virtual learning platform was established that all teachers could use to teach live lessons.

Managers have adapted models of teaching as circumstances have changed during the autumn term. They have varied levels of remote learning to suit learner needs. For example, level 3 hair and beauty students were given more classroom time so they could practise their practical skills. Adult learners have the option to increase their remote learning so that they can abide by the latest COVID-19 restrictions.

Senior leaders have implemented a strict social distancing policy in all areas of the college campus. They state that, due to compliance with this policy, rates of infection have been kept low and most learners have remained in learning because they have not had to self-isolate.

Managers have reshaped timetables and recruited additional teaching staff to accommodate the significant increase in the number of learners signing up for health and social care courses.

Managers have identified some positive benefits from the pandemic. For example, the college's flexible model of remote learning has resulted in more employers choosing it to train their apprentices.

Senior leaders have contributed to shaping the local area's response to the economic impact of the pandemic through sourcing investment in training. For example, they have led on tackling digital poverty among the area's residents.

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?

Teachers have spent more time than usual at the beginning of the academic year identifying the starting points of new learners. They provide intensive support to learners to help them close gaps in their knowledge, including in English and mathematics.

Teachers have rearranged the order in which they teach some subjects to enable learners and apprentices to develop practical skills that they could not acquire during the period when they were taught online. For example, instead of starting the term with lessons in theory, learners on hair and beauty courses began by developing their cutting skills.

Managers work with employers to replicate some of the experiences that students are at risk of missing through the reduction in external work placements. In motor vehicle engineering, teachers have created a commercially based garage where learners can develop their skills in car repair work and customer service.

Managers monitor the progress and attendance of all learners, both in classrooms and when learning remotely. Learners who struggle with online learning come into the college for more face-to-face teaching. Teachers record all lessons so that learners who miss them can catch up.

Managers have changed the way that they assess their learners' work. They have introduced more video recording of practical skills sessions in subjects such as sport. On English and mathematics courses, managers plan to increase the number of mock tests that learners will take. This will provide teachers with assessed grades which they can use if learners are unable to take external examinations.

In response to the lengthy gap that some learners experienced between leaving school and starting at college, managers have increased the time that careers staff and tutors spend with learners discussing their future career plans. This helps learners to be clear about whether they are on the right courses to achieve their future aspirations.

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

Managers identified social isolation as the main safeguarding concern when the initial COVID-19 restrictions started. They counteracted this by ensuring that progress mentors made weekly contact calls to each learner and by setting up networking groups. At the start of the autumn term, managers appointed additional emotional resilience resource to provide specialist support to learners with mental health concerns.

Teachers have been trained to use questioning techniques when teaching online to help them identify learners who may be suffering from anxiety. They know how to run closed communication groups with learners on social media.

Managers have stepped up the guidance that learners receive about how to stay safe online during induction, with a specific focus on the use of the college's new virtual learning platform. Parents have received additional information on how to monitor their children's use of social media and how to protect them from online bullying and fraud.

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