

Tower Hamlets Idea Store Learning

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	53148
Name of lead inspector:	Sue Hasty, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Local authority
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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

Idea Store Learning is the London Borough of Tower Hamlets' community learning and skills service. Courses take place in four Idea Stores, one main learning centre, and 15 outreach venues across the borough. The vast majority of learners live in Tower Hamlets in postcode areas identified as economically disadvantaged. All learners are 19 and older.

Most of the provision is in English and mathematics, ranging from entry level to level 2, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) at entry level. A wide range of community learning courses is offered, focusing on mental health and wellbeing. Courses include languages, health and fitness, creative arts, and information technology (IT).

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 recognise that the biggest impact of COVID-19 is on the recruitment of new learners and having the space to hold classes in centres. On ESOL courses, managers made sure that existing learners returned to classes first before enrolling new learners. For performing arts courses, health and safety restrictions on class sizes mean that fewer learners attend in person. Leaders estimate that they would usually have 50% more learners in education by now.

Leaders described how they feel it was important to keep classes running as much as possible during the period of national restrictions. They say there was a mixed approach to classes reopening. They gave teachers the time and the training to prepare and adapt their courses for online teaching, where appropriate.

Leaders explain that on ESOL courses, face-to-face teaching works best. This is because most learners do not have computers at home, or they share them with several family members. ESOL learners appreciate being back in the classroom after periods of self-isolation.

Leaders say that for courses in languages and creative arts, teachers have been able to adapt well to online learning. New courses taught entirely online prove popular for unemployed adults, for example in English, mathematics, and job search skills. On these online courses, leaders say that the proportion of learners who attend and stay on their course is high.

Classes for a small group of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities have yet to resume. These classes take place in a community venue that remains closed. Many learners in this group are shielding in order to look after their health.

Managers report that for ESOL and British sign language courses, the date for taking the end of course assessment is now later in the year. This is so that learners have enough time to catch up with their studies.

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 support teachers to develop their skills in online teaching through individual tuition and drop-in sessions. They identify in-house experts who encourage teachers to try out different ways of teaching using digital technology. Teachers speak highly of the support they gain from sharing the new skills they have learned from each other. Managers recognise the need to extend teachers' online teaching skills.

Teachers across a range of subjects describe the adaptations they make to teach their course online. In yoga, teachers and learners share their screens to demonstrate and practise different poses. In visual arts, learners extend their knowledge by visiting online art galleries from around the world. In language courses, many learners working in the financial sector returned overseas at the beginning of the pandemic. Moving these courses online means that they can continue with their studies.

Learners say that learning online is a positive experience. Given the choice, they prefer to learn in the classroom because they miss the social interaction. Managers say they know that learners who have dyslexia struggle with learning online.

Managers acknowledge that access to IT and a lack of computer skills prevent many ESOL learners from learning online. They overcome this by supplying laptops on loan where they can. Teachers show learners how to use IT software on a variety of devices. They create 'how to' videos in English and Bengali to help learners remember the skills they learn.

Teachers describe the new ways they assess learners' progress and give feedback. In dance classes, teachers ask learners to upload videos of themselves executing movements. For languages, teachers use a combination of voice notes and web-based learning platforms to give verbal and written feedback on homework.

Learners receive careers advice and guidance through the council's 'Workpath' team.

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

Leaders explained that, at the outbreak of the pandemic, the safeguarding policy that was in place included guidance on keeping safe online. Managers have since trained teachers in additional safety measures, such as using secure online teaching platforms and how to protect content on video sharing platforms. Teachers show learners how to change their backgrounds when working online, to ensure privacy.

In fitness classes, teachers assist learners with risk assessments of their homes. Teachers advise learners to check for hazards so that they can move safely around a room.

Leaders say that their concerns at present are well-being and welfare issues. Staff contact learners regularly to check for signs of deterioration in mental or physical health. They refer learners to a range of support services where necessary, for example foodbanks. Teachers invite the 'Talking Therapies' team into online lessons to explain the help available for learners.

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