

NCG

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Ken Merry, Her Majesty's Inspector

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Type of provider: General further education college

Address: Rye Hill Campus
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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

NCG is a very large further education provider that consists of Carlisle College, Kidderminster College, Lewisham College, Newcastle College, Newcastle Sixth Form College, Southwark College, and West Lancashire College. NCG provides education and training to approximately 11,000 learners on study programmes, 6,150 learners on adult learning programmes, 1,800 apprentices, and 500 learners who have 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?

Senior leaders for the group responded to the pandemic by providing the individual college leaders with a set of expectations about teaching and the curriculum in the changed circumstances. College leaders explained that they act in line with these expectations, taking account of the local context and their learners.

Leaders have supported teachers to improve their skills and confidence to teach online. They have revised their teaching strategy to set out clear expectations about the standards that teachers should meet when teaching remotely. Managers check the quality of online teaching through remote lesson observations and online scrutiny of learners' work. Teachers participate in a range of developmental activities to improve their practice. For example, at West Lancashire College, several teachers have undertaken accredited training with a prestigious technology company.

Leaders have adapted the content and delivery of the curriculum depending on the level of the course and the subjects that learners study. Where they believe learners would benefit from increased face-to-face delivery, such as at Newcastle Sixth Form College, they have planned timetables to facilitate this. On many sites, leaders prioritise face-to-face lessons for learners with high needs and those on skills-based vocational courses, such as construction or hairdressing.

On sites where space is limited, leaders have made arrangements to use additional facilities to increase the capacity to provide learning that meets COVID-19 safety arrangements. For example, managers have moved learners in Carlisle into a vacant secondary school to increase the number of rooms available for teaching. Learners on performing arts courses at Southwark College use local public space as an open-air dance studio.

Leaders believe that the proportion of learners who achieved their qualifications in the last academic year was unaffected by the pandemic. They recognise, however, that apprentices did not achieve as well. This was due to the large number of apprentices who were furloughed and the lack of opportunities for end-point assessment during the COVID-19 restrictions.

Employers and other partner organisations from all regions are positive about the response of NCG leaders to the challenges of the pandemic. They told us that the provision of online learning is effective and that learners receive the support they need. Subcontractors are positive about the help that they receive to increase the digital skills and confidence of their teachers.

Leaders have responded to changes in local employment needs across the regions in which they operate. Managers have increased the number of places available in health-related subjects at most sites as more learners have the ambition to work in the health services. For example, they have increased the volume of employment-related programmes on offer at Southwark College due to requests from local Jobcentre Plus officials to address growing levels of unemployment in the borough.

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 across all sites have used assessment to identify gaps in learners' knowledge, skills, and behaviours caused by lost learning during the pandemic. Teachers have used this information to change the order that they teach the topics in their subject to fill the gaps.

Staff provide support to learners who need extra help and training to use technology to access the online aspects of their course. For example, teachers coach learners to develop the digital skills they need, such as how to save documents correctly and how to use video call technology appropriately.

Leaders believe that learners attend and participate enthusiastically in remote learning. Learners comment that the quality of remote learning has improved over time. Where necessary, managers provide learners with the equipment that they need to engage with online learning.

Staff adjusted the way that they provided careers advice and guidance to reflect the changing circumstances brought about by the pandemic. They used telephone calls and virtual activities, such as video tours of campus facilities, to replace the need for new learners to physically visit college sites. Staff also supported new learners with 'summer packs' of activities to prepare them for the move into college.

Throughout the pandemic, staff have supported learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Many sites, including Lewisham College and Newcastle College, remained open to learners with SEND throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. Leaders ensured that transition activities for learners with SEND happened on site during the summer, so that learners were less anxious about starting college at the start of this academic year.

Teachers and learners explained how they have worked together to overcome some of the challenges that remote learning has posed for practical subjects. For example, learners studying music at Kidderminster College take part in online music productions. Learners on catering courses at Lewisham College cook at home following online demonstrations. Learners on hairdressing courses at Newcastle College practise their skills on mannequin training heads at home.

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

Leaders and staff work closely with partner agencies, such as local authorities and the police, to ensure that learners are well supported and kept safe. They are acutely aware of the additional challenges that learners face due to the pandemic. They ensure that learners can continue to access essential support services, such as counselling and pastoral care.

Learners and apprentices receive guidance and training on how to stay safe in all environments, including online. They are aware of risks such as online scams and cyber-bullying. They know how to report any safeguarding concerns and they feel safe at college and at work.

Teachers receive training in online risks and other risks exacerbated by lockdown, such as domestic violence and gang activity. They also receive guidance on minimising the risk of COVID-19 infection. They use this information to keep learners and themselves safe. Leaders check how staff and learners are implementing online safety strategies by observing lessons remotely.

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