

Learn Plus Us

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	1237195
Name of lead inspector:	Gayle Saundry, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Independent learning provider
Address:	63–65 Colney Hatch Lane London N10 1LR

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.

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

Learn Plus Us is a small independent learning provider based in Barnet, north London. The provider opened in 2008, and since 2014 has offered courses for adult learners in childcare, education, English and mathematics, and health and social care. Since January 2018, the provider has also offered apprenticeships in the same subjects. At the time of the interim visit, Learn Plus Us had 80 apprentices and 95 adult learners. The majority of adult learners fund their studies through an advanced learner loan and register with the provider from across London.

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?

In March 2020, senior leaders had to face the dual challenge of a change in ownership and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders responded by making changes to their leadership team, including appointing a new managing director. Leaders have reduced the breadth of the courses they offer, with a focus on care and early years, where they feel their training is most effective.

Leaders consider the move from face-to-face to online teaching a significant change in the way they work. Middle leaders feel that they have minimised the impact on learners by making use of their electronic portfolio system and moving quickly to deliver training online. Middle leaders report that they are able to monitor the quality of training through observing teaching sessions online and through feedback from learners and employers.

Leaders have decided to continue teaching online at present due to concerns from learners about travelling on public transport, and their confidence in the quality of their online teaching. In the future, leaders intend to continue with some teaching online, to complement their face-to-face lessons and visits to apprentices in the workplace.

Employers speak highly of the increase in communication and flexibility shown by trainers in responding to the individual needs of apprentices. For instance, trainers increase the teaching time for apprentices who have been furloughed.

Leaders recognise that apprentices are finding it hard to learn English and mathematics online. They have recently held meetings with employers to discuss how to improve this element of their teaching.

Leaders have ambitious growth plans for the business, and intend to focus on supporting learners to translate their new skills into gaining employment. Leaders recognise that their plans have been delayed by the lack of employers taking on new apprentices during the pandemic.

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?

Staff feel confident that learners' attendance, engagement with their studies, and progress have remained broadly on track during the pandemic. Leaders believe that trainers and assessors work effectively, and that learners continue to receive high-quality training.

Trainers have moved most of their lessons from face to face to online. Online lessons include sessions on preparation for work in addition to learners' main subjects. Teachers feel that online lessons help increase the level of engagement of learners and have reduced any sense of their studying in isolation.

Leaders have begun to monitor learners' progress through a weekly progress-tracking system. Staff are pleased that they are now able to use this information to work more closely with employers, who feel better informed about the progress their apprentices are making.

Trainers have used a range of online tools, including digital conferencing and phone-based video applications to teach, assess and communicate with learners. Staff and learners feel confident using these systems, which they feel have made their training more efficient, in part as they no longer have to travel to lessons.

Leaders have provided staff with training on how to work effectively online and how to use their new system for teaching English and mathematics. Leaders have also trained assessors in the new end-point assessment arrangements for apprentices.

Leaders have faced difficulties in completing workplace visits and observations due to COVID-19 restrictions. Trainers have instead used witness testimonies by employers and videos of apprentices at work to gather evidence of their progress. Trainers have begun preparing apprentices for their end-point assessments using practice graded assessments and professional discussions.

Leaders have put in place social activities and reward schemes to maintain the engagement and enthusiasm of their staff.

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

Trainers teach learners a range of safeguarding topics, including how to avoid COVID-19-related financial fraud. Trainers draw from popular culture sources, such as soap operas, to engage learners in discussion of issues such as online gambling.

Leaders report that they conducted a risk assessment for each learner at the start of the pandemic, considering issues such as job losses and health. They then provided support for those learners about whom they had concerns through weekly telephone calls.

To help keep learners safe online, leaders ask learners to have their cameras on during lessons and have taught them hand signals they can use if they are in distress. Staff are confident that they have a positive rapport with learners, who would share with them any concerns they have.

Assessors report that they have briefed learners on how to minimise COVID-19 risks to themselves and those around them before returning to childcare settings following COVID-19 restrictions.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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