

Brent Start Adult Education Service

Interim visit report

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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 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.

Information about the provider

Brent Start Adult Education service is located within the council's directorate of Regeneration and Environment. The mission of the service is to broaden minds, create opportunities and change the lives of individuals and communities. The service offers courses from three main council venues and a number of community-based venues. They deliver a range of courses leading to qualifications in English, mathematics, English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), childcare and hair and beauty. Some 17% of the population in Brent lives in wards that are within the 10% most deprived in the country.

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 and managers learned from the adaptations they made to their programmes during the first national lockdown in March what worked well. This enabled them to adapt their existing curriculum offer from September 2020 to better meet the needs of learners. In addition, they introduced level 1 courses in childcare and health and social care as a result of the emerging employment need.

Leaders and managers have responded to the changing economic landscape in the area. They work in partnership with the council's employment service, local further education colleges and neighbouring local authorities to develop sector-based work academies in customer service, care and construction. They aim to support learners to gain jobs in employment growth areas.

Leaders and managers recognise that some learners will miss out on learning. They have introduced specific classes to help learners catch up on missed learning. Some learners were unable to take their examinations in July and will take them in December. This has delayed their progression to higher level courses.

To help learners with learning difficulties and disabilities, teachers have sent learning packs home each week. This has helped to ensure that they continue to learn skills that will help them to live more independently. Staff have also had to adapt their curriculum in response to the pandemic. For example, learners were not able to work in the café, so, instead, they take part in a volunteering project.

Leaders and managers have supported staff during the pandemic. Their regular communications and provision of training have helped staff to develop their skills in teaching online. Staff have been given support with their well-being during periods of working from home. For example, community learning teachers have provided online yoga and Zumba sessions for staff to join.

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 review how well teachers teach the curriculum through their established quality assurance process. They focus on the quality of online teaching, as for many teachers this is new. Teachers say that they and their learners are enthusiastic about learning online. They are particularly positive about the use of live-streaming lessons. Learners who are unable to attend in person can join and interact from home. As a result, few learners miss lessons. Managers say attendance rates are in line with those prior to the pandemic.

In September 2020, teachers assessed all learners who returned to study. They found notable gaps in learners' knowledge. They cited examples such as entry-level ESOL learners who struggle to use verbs and prepositions accurately, while hairdressing learners were not all confident in doing short cuts or blow dries.

Teachers adapt their teaching of the curriculum according to the circumstances of each learner and each subject. For example, in childcare, because learners cannot currently go on placements, teachers focus on theory components. As a result, learners are ahead in their preparation of activities for placements, and their knowledge of topics such as risk assessments.

In family learning, senior leaders acknowledge that the disruption due to COVID-19 has had a detrimental impact. Staff endeavour to maintain as much contact with families as possible. However, the closure of children's centres means they are not able to provide the service they previously did.

Teachers provide considerable guidance to learners on how to use their computers and phones for learning. For adults with learning difficulties, staff also teach their parents and carers how to use learning technology so that they can be helped at home.

Staff continue to provide careers advice and guidance to learners and refer them to external agencies when necessary. Learners say they receive appropriate guidance to help them select vocational programmes to meet their career aims.

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

Teachers have provided learners with additional information about how to keep themselves safe online. This includes information on how to maintain their privacy when attending online lessons.

Leaders and managers recognise that learners' understanding of how to keep themselves safe from the risks of extremism and radicalisation has declined during the lockdown. As a result, staff are having to re-educate learners about these dangers.

Leaders and managers are aware of the potential difficulties when not seeing learners face to face. For example, it is more difficult to identify signs of neglect or abuse when working online. As a result, staff have received additional support and guidance on being vigilant when teaching online.

Staff telephone learners each week to check on their well-being. Learners value the effort that staff make to support them.

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