

Lifebridge ASEND

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	142922
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Type of provider:	Independent specialist 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 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

Lifefridge ASEND is an independent specialist college based at the Susan Isaacs site, close to the centre of Bolton. The college was established in 2015 and achieved independent status in September 2016. The college provides programmes for learners aged 19 to 25 years old who have moderate to severe learning difficulties and/or disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder. There are two pathway programmes from entry level to level 2. Programmes focus on preparing young people towards independence and/or voluntary or paid employment. Currently, 21 learners follow the pathway to employment programme and 12 follow the pathway to independence programme. All learners have an education, health and care (EHC) plan.

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?

Shortly after the COVID-19 national restrictions came into place in March 2020, leaders worked with the local authority and social workers to identify and arrange for five of the most vulnerable learners to attend college. Leaders acknowledged that feedback to learners who were working remotely was not sufficient or regular enough.

From September, staff and learners formed a 'group bubble'. Since then the college has closed twice due to positive COVID-19 cases. During the closures, leaders tested out their new strategy for remote learning. Most learners chose to use workbooks, and a few worked online. Managers contacted learners at least once a week to check

on their progress. They put in place individual adaptations to meet learners' needs. For example, learners with visual impairments used resources with enlarged text.

Leaders told us that, although they are much better prepared now for learners studying remotely, they recognise that they are in the early phases of implementing online learning. Leaders identified that during the recent closure, the employability pathway timetable worked better remotely than the independence pathway. In the event of future closures, leaders plan to gather feedback from parents and carers about what learners are doing at home, such as cooking a meal, to support their young people's learning.

Parents and carers said how much their young people enjoy being at college. They explained how leaders adapt the curriculum to meet learners' individual needs, such as helping them prepare for the theory part of their driving licence.

During the summer term the college relocated to new premises. Many staff, including senior leaders are new to the college and started in September 2020.

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?

On their return to college in September 2020, tutors carried out assessments of learners' access to digital resources and the internet at home. They asked learners whether they preferred workbooks or online resources when learning remotely, which they responded to during the recent closure. Learners were given access to and trained to use an online learning platform to support them in their learning. In preparation for using the platform remotely, learners built their confidence by using it in lessons at college. Tutors use online learning to recap learners' knowledge and skills.

Tutors review learners' basic knowledge to check their current skills levels. They said that the curriculum is flexible and individualised and learners work at their own pace. Managers told us that learners are working towards their EHC plan targets. For example, when shadowing the college caretaker learners use their experience to work out the costs of a stock order.

Most learners are unable to attend their work experience placements due to COVID-19 restrictions. Managers said that they have been innovative in finding alternative activities to develop learners' employability skills. Learners undertake gardening activities in the college grounds, including tending and developing their own patch of land. Learners practise customer service skills in the college tuck shop.

A few learners continue to work in a local school kitchen and at a charity shop. Employers told us how well learners adapted while on work placement during the pandemic. Learners who work as assistants in a school kitchen follow the enhanced hygiene rules.

Staff work with an independent careers information, advice and guidance service. One member of staff supports each learner, alongside the college's employer engagement officer. Tutors work with employers to identify careers opportunities. A local employer gave an online talk to learners about what to expect on a work placement at a garden centre.

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

Leaders adjusted the curriculum to support learners' mental health and well-being. Learners discuss what they see and hear on the news in their weekly tutorial sessions. They talk about fake news relating to the pandemic. This helps learners understand risks in their day-to-day lives. Leaders put in place COVID-19 secure measures to ensure that drama and health and fitness lessons could continue.

Tutors explained how they kept themselves and learners safe. They received training on the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of teaching online. Staff and learners on the employability pathway completed a COVID-19 skills check. Tutors discuss online safety with learners every time they use a computer and during welfare telephone calls with learners and their parents and carers.

Learners said they feel safe in college. They learn about security settings on social media platforms. If they had any concerns about safety, including when online, learners said they would tell their tutors or talk to their parents.

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