

WESC Foundation College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	132042
Name of lead inspector:	Kathryn Rudd, HMI
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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 those 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

WESC Foundation College provides a range of education, therapy, care and support services to young people and adults with visual impairments and other complex needs. WESC Foundation College is a part of the WESC Foundation, which includes a school, residential accommodation, adult support, visual impairment advisory team, supported living and short-break services. The college operates from the main 14-acre campus on the outskirts of Exeter and a nearby horticultural site. At the time of the visit, 33 students were studying courses from pre-entry to level 2. Twenty-five of these students live at college for all or part of the year.

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?

At the start of the pandemic, leaders decided to bring forward the Easter break, amid concerns about a decrease in the number of staff. They used the closure to implement plans for their students' physical and virtual return. This included establishing home learning packs and putting in place new safety arrangements across the site, such as external hand washing stations.

Leaders accelerated the introduction of a new curriculum for all students. They report that this has led to therapists, teachers and support staff working more cohesively as a team around individual students.

Leaders have invested in their technology infrastructure to improve security. The local authority bought laptops for some students and leaders provided families with assistive technology equipment, training and support. Leaders plan to continue using

information technology more extensively in the curriculum. For example, holding virtual student council meetings which enable trustees to attend regularly.

Leaders state that while most students maintained their skills development during the pandemic, some on qualification-based courses could not continue with their practical work. Staff supported students to catch up when they returned to face-to-face teaching.

Leaders have prioritised regular communication with students, staff, parents and other stakeholders. They reinforced the sense of college community by sharing college events. They filmed college assemblies and established a combined on-campus and remote walking challenge called 'Walk for WESC'.

Leaders value the support from their membership organisations and local authorities. They have regular opportunities to share practice and discuss new COVID-19 (coronavirus) guidance with similar organisations.

Leaders aim to recruit additional supported interns, in line with their own strategy and the priorities of their local authority. However, this is challenging due to work placement restrictions caused by the pandemic.

Leaders believe that if they had to return to delivering their curriculum remotely, they now have the resources and ways of working in place.

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 developed online learning sessions which included weekly tutorials, fitness videos and therapeutic activities. Some students struggled to access these. As a result, staff set up additional sessions so students could better see staff and their peers on screen. Staff also sent work home for students who could not study online.

Families are positive about the support they received at home during lockdown. This included translating resources into text to help parents support online Braille sessions. Families state that remote learning helped them understand the care and effort that staff put into designing and teaching sessions.

Staff report the reduced access to their local community has meant that students have fewer opportunities to practise their skills in real settings. For example, learning how to safely use a cane on a busy street. Staff have redesigned activities to teach skills, such as location finding, on their large site.

Managers check whether students are making progress by sample-checking their online learning diary. Teachers feel that this new system allows them to evidence the progress that students are making. If a student is not making the expected progress,

teachers hold cross-team meetings to discuss learning strategies and set new targets to enable them to catch up.

Staff identify the changes introduced as a result of the pandemic, which they plan to continue. These include more consistent staffing, better curriculum planning, improved use of technology and frequent contact with employers and families. Although some students have found the limited social contact difficult during the pandemic, others have become more resilient.

Leaders have developed the curriculum to ensure that topics such as bullying and online safety are embedded in students' memories. Students leaving the college before lockdown had a face-to-face meeting with an independent careers adviser. Staff continue to discuss employment options with learners in work skills sessions.

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

Throughout the lockdown, leaders and staff contacted students and their families regularly to check on their well-being. They established virtual ways for students to socialise together online, including 'Chitchat Thursday' and group 'WESCercise' fitness sessions.

All of the students we spoke to feel safe at college, know who to talk to about any concerns and could give examples of safeguarding topics they had discussed. They talked about this term's theme of superheroes and how, because of this, they had learnt how to contact the emergency services.

Staff report that they have received copious amounts of training to ensure that they can teach online safely and can be sensitive when sharing their knowledge with students. Staff report that their training has made them more vigilant about identifying potential online risks for students.

The safeguarding team provided students with virtual support throughout the lockdown period. Their relationships with external agencies help them to update their knowledge regularly.

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