

Essex County Council

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Gerard McGrath, Her Majesty's Inspector

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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.

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

Essex County Council commissions Adult Community Learning Essex (ACL Essex) to provide learning across the county, excluding the unitary authorities of Thurrock and Southend. Essex is a large county with a population of around 1.4 million. It has a wide range of communities spanning rural, urban and coastal areas with widely varying qualification levels and areas of significant social deprivation. ACL Essex is principally a direct delivery service and has adult community learning centres in most of the major towns in Essex.

ACL Essex provides accredited and non-accredited adult learning and apprenticeships. Just under a third of courses are accredited. Leaders contract with Essex County Council's youth service to provide traineeships.

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 of ACL Essex have made the safety of learners, staff and the local population the focus of their plans and actions throughout the pandemic. In March 2020, they made the early decision to halt teaching at all sites. Senior managers oversaw a phased return to centres for vulnerable and digitally excluded learners from September 2020.

Prior to the pandemic, senior leaders had already taken the strategic decision to introduce online learning for GCSE and functional skills courses. In response to the changing circumstances, they swiftly introduced additional resources to provide all courses online or remotely. Senior managers ensured that teaching staff and learners were trained in how to use the virtual learning environment and new software

systems. Senior managers report that they also ensured that learners and staff had appropriate information technology equipment. They recognise that digital poverty remains one of the main barriers to learning.

Senior managers worked with staff to review the curriculum. They have changed the order of some programmes. For example, hairdressing courses focused on theory learning until learners could safely return to their training centre. Family learning programmes were adapted to meet the needs of families supporting their children who were not attending school. Senior leaders intend to introduce more blended and online learning courses in the future. For example, higher level accountancy courses to attract learners from more remote areas.

Managers ensured that staff continued to provide tutorial and personal support to all apprentices and learners. This included learners on GCSE courses and study programmes who were supported to achieve their qualifications, and progress to their next steps in learning.

Senior managers described their work with awarding bodies to agree new remote assessment and examination invigilation arrangements. This enabled teachers to support apprentices and work-based learners to complete their learning and achieve their qualifications.

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?

Leaders described a range of changes they have made to courses due to the pandemic. These include adapting the content of some courses to better suit online learning. For example, they offer more 'bite-size' sessions and free tasters for learners to access.

Senior managers report that teaching staff have become more confident and knowledgeable in facilitating online learning. This helps teachers ensure that their teaching is increasingly interactive and interesting.

Teachers have been creative in ensuring that learners can continue to develop new skills and apply their new knowledge. They state that they now use a wider range of assessment strategies than previously. For example, teachers set learners assignments to be carried out outdoors, such as photography from winter walks. They then help learners to digitally edit their pictures using online systems. Apprentices use expert witness testimonials to evidence their skills competence. Learners on art courses upload images of their work to online 'sketchbooks'. Teachers say that they are confident that learners learn and acquire the skills needed to succeed.

Managers described how they have adapted their quality assurance systems to enable them to check the quality and content of online classes. For example, they

undertake observations of lessons by logging into online sessions. Teachers check learners' progress through the online systems that they are using. Learners upload their work to online portfolios. Teachers then mark the work and provide feedback online.

Managers say that many learners benefit from accessing learning at times that suit their lives better. For example, learners on counselling courses prefer learning 'out-of-hours' when they feel more relaxed and prepared to contribute to discussions.

Managers say that at the start of the pandemic, learners' attendance declined a little. Attendance rates have improved since September 2020 and are now close to those in 2019/20.

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

Senior managers have maintained their long-established range of safeguarding arrangements. Senior leaders also ensure that all staff and learners receive additional training in e-safety. For example, ensuring that personal images or information are not visible to other people when working online.

Teachers are mindful of those learners who live alone and may feel isolated, particularly learners with high needs and those on study programmes. They keep in frequent contact with them to ensure that they are well. Learners are confident in how to stay safe when working online.

Learners remember who to report issues to, should they arise. They are confident that staff will respond to their concerns and support them fully, if required.

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