

Suffolk New College

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector: Michael Worgs, Her Majesty's Inspector

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Type of provider: General further education 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 and apprentices 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

Suffolk New College (SNC) is based in Suffolk with campuses in Ipswich, 'On the Coast' at Leiston and 'Suffolk Rural' at Otley. In addition, SNC has assumed responsibility for a skills centre in Halesworth, where provision commenced in September 2020.

Most students aged 16 to 18 are from the local and surrounding rural areas. Standards on entry are below the average for the east of England. Around half of all young people following programmes at the college did not achieve GCSE grades 5 and above in English and mathematics.

At the time of the visit, there were 2,900 learners on education programmes for young people, 940 adult learners, 706 apprentices and 272 learners with high needs. The college offers a wide range of vocational 16 to 19 study programmes across nine main curriculum areas. In addition, the acquisition of the 'Suffolk Rural' campus in January 2020 has added land based, animal and equine studies to the curriculum offer.

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 say staff have responded well to meeting learners' needs throughout the pandemic. During the Covid-19 restrictions, most teaching was online. Staff created a wide range of course materials for learners. Learners received remote help from their teachers via telephone, emails and other methods. This allowed staff to spend more time focusing on managing learners' welfare.

Leaders implemented a flexible approach to face-to-face and online teaching. For example, some curriculum areas, such as childcare, offer one quarter online teaching. Other areas, such as foundation learning, offer full face-to-face teaching for learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities. Leaders see the value in continuing with elements of online learning in the future.

Managers are aware that many learners have greater skills gaps compared to cohorts in previous years. They say that the national restrictions led to learners not developing practical skills quickly. As a result, managers have changed their curriculum plans to place a greater emphasis on the early assessment of skills and knowledge. For example, in engineering and construction, practical sessions are longer to cover more content and practical assessment.

Managers identify a rise in adult learners applying for programmes at the college. As a result, more courses will be offered in areas such as agriculture and floristry. Managers say this will meet both local demand and future skills needs.

Employers say that managers are very responsive, and that communication has remained good throughout the pandemic. Employers receive weekly email updates on learners' progress and attend monthly progress review meetings through video calls.

Teachers feel that the period of national restrictions has brought the newly merged college together very quickly. The transition to one college has been very smooth.

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 and managers report that assessment of learners' skills and knowledge is frequent. All assessments are centrally logged to allow leaders and managers to check learners' progress and intervene when necessary. Teachers say they used the extended induction period to closely assess learners' existing skills and knowledge.

Leaders and managers use a range of quality assurance methods to ensure that learners make progress. For example, they complete a range of audits, conduct observations and use assessment tracking systems. Managers use the detailed feedback from audits to make improvements.

Teachers are encouraged to be creative in their approaches to teaching and assessment. For example, on catering courses, they use cameras in kitchens to record practical sessions. Learners then use the recordings to reflect on and refine their practical skills. Teachers value the virtual classroom software adopted by leaders. Teachers feel this facility enables them to create useful online learning materials that are specific to each cohort. Teachers have improved their confidence and skills in using digital teaching methods.

Learners have developed new transferable skills through remote learning. For example, learners have become more independent in managing their own learning and have improved their problem-solving skills.

Careers advice and guidance continues in tutorials and one-to-one discussions with progress tutors, dedicated careers staff and teachers. Learners can access resources from a new suite of employment-based learning modules.

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

Leaders say tackling learners' mental health concerns are a key priority. Since September 2020, most of the 450 safeguarding referrals are mental health related. Leaders feel they have good systems in place to deal with safeguarding concerns for all age groups. They have specialist staff who are trained to support learners who self-harm and have suicidal thoughts. These staff are well equipped to reduce the immediate risk of suicide and increase the help for learners at risk.

Learners say that staff have been very responsive in supporting their well-being throughout the pandemic. Staff phone or email them on a weekly basis. They feel comfortable to have conversations with staff to discuss their welfare needs. Learners value the frequent personal development tutorial sessions and updated safeguarding resources provided. They use information from these sources to keep themselves safe online and when travelling to college.

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