

DN Colleges Group

Interim visit report

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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.

Information about the provider

DN Colleges Group was formed in November 2017 following the merger of Doncaster College and North Lindsey College. At the time of the visit, there were 4,353 learners on education programmes for young people, 2,759 learners on adult learning programmes, and 1,882 apprentices in training. There were 156 learners with high needs. The group also subcontracts some of its provision; there were 164 learners on subcontracted programmes.

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 have revised their strategic aims in response to the pandemic. They have placed a strong focus on developing a more flexible approach to delivering the curriculum in ways that respond to the future needs of learners and stakeholders. Leaders have introduced group leadership roles and identified additional lead practitioners to support staff to teach in different ways.

Leaders and managers have adapted courses to include online and face-to-face teaching. Teachers plan a three-day delivery model that is based on the needs of learners and provides a combination of online lessons and attendance in college. Leaders said that staff have the autonomy to determine the best way to teach their subject.

Managers changed the order of the curriculum in response to COVID-19 restrictions. They identified modules that could most easily be taught online, and they used new methods to develop learners' skills. For example, in sports programmes, learners produced fitness videos at home to demonstrate their skills in preparation for assessment. Teachers moved units requiring close physical contact to the end of the programme.

Leaders and managers collaborated with employers and apprentices to agree an effective approach to teaching. On most apprenticeship programmes, teachers provided a mix of online and face-to-face training. Since September 2020, apprentices have attended the college to enable them to develop their skills. Employers said that they value teachers' flexible response to meeting apprentices' needs.

Leaders recognise how challenging it is to provide work experience for learners amid COVID-19 restrictions. Staff work with employers to design virtual opportunities and conduct risk assessments, to ensure as many learners as possible benefit from face-to-face work placements.

Subcontractors adapted their curriculum to be taught online and by using workbooks. They provide live and pre-recorded lessons and use online chat to communicate with learners. Staff explained how they introduced new ways of working to assess learners' skills. For example, by inviting family members to take part in fitness sessions led by learners.

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?

Teachers identified gaps in many learners' skills and knowledge, resulting from missed learning during COVID-19 restrictions. In response, they have provided workshops and individual support to help learners get back on track. They use the results of initial assessments to plan a timetable that is responsive to learners' individual needs.

Teachers described how they have modified the way that they assess learners' knowledge and skills. They use a range of methods in digital lessons, such as online notebooks, collaborative whiteboards and quizzes, to check understanding. For example, in hairdressing, learners upload photographs and videos of their hairstyles to digital scrapbooks for teachers to assess.

Managers of vocational courses explained how they plan for learners to focus on skills development when attending college. They have adapted workshops to maximise the number of learners who can carry out practical work. For example, learners in construction and engineering complete a full day in the workshop when they attend college.

Leaders and managers told us that overall attendance in online learning was high during the initial period of COVID-19 restrictions. They recognised, however, that online attendance was lower for learners on level 1 and 2 vocational courses, and they prioritised bringing these learners back into college to help increase their engagement in learning.

Staff provide careers advice and guidance online using group sessions, virtual careers events and online messaging. They offer learners one-to-one appointments by telephone or video. Staff report an increase in requests from learners for careers advice and guidance, due to the flexible approach, and they plan to continue to offer sessions online.

Staff continue to provide learners with opportunities to develop their personal and social skills through activities such as sports and citizenship projects. Learners have used these projects to make positive contributions to charities and their local community.

Managers continue to monitor the quality of education, including using virtual observations of online lessons. They identify strengths and areas for development in staff practice and use lead practitioners to coach and support staff to improve their digital teaching skills.

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

Learners with high needs are protected against virus transmission by working wholly from home using a robot device. They are able to control the robot, which enables them to speak in the lesson, see their peers and participate in classroom activities.

Learners and apprentices told us that they receive an induction and ongoing advice about how to stay safe online and in college. They receive information about risks arising from the pandemic, such as online scams. Learners and apprentices said that they feel safe because of the training and support that they receive.

Lead practitioners created a digital teaching and learning resource, for learners and staff, that they shared online. They use the resource to provide information about e-safety, managing digital footprints and using online technology safely.

Managers identify that the pandemic has had a negative impact on learners' well-being. They have introduced an online support service to provide out-of-hours access to mental health resources for staff and learners.

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