Building Crafts College

Interim visit report

Unique reference number:	50888
Name of lead inspector:	Jon Bowman, Her Majesty's Inspector
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Type of provider:	Not for profit organisation
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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

The Building Crafts College is located across two sites, close to Stratford station in the London Borough of Newham. The original college, founded by the Carpenters' Livery Company, dates to 1893. Since the onset of the pandemic, a new principal has been appointed, and a new senior management tier and new governance arrangements have been established.

At the time of the visit, there were 66 apprentices on level 2 and 3 apprenticeships. Around three quarters of these are on standards-based apprenticeships. These include bench joinery, form work, site carpentry and bricklaying. The other apprentices are on framework apprenticeships in stone masonry and maintenance operations. There were also 58 learners on education programmes for young people. Most were on bench joinery and stone masonry courses at level 2 and multi-skills at level 1, and a small number on level 3 bench joinery.

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 time of national restrictions in March 2020, senior leaders report that they were not well equipped to move learning online. Not all learners, apprentices and staff had the equipment and connectivity that would allow them to learn remotely online. However, leaders and managers moved the teaching of theory online. They say that learners aged 16 to 18 years did not engage well with online learning. To support learners and apprentices, hard copy resources were sent to them at home.

When the college was closed, learners did not have access to the specialist equipment they needed to develop their practical skills. Leaders identify that when the college reopened, learners were not as proficient in the skills they had developed previously. For example, those training as carpenters had to practise their marking out skills to restore them to previous levels. Some struggled to remember the health and safety procedures for the safe use of power tools.

Senior leaders identify that apprentices have had less interruption to their learning. Most apprentices remained employed in construction industries that have largely kept going during the pandemic. This helped them maintain their skills through their day-to-day work. They benefited from concentrating on learning the theory behind their craft. Leaders and managers say that this prepared apprentices well for their online tests.

Managers put in place extra support to fill gaps in apprentice's learning. This included extra sessions during the summer holiday and opening the college on Saturdays to ensure that assessments could take place. Some apprentices have experienced delays in completing their studies. For example, the final assessment for apprentice form workers is not yet in place. Some planned final assessments have been rescheduled because staff from the assessment organisation have tested positive for COVID-19.

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 made sure the college reopened as soon as it was safe to do so. They reduced the size of classes which, managers say, has led to increased individual support for learners. They have put in place a technician to prepare timber for tasks so that learners spend more time developing their skills.

Leaders and managers recognise that they need to develop a clear strategy so that they can move learning online and improve the proficiency of tutors, should they need to close the college again because of the pandemic. They are in the process of allocating the responsibility for this to a member of staff. Leaders and managers are mentoring staff who need to develop their confidence to teach online.

Managers and tutors continue to provide careers advice and guidance to apprentices and young people. Those who are coming to the end of their course are provided with details of higher-level courses, apprenticeships and jobs. Working with employers, staff support students who have been affected by the pandemic. For example, bench joiners who have lost jobs from theatres which have shut down are supported to find alternative employment.

Staff work hard to ensure that all learners get the support and help they need. Those with education and health care plans continue to get the specific support they need to make progress with their learning. Tutors of learners aged 16 to 18 years are in more frequent contact with parents to let them know when work is being sent home for completion. This has contributed to learners routinely completing and returning work. Staff report that, since September 2020, the attendance and motivation of learners and apprentices has improved as they are more appreciative of the opportunities they have to develop their skills.

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

Senior leaders report a rise in mental health concerns, particularly for those aged 16 to 18 years. Learners whose external support for their mental health stopped in March 2020 benefited from support from the college's own counsellor.

When learners and apprentices returned to college, they were provided with a range of information on the new safety measures at centres. They were reminded about how to keep themselves safe online. However, those learners spoken to did not recall getting information about how to stay safe online.

Senior leaders and managers have introduced a range of measures to make centres safe for learners and staff, including temperature checks and hand sanitisation on arrival, mask wearing in communal areas and regular cleaning of tools. Cameras have been introduced into workshops, so that practical demonstrations can be seen on screen and learners are able to maintain a safe distance from each other.

Learners say they feel safe at the college and know who to turn to if they do not.

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