

The Growth Company Limited

Interim visit report

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Type of provider: Independent learning provider

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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

The Growth Company Limited (TGC) is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1989. The company provides apprenticeships, adult learning programmes and education programmes for young people. Apprenticeship programmes focus on priorities for the Greater Manchester Work and Skills Strategy and the needs of the local labour market. Adult learning programmes are primarily aimed at meeting the needs of unemployed adults and those wishing to return to study to progress to higher education. TGC engages with the hardest-to-reach young people and adults in the region.

TGC has 2,964 learners enrolled on courses from entry level to level 7 across a range of subject sector areas. Just under 600 learners are enrolled on education programmes for young people. Over 50% of young people study a level 1 vocational programme, with a third studying at level 2. There are 564 learners on adult programmes. Over half of adult learners study at entry level/level 1. A further third study at level 2. There are 1,768 apprentices who study programmes between level 2 and level 5. A further 55 study at level 6 and level 7. TGC works with 29 subcontractors. There are 25 learners on education programmes for young people, 221 adults and 313 apprentices who all study with subcontractors.

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 and managers say they were able to quickly move to online and remote learning in March 2020. Many tutors were already using the virtual learning environment to teach prior to COVID-19. Leaders and managers used this knowledge

and practice to help other curriculum areas adapt their teaching quickly. They used their more digitally-competent tutors to train colleagues and share best practice in online teaching.

Throughout the pandemic, leaders say they have focused on staff, learners' and apprentices' welfare to engage them in learning and resolve any emerging issues. They used funding to buy and loan laptops to provide learners with access to online learning from home. Leaders provided training for staff and learners in how to stay safe online and how to access and make best use of online learning.

Leaders told us they ensured their more vulnerable learners, and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities, received extra support throughout the pandemic. Managers and staff kept centres open to provide facilities for those who could not work from home and food packages for those who needed them. They provided hard-copy work packs with pre-paid postage envelopes, so learners could submit work for marking and feedback.

Leaders recognise the challenges of COVID-19 restrictions. They are working to secure work placements for students in the health and care sector. Leaders have employed additional placement consultants to keep in touch with placement providers and ensure access to work experience when it is safe for learners to complete. Tutors provide catch-up workshops for learners and apprentices in practical subjects such as air conditioning and refrigeration.

Leaders acknowledge the impact COVID-19 has on the mental health of staff, learners and apprentices. They worked with an awarding body to develop a well-being qualification. The programme is now being taught to staff, learners and apprentices. Tutors work with learners and apprentices to develop their resilience and adaptability to new ways of working.

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 tutors made changes to the curriculum to meet learners' changing needs. For example, managers introduced flexible online sessions for learners and apprentices who were furloughed or who were schooling their children at home. Leaders put in place support tutors to help learners and apprentices with technical issues and digital skills development. They worked with employers to provide digital resources for apprentices.

Tutors adapted the sequencing of the curriculum because learners could not do sufficient practical skills development during the restrictions. For example, engineering learners completed the theoretical aspects during closure, and on their return, they developed their practical skills.

Leaders and managers continue to check the quality of the curriculum by reviewing recorded lessons or observing on-site sessions. Tutors share best practice during sector-

specific development sessions. For example, tutors learned how to make online sessions more interactive by introducing quizzes and breakout rooms. Construction tutors developed an online health and safety module to be used across a range of trades.

Managers monitor learners' and apprentices' attendance and the progress that they make through an electronic monitoring system. They meet regularly with tutors and discuss any learners who are at risk. Where required, additional lessons and interventions are provided for learners and apprentices.

Apprentices and learners receive careers advice and guidance at the start of their programme and on an ongoing basis. For example, Access to Higher Education learners received online guidance from universities.

Managers say that some awarding bodies have been inflexible in their approach to examinations. This has meant a delay in some learners being able to complete their final assessment, such as in financial services and construction.

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

Throughout the pandemic, leaders made sure that tutors contacted learners to check that they were safe and to discuss their progress. They provided regular telephone support and liaised with the local authority and employers to refer any learners where a risk was identified. Leaders have made physical adaptations to learning centres to ensure staff and learners wear appropriate personal protective equipment, follow signage and socially distance.

Learners and apprentices receive online safety training that includes information on safety and security when working and learning online. Tutors cover topics such as online bullying, the appropriate use of social media, and money management.

Learners and apprentices say they feel safe in and around the centres, at work and when learning online. They know who to contact and how to report any concerns about their safety. Leaders are aware of increased vulnerabilities around welfare, well-being and mental health. They have trained staff in mental health first aid to support learners and staff.

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