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Leicester City Council

Interim visit report

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Name of lead inspector:	Russ Henry, Her Majesty's Inspector
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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 students and apprentices in this period, including learners with high needs and those with special educational needs and disabilities. We intend to return to routine inspection in January 2021 but will keep the exact timing under review.

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

Leicester Adult Skills and Learning Service is the trading name of Leicester City Council's community learning and skills provision. The service has contracts with the Education Funding Agency to provide education and training for learners from 16 years old upwards. The overwhelming majority of learners are aged 19 or over.

The service operates from the Adult Education College located in the very centre of Leicester. Courses are taught at eight sites across the city and from a number of smaller community venues. The service does not use any subcontractors. As a result of the pandemic response, around a quarter of all courses are now taught online. Most other courses include both online and face-to-face teaching.

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?

Managers report that during the initial pandemic lockdown they were able to maintain most of the existing curriculum through distance learning. They allowed teachers to decide the best way to approach this with their learners. Consequently, teachers used a range of approaches that included live one-to-one tutorials supported by self-paced study materials; live group video lessons that mirrored the previous face-to-face timetable; and pre-recorded videos demonstrating practical skills.

Managers say that staff worked hard to help students to get online and start learning. They say that staff made many telephone calls to individual learners to help them to configure software and resolve connectivity issues. In a number of cases where learners did not have access to appropriate devices, managers supplied laptops and tablets.

Managers produced a distance learning policy for staff and learners. They say this is important to ensure that learners and staff have realistic expectations, and that staff workloads are sustainable.

Staff teach current courses through a mix of face-to-face and online learning. This is to maximise availability of courses and to ensure that learners are familiar with online study so that they can adapt quickly if further pandemic restrictions are imposed.

Managers say that they have identified some benefits of the blended approach to teaching that they will retain when things return to normal. For example, they can offer a more diverse range of courses and extend learning opportunities beyond the classroom. They also say that staff now share resources more and produce these to a higher standard.

Managers are concerned about the impact that restrictions will have on their ability to offer a full curriculum. Current restrictions mean that they are teaching fewer learners in each class.

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?

Managers had already invested in online learning software prior to lockdown. At the start of lockdown, they provided teachers with training to use this software and appointed a lead online learning tutor to support them. They provided a summer development programme for teachers and support staff to ensure that they were ready for continued online teaching from September.

Managers monitor the quality of provision and the progress of learners through reviews of the records kept by teachers, by scrutinising the quality of learning materials, and by 'visiting' live online lessons. Managers say that they are having more team meetings and more meetings with individual members of staff to support them and to review their work. Tutors report how much they appreciate this contact and how it helps with their own wellbeing.

Some learners on lower level courses struggle to access online materials. Tutors prepare printed materials for these learners so that they are able to study from home without going online.

Leaders and managers say that learners' participation remained high during lockdown. Nevertheless, they recognise that for some learners, pandemic restrictions made it difficult to study. Managers and staff say they maintained close contact with these learners so that they could support them quickly and effectively. Learners spoken with say that they value this contact.

Tutors say that during lockdown they were able to use online tools to simulate exam conditions for those learners preparing for external assessments. Once buildings reopened they provided additional short courses specifically focused on examination preparation.

Teachers say that they currently make less use of written assessments to gauge learners' progress. Instead, they make increased use of professional discussions.

Learner recruitment and welfare officers provide pre-enrolment guidance via online open events, pre-recorded videos and individual discussions. They continue to contact all current learners and to provide them with advice and guidance about their next steps.

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

Prior to reopening, managers undertook a risk assessment and put in place measures to minimise the spread of the virus. All learners receive a handbook that contains key safeguarding information and details of COVID-19 precautions. Learners know whom they should contact if they have any concerns.

Managers say that prior to the pandemic, staff were well aware of safeguarding and welfare risks and responded well to learners in need. Staff are conscious of potential risks to vulnerable learners arising from social isolation.

Managers provided teachers with guidance about online safety prior to the pandemic and this advice has not changed. Teachers and students have discretion over how they interact online, so long as it is through the provider's software. Managers drop into online classes to ensure that there are no safeguarding concerns.

Managers have recently completed safeguarding training. The designated safeguarding lead is part of a regional group that shares safeguarding knowledge and experience.

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