

Highbury College

Interim visit report

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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 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

Highbury College is a medium-sized general further education college serving the city of Portsmouth and the surrounding areas of East Hampshire, Fareham, Gosport and Havant. The college has four centres: Highbury Campus, Highbury Northarbour Centre, Highbury Arundel Centre and Highbury Apprenticeships (Birmingham). The college provides education and training programmes in a number of community venues in and around Portsmouth.

Portsmouth is one of the most densely populated cities in the country. It has the fourth largest economy in the South East, with a broad employment base, and is the national home of the Royal Navy. The city has several areas of high deprivation.

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 prepared a move to remote learning before the lockdown so that students could continue with their studies. Leaders adapted training programmes to train staff in the use of online conference facilities and a web-based product to help them develop interactive lessons. Advanced practitioners led training to develop staff confidence and competence. Teachers told us how well targeted and supportive the training was. Staff have been helping students struggling with web-based technologies during the pandemic, as well as identifying those students who are new to college and require support with remote learning.

Leaders and managers identified the impact of the pandemic on particular groups. Students with special educational needs and/or disabilities missed social interactions, so staff provided social activities, for example virtual picnics. Staff have adapted their approach to careers advice in response to students' concerns on future opportunities. Careers advisers provide extra sessions and guest speakers to support students.

Managers described the links they have made with local colleges and organisations to make sure students can still get work experience as part of their course.

Managers have continued to track students' progress to reassure themselves that students are not falling behind with their learning. To support this further, staff have provided more tutorials, made phone calls to students and kept two study centres open. Staff reported an increase in parental involvement.

Leaders work with a range of stakeholders in their communities. Subcontractors said they had leaned on college leaders for guidance and support and benefited from sharing of resources. Employers felt college staff responded quickly to minimise disruption to apprentices' learning. The local authority reported that leaders at the college play a very active role in the community response to the pandemic. Partners spoke enthusiastically about several projects leaders have committed to that provide support in the local community.

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 took the decision that staff should decide at course level how best to adapt the teaching of their subjects. Managers felt this gave them the autonomy to make appropriate decisions for their students. For example, construction learners are on site in blocks to catch up on missed practical sessions. In floristry, live demonstrations are streamed for students not in the classroom. Leaders identified the learning that apprentices, many of whom were furloughed, have missed and are using block learning and day release to help them catch up.

Managers at the college said the majority of staff and students have coped well with the move to more blended and remote learning during the pandemic. Inevitably there were initially some issues with lack of equipment, alongside some unsuitable home-working environments for students. Leaders have provided equipment to both staff and students who need it. Leaders have created private study areas in the college for students who find it difficult to study at home and additional staff work in these areas to help students.

Teachers told us how they have focused on adapting the traditional aspects of classroom teaching to a more blended approach to learning. Although some teachers had concerns about how this would work effectively in their subjects, most teachers were very positive about the use of online learning platforms. They are continuing to encourage their students to participate in collaborative learning online.

Managers have adapted the methods they use to assure themselves that the quality of teaching remains high. Staff have moved some of the observation of teaching activity online and are using these observations both to support staff development and to make judgements about how well staff are adapting to the changes so that they can identify further training needs.

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

At the start of the pandemic, staff identified vulnerable students and the increased risks they may face. They worked closely with the local authority and other organisations to maintain contact with these students and reassure themselves that they were safe.

Leaders described how they provided training to staff and students to safely participate in online learning. This included training for staff calling students on 'safe conversations'. Staff use regular calls and tutorials with students to check students' safety. Leaders keep staff and students informed of new or increased risks resulting from the pandemic.

Students told us they understood fully the health and safety protocols and restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic. Most of these students knew how and to whom they would report any safeguarding concerns, and all felt very confident that these would be taken seriously. Students new to the college remember their induction and the topics covered, for example British values and diversity.

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