A **summary** of the COVID-19 series: briefing on further education and skills, November 2020

Evidence collated from interim visits to further education and skills providers between 19 October and 4 December.

- This is the second briefing note on further education and skills (FES)
- Report written using data from 84 interim visit.

Provider type	Outstanding	Good	Requires improvement	Inadequate	No previous grade*	Total**
Total in sample	6 (7%)	26 (31%)	44 (52%)	4 (5%)	4 (5%)	84 (100%)

Main findings summarised.

- All establishments remained operational during the Autumn term.
- A number of staff spoke about the need to review and better understand the quality of their curriculum.
- Leaders reported as follows:
  - They were in the planning phase of supporting learners to catchup, as 'gaps' been had identified in learners' knowledge and skills because of the pandemic.
  - They were making more mental health and safeguarding referrals to local agencies than this time last year
- Finding work placement for learners and reviewing and assessing work remotely were still common challenges.

This briefing aimed to answer four broad questions based on evidence from the visits:

- 1. What is the current state of further education and skills?
- 2. How have learners been affected?
- 3. How are providers planning to maintain standards during the pandemic?
- 4. How have leaders managed additional financial pressures?

What is the current state of further education and skills?
Returning to settings

- Provision continued with adapted times for attendance, and timetables. Visits to site were reduced to a minimum.
- Some providers have restricted intake on practical courses and some provisions were fully remote, as their place of operating was closed.
- Learners on site were prioritised, according to practical needs.

Continuing to adapt the curriculum

- most staff were prioritising practical skills in face-to-face sessions and teaching the theoretical knowledge online.

- Various schemes had been implemented to support the practical element of courses, according to the direction of the course and learner needs.
- More leaders were aware that the curriculum had to be adapted to meet learner needs. Teaching and assessments have been reorganised therefore learning seems disjointed. This potentially could have an impact on learners being able to develop and embed skills and knowledge.
- Curriculum content had been adapted to reflect the reality of new working environments.
- Employability skills were continuing to increase to better prepare learners for the working environment.
- The curriculum continued to be revised to support learner's well-being.

Remote learning

- Overall online learning is seen as a positive adaptation.
- A mixture of remote and face to face learning is still being provided.
- Some learners struggle with remote learning, particularly learners with high needs.
- 'live' online sessions are most preferred.
- Decisions about online learning are made with safeguarding protocols in mind. Some providers record online sessions so students can revisit topics or catch up if required.
- The online platforms and tools varied across providers. Some providers had various platforms in operation in their establishment.
- Some Staff evaluated their offering with colleagues and learners. This supported increased engagement from the learners.
- Online learning is widely being monitored to ensure the quality of teaching offered to the learner.
- Some teachers believe that online teaching has improved over time.

Recruiting learners

- The overall picture of recruiting varied across provider and across courses.
- Recruitment of learners had had to be adapted to current COVID guidelines. Advertising campaigns, social media, increased email, virtual open days and site tours and virtual taster sessions. Some providers implemented online enrolment and interviews.
- Reduced physical capacity led to reduced recruitment in a few providers.
- Courses including entry to care and entry to business and professional services, such as telesales have seen an increase in demand and provision.

Careers, information, advice and guidance (CIAG)

- Some staff have changed the way they give CIAG, while others have remained the same. Things such as remote guidance through 1-2-1s and enlisting external speakers as part of their virtual offering.
- Some staff said that some learners, particularly young ones required more CAIG. They also said it was hard to gain contact with the 2020/2021 year 11 leavers to offer them advice in advance.

Safeguarding

- Learners with significant mental health, domestic abuse, county lines, dependence on food banks, knife crime and drug and alcohol misuse have all increased since the pandemic, therefore referrals to local mental health and safeguarding teams has increased greatly.
- Personal development modules on protecting learners' mental health and/or well-being have been included in some course.
- Leaders in many providers have continued to increase their focus on online safety for learners.
- some providers found safeguarding learners remotely a challenge.

- Leaders said they continued to engage with external partners and agencies.

Staff

- Some leaders said they had increased their staffing levels because of the pandemic. Other leaders, mostly those not in colleges, told us that they were making, or had already needed to make, redundancies.
- Moving to a remote curriculum was a challenge for staff at the beginning of the pandemic. Most staff have now developed their digital skills and confidence in using different technologies for remote learning.
- COVID-19 has had a negative impact on staff well-being. There have been suicides, as well as COVID-19-related bereavements, within the teaching community.

How learners have been affected
Gaps in learning

- There is a significant increase in learners having 'gaps' in their knowledge and skills because of the pandemic and related closures.
- Some leaders said these gaps were worse for current learners compared with previous cohorts.
- Many providers used synoptic assessment in order to assess learning, to account for learners not having been taught all the content they would have usually.
- Some apprenticeship providers said that restrictions, furlough and economic challenges meant that some apprentices were unable to finish their courses.

Learners' engagement and diverse learning groups

- Staff found that learners disengaged from their learning when they became aware that their final grades were not calculated using work completed after March.
- Staff said that apprentices at levels 2 and 3 and learners aged 16 to 19 are the main groups whose engagement has improved since returning to more face-to-face or fuller provision.
- Some leaders said that learners who speak English as an additional language struggled to engage with remote learning.
- learners who typically enrol on practical learning programmes and deaf learners disengaged from remote working for 'fear of online' or frustration.
- Student champions or learning ambassadors were recruited to encouraged learners' engagement and participation.

Learners' well-being

- Many leaders said that supporting learners' well-being and mental health were their primary focuses during the autumn.
- Some learners were anxious about returning to learning on site in autumn.
- Staff aimed to mitigate these anxieties by using various virtual and communications tools.
- In some providers, a focus on learners' well-being superseded that on engagement with learning.
- For a few learners, mostly vulnerable learners with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), remote learning appeared to have a positive impact on well-being.

How providers plan to maintain high standards in education and skills
Work placements and apprenticeships

- Many leaders told us that providing work placements and apprenticeships was an ongoing problem. It was a particular challenge to provide these for learners with high needs who required additional support.
- Leaders were concerned by the reduction in availability of work experience placements.
- Several leaders said that placements in health and social care settings were more challenging because of the infection risk for these sectors.
- At the time of the visits, some leaders had established links with new employers to set up placements and work-experience opportunities.
- Other leaders were working closely with existing employers.

Reviewing and assessing work remotely

- At the time of our visits, many staff were reviewing learners' work and assessing progress remotely
- Many leaders said that effective assessment was a challenge.
- Apprentices' apprenticeship end-point assessments (EPAs) are still a challenge for providers.
- Leaders had mixed views on awarding organisations and exam boards.

Working with others

- Leaders said this collaborative work had continued in with employers, local organisations and partners in November and early December.
- Some leaders were increasingly working with other organisations and employers to support learners' well-being.
- Some leaders said that they were engaging more with their local community.
- Many leaders mentioned receiving help from professional organisations, such as the Association of Colleges, Association of Employment and Learning Providers, Holex and Natspec, as well as other more local networks.

Other challenges

- In addition to the challenges outlined in the initial briefing, providing practical elements of courses, work experience placements, supporting learners' well-being and reviewing and assessing work remotely were still posing challenges for many.
- There are also other challenges such as; staffing, keeping up with guidance, and IT challenges to nae a few.

Financial pressures within the sector

- Providers said the financial pressures listed in our previous briefing continue to affect them and other ongoing costs
- Reduced commercial income continues to affect some providers.
- Many spoke of an increased enrolment for some courses, which would bring in associated funding in due course.

Here are links to the full document and the initial document:

COVID-19 series: briefing on further education and skills, October 2020
COVID-19 series: briefing on further education and skills, October 2020 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

COVID-19 visits to further education and skills providers - 1 September 2020 to 31 December 2020
Data on COVID-19 visits: further education and skills - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)