

# COVID-19 series: briefing on further education and skills, November 2020

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

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This briefing note reports on 84 interim visits to further education and skills (FES) providers that Ofsted made between 19 October and 4 December. This is our second briefing note on FES.

## Data summary

**Table: Number of visits in this analysis: 84**

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%)
Colleges	2 (2%)	10 (12%)	12 (14%)	3 (4%)	3 (4%)	30 (36%)
Independent specialist colleges	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	6 (7%)	0%	1 (1%)	9 (11%)
Independent learning providers (including employer providers)	1 (1%)	11 (13%)	19 (23%)	0%	0%	31 (37%)
Community learning and skills providers	0%	4 (5%)	4 (5%)	1 (1%)	0%	9 (11%)
16 to 19 academies	2 (2%)	0%	1 (1%)	0%	0%	3 (4%)
Higher education institutions	0%	0%	2 (2%)	0%	0%	2 (2%)

\* Providers that have no previous inspection grade. These could be new providers or newly merged colleges.

\*\* Due to rounding, the percentages may not total 100.

## Main findings

All settings continued to provide education and skills throughout the autumn. This was often done using a mixture of face-to-face and remote provision. A minority of leaders said they had reduced the amount of face-to-face provision during the second national lockdown.

Compared with our earlier visits, more staff spoke about the need to review and better understand the quality of their curriculum. Some providers recognised that curriculum sequencing was becoming disjointed because the pandemic had disrupted its logical sequencing. For example, COVID-19 (coronavirus) restrictions make it hard to integrate practical elements and work placements in courses. Some providers had changed curriculum content to keep up to date with industry and employer changes.

More leaders than in our earlier visits mentioned that they had found 'gaps' in learners' knowledge and skills because of the pandemic. Many providers had carried out a series of assessments at the beginning of term to identify gaps in learning. They were putting plans in place for learners to catch up.

Many leaders said that they were making more mental health and safeguarding referrals to local agencies than this time last year. Leaders emphasised that supporting learners' well-being remains a priority. Many said well-being activities had been integrated into the curriculum to support learners, and this also indirectly supported their learning.

Finding work placements for learners, integrating practical elements of courses into the curriculum and reviewing and assessing work remotely were still common challenges. The increasing economic impact of the pandemic on the availability of practical work placements, real-life experiences and apprenticeships was a real concern for many.

## Methodological note

This is the second FES briefing note in our series about COVID-19. The evidence in it is based on our interim visits to FES providers. These visits resulted in no graded judgement. Providers received a brief report from the inspection team, summarising the provider's plans for maintaining high-quality education and skills provision.

Our visits covered a broad range of providers that collectively provide provision to tens of thousands of learners across England. Most of the providers we have sampled were previously graded requires improvement. The findings here do not necessarily represent what is happening at a national level, but do give us a perspective on what is happening in a sample of providers.

## Overarching questions

This briefing answers **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?

## The current state of further education and skills

### Returning to settings

Similar to our [last briefing](#), providers have continued to provide education and training throughout the autumn. A few leaders said the way they taught had changed during the second national lockdown. For example, in one college, Year 12 and Year 13 learners alternated each week between remote and on-site learning to reduce the number of learners on site; full face-to-face teaching was due to continue once national restrictions were lifted. A few providers had also changed their timetables so that all face-to-face teaching on a particular subject was concentrated over one day, rather than spread across the week. Leaders who were doing this said it was to minimise the number of visits to sites for learners. Leaders liked this approach and were going to continue with it after the second national lockdown ended. A few leaders also said they were having to restrict their intake on practical courses to be able to run them on site. A few providers said they needed to return to fully remote provision during the second national lockdown because their community venues had been closed.

Providers prioritised learners for on-site learning in different ways. Some said that they prioritised those on courses with a lot of practical components, such as science A levels, plumbing and construction courses. Others said that they prioritised vulnerable learners and those reporting anxiety and well-being concerns. Some said they had prioritised learners and courses where they perceived engagement with remote learning to be lower, which was often those on lower-level courses. Most said that they continue to use remote learning but are keen to return to as much face-to-face teaching as is possible under COVID-19 restrictions.

### Continuing to adapt the curriculum

Many leaders said that the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect their curriculum, especially their ability to provide practical elements. It was harder to teach practical elements of certain courses because learners struggled to practise skills at home. As a result, most staff were prioritising practical skills in face-to-face sessions and teaching the theoretical knowledge online.

Other providers were working around the practical skills challenge. For example, in beauty therapy, tutors used online platforms to demonstrate skills and suggested that learners practise skills on family members. Others were working with local businesses to supply learners with the necessary equipment and/or expertise to

undertake projects at home. For example, one provider had sent all learners a 'make your own drone' kit as part of a project to construct and document it at home. Another hired local chefs to provide online lessons on their specialities to learners. A few providers had also set up an in-house tuck shop during the second national lockdown to provide enterprise and money-management opportunities for learners with high needs. We listed other ways leaders were exploring providing practical elements of courses in our [last briefing](#).

Compared with our earlier visits, we found more leaders were aware that the order of topics within the curriculum had to be carefully thought about and adapted to meet learners' differing needs. Some staff explained that having to reorganise assessment and teaching due to restrictions, along with meeting learners' differing needs, has meant that learning has become disjointed and the logical sequencing of the curriculum has been disrupted. Some leaders said this is likely to have implications for learners being able to develop and embed knowledge and skills. Some staff said that delayed guidance from qualification-awarding organisations made it harder for them to plan course content, particularly the practical elements.

A few staff told us they had done a strategic review of their curriculum as a result of the COVID-19 disruption. This had highlighted the need for some changes. For example, one provider used to teach functional skills in one block of time. They now embed functional skills in all lessons throughout the course. They saw this as an improvement.

Leaders said that they had changed the curriculum content for some courses to reflect the reality of new working environments. In beauty and healthcare courses, staff updated curriculum resources to include content on infection control and COVID-19 safety measures. Drama courses were focusing on TV and film as opposed to theatre. Others created assignment briefs to make their curriculum relevant by relating it to real-life tangible issues. Some leaders also said that they had reviewed their curriculum plan to meet the changing demands of the job market. Several said they were working with other providers and local agencies to fill local skills gaps.

To prepare learners for the future job market, most leaders were continuing to increase employability skills, such as digital skills, through their curriculum and courses. For example, some staff running media and music courses said they were supporting learners to build their own websites and social media presence to enhance their future work prospects. A few leaders said that they were providing extra tuition and guidance in order to increase learners' employability. For example, they offered new courses on the principles of eco-driving in large-goods vehicle (LGV) training. Leaders said they were seeing increased enrolment on these courses. Some providers have a substantial cohort of adult learners studying English and/or mathematics to update their skills and qualifications so they can move into new careers.

As in our earlier visits, staff said they had modified curriculum content to support learners' well-being. We cover this in more detail later in this briefing. Some staff said that their curriculum offer had narrowed. Trips and extra-curricular activities,

such as swimming, were currently unavailable. They had replaced these by offering new outdoor activities, such as orienteering, introducing a forest school (a form of schooling where all lessons are outdoors) and having some face-to-face sessions outside, such as art lessons.

A few leaders were planning for different future scenarios: providing 100% of tuition online, 100% face to face, or a mixture of the two. This was in order to minimise possible future disruption to learning if restrictions changed. A few providers were assessing their learners more regularly, so that they would be prepared if centre-assessed grades were used again.

## Remote learning

Leaders were continuing to provide a mix of remote and face-to-face teaching in a variety of ways. Our previous briefing lists three common approaches they were taking.

As leaders said in earlier visits, remote learning tended to include online platforms and tools. Leaders said some learners struggled with these tools and ways of working. Staff identified that some learners with high needs found online remote learning more difficult. Often, providers posted paper-based resources to learners who struggled.

Our [review of the quality of learners' experience of online education](#) found most learners preferred 'live' online sessions. This was because they were able to interact with tutors and other learners. In our interim visits, staff told us about different tools they used to interact with learners in live sessions, including:

- quizzes and polls
- chat functions
- breakout rooms for smaller group work
- encouraging learners to use cameras and microphones.

We found that staff made decisions about online learning with safeguarding protocols in mind. Some also said they recorded live teaching sessions. This was viewed positively by staff and learners. The recordings were helpful when learners wanted to revisit or revise topics. They also allowed learners to catch up if they missed a session.

The online platforms and tools used varied across providers. Our review in July found that some providers used different platforms across subject areas. This could result in an inconsistent experience for learners. In our visits, one provider used multiple platforms and staff thought this could be frustrating at times. For this reason, they had plans to move to a single platform. However, some leaders, particularly in independent learning providers, explained that staff changed the platforms and tools they used to match what learners were comfortable with and had access to.

Some staff told us they were evaluating and improving their remote learning. They often did this through consulting with learners and staff. For example, some staff found that in order to increase learners' engagement, online sessions needed to be shorter than they would be in person. Some leaders also said they had created opportunities to share good practice for remote learning. For example, some used 'drop-in' sessions for staff to discuss this. A few providers had teamed up with other providers to peer review and learn from each other.

More staff than in our earlier visits said they were now considering the quality of their curriculum and remote learning. Some leaders said they were using online lesson observations to check quality. Members of the senior leadership/management team or staff with responsibility for overseeing the quality of teaching and learning usually carried out these observations. Other providers described using work scrutiny, monitoring learners' progress at all levels, moderating targets set for learners and following up on whether needs identified for individuals were being met. We do not yet have a clear picture about the criteria providers were using to judge quality in their remote learning. We will explore the quality of education at providers when our inspection activities resume.

A few leaders we spoke to during and before the second national lockdown said that remote learning was 'a lot better' than it was back in March. Reasons for this included:

- teachers and learners being more familiar with online learning and delivery
- providers having better systems of technical support in place for staff and learners
- teams having had the opportunity to experiment with various options and finding solutions that worked best for them.

Overall, providers saw remote learning as a positive adaptation. In the current situation, it has allowed self-isolating learners to continue learning and progressing with their programmes. Leaders in a few independent learning providers said that the pandemic had accelerated their move to remote learning, and they would continue with it in future. Most providers were planning to keep some form of remote learning but said it would not replace face-to-face teaching. One provider was considering where the pendulum should rest between online and face-to-face learning.

## **Recruiting learners**

Due to the difficulty of arranging normal recruitment events such as on-site visits and student interviews, staff had changed the way they attracted new learners. One provider arranged a local advertising campaign. Others had used social media to engage future learners. Some providers gave examples of how they stayed in touch with new and returning learners to keep them engaged, for instance through weekly emails. This is more than they did in previous years.

Many providers had organised virtual open days and site tours for prospective learners. Others had put on virtual taster sessions or demonstrations to showcase the types of activities learners would be doing when they joined. Some introduced online applications and enrolments, for example interviewing applicants over telephone or video calls. Generally, staff thought the remote events were a success. Many providers were planning to keep using them in future.

The overall picture of recruitment was mixed. It also varied across courses. Some providers had seen increases in the number of learners who were signing up for some courses, for example in courses related to the health and social care sector. Staff suggested that this could be because the pandemic has shown how valued these roles are. Other providers have found it difficult to recruit new learners. This was particularly common for apprenticeships. Staff told us that some employers were reluctant to take on new apprentices and others had ceased or paused all recruitment. One provider had decided to stop some of its apprenticeship programmes because of the challenge of recruitment. It decided to move into other sectors, including health and social care.

In a few providers, reduced physical capacity led to reduced recruitment. One provider reported significantly reduced recruitment to English for speakers of other languages courses because community venues that staff normally used were unavailable. Staff said they had also only been able to recruit small numbers (up to five) to performing arts courses because of social-distancing requirements. Other providers said their construction courses were facing similar obstacles to recruitment.

By contrast, in other providers, leaders talked about a large increase in enrolments for all age groups. For example, in one provider, leaders are working with Jobcentre Plus and the local enterprise partnership to develop new curriculums and traineeships for adults. These courses include entry to care and entry to business and professional services, such as telesales.

## **Careers information, advice and guidance**

A few staff said that the careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) they gave learners had not changed during the pandemic. However, some providers told us about ways they had adapted their CIAG. Some were providing guidance remotely, including through one-to-one meetings. Others arranged for external speakers as part of their virtual CIAG. A few said they had adapted the advice they gave in light of the current changing job market. For example, pharmacy apprentices at one provider had written blog posts about their work during the pandemic so that future apprentices would understand what the job involved.

Some staff said that learners, particularly young learners, needed more advice and support to check whether they were on the right course than they did in previous years. Staff thought this may be because these learners had missed out on the CIAG they would usually receive from schools over the summer. However, most learners had their destinations for the current academic year sorted out by last March. A few providers said it was challenging to contact 2020/21 Year 11 learners to help them

select the most appropriate courses. One provider said this was because some schools were not allowing visitors on site.

## **Safeguarding**

Many leaders said that the number of learners with significant mental health concerns had increased over the course of the pandemic. They had also seen increases in safeguarding concerns such as domestic abuse, county lines, dependence on food banks, knife crime and drug and alcohol misuse. For many leaders, this had resulted in an increase in the number of learners they referred on to local mental health and safeguarding teams.

Some providers had updated courses to include personal development modules on protecting learners' mental health and/or well-being. As a result, a few staff said they had seen a reduction in the number of learners they needed to refer on to mental health teams.

As with earlier visits this term, leaders in many providers had increased their focus on online safety for learners. They had also created specific induction activities for new and existing learners to teach them how to stay safe online. This is still the case. Many providers brought forward their safeguarding and online training in the curriculum to the start of the year or when learners returned. Some continued this in tutorials and refresher courses.

Leaders were confident that they were safeguarding learners effectively. But some providers found safeguarding learners remotely a challenge. They therefore stayed open for welfare checks throughout the first national lockdown. Others provided regular welfare checks and contact through telephone calls, meetings and pastoral interviews. Counselling was moved online. Leaders said staff would contact both parents and learners, particularly vulnerable learners. Some providers had safeguarding teams that made calls alongside teaching staff. This meant that the two points of contact provided more support for families, parents and carers. Some providers also sent information about safeguarding to parents and carers of young learners and/or those with high needs. This was to engage parents and carers with online safeguarding of learners using the internet to access learning at home.

A few providers mentioned that they were working with social services to support individual learners being removed from their families as a result of safeguarding concerns, such as forced marriage. In these instances, the learners were coming on site daily or had remained on site until they were signposted to the appropriate agency.

Leaders said they continued to engage with external partners and agencies. They used the updated information to adapt policies to cater for the changed circumstances. Most providers focused on similar topics, such as staying safe online. However, there was some variation in topics due to multi-agency links highlighting local risks. Some specific topics were therefore introduced, such as county lines, knife crime, radicalisation and extremism.

## Staff

COVID-19's impact on staffing varied between the providers we visited. Some leaders said they had increased their staffing levels because of the pandemic. This was in order to accommodate smaller class sizes, offer additional support for learners' well-being and to provide additional teaching for new young learners who had missed school for a significant period or for whom assessment had shown gaps in knowledge. Other leaders, mostly those not in colleges, told us that they were making, or had already needed to make, redundancies because of the financial pressures the pandemic has placed on them.

Leaders told us that moving to a remote curriculum was a challenge for staff at the beginning of the pandemic. This is because they needed to develop practical IT skills as well as familiarise themselves with new systems. To do this, leaders said they had focused on practical technical support rather than pedagogical support in providing lessons online. Some providers used more formal staff training, which was often delivered externally. Others relied on internal training from IT champions in their organisation and on staff sharing best practice. As a result, many leaders said that this barrier had now been mostly overcome. Staff in many providers were growing in confidence when using IT systems. Most staff said they had developed their digital skills and confidence in how to use different technologies for remote learning. However, some said they were still struggling with providing and planning remote lessons. They found these more difficult to do and longer to plan.

Many leaders said that COVID-19 had a negative impact on their staff's well-being. More than one leader said there had been suicides, as well as COVID-19-related bereavements, within their community. This had significantly impacted both staff's and learners' well-being. Many leaders said that staff needed additional reassurance and support in order to return to work due to COVID-related anxiety. Leaders said they had been supporting staff and learners, though how providers did this varied. Some were operating informal arrangements, such as 'open door' policies and leaders acting as a 'call centre for staff'. Other leaders told us they had held formal return-to-work interviews, sent out weekly newsletters and carried out more regular one-to-one meetings in order to support staff. A few providers made daily keeping-in-touch phone calls.

## How learners have been affected

### Gaps in learning

More leaders than in our last visits told us that learners had 'gaps' in their knowledge and skills because of the pandemic and related closures. Many had assessed learners at the beginning of the term and identified some learning gaps. Leaders said the gaps were generally most apparent in English and mathematics. Additionally for apprentices, some leaders said gaps in practical skills were evident. Several leaders also mentioned learners' loss of social skills and ability to communicate formally or their loss of aspiration.

Some leaders said these gaps were worse for current learners compared with previous cohorts. This was mainly the case for young learners and those on lower-level qualifications. Leaders said these learning gaps had to be considered when planning the content and order of teaching in some programmes and subjects. Many of these leaders had put catch-up programmes in place as a result of their assessments.

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. Synoptic assessment focuses on the knowledge learners have and how they apply it. It gives learners a choice of questions to answer from different topics, rather than requiring them to recall knowledge from all units. A few leaders, particularly in colleges, said that the high volume of learners with centre-assessed grades for GCSEs was a big challenge for them. It made identifying learning gaps harder and sometimes meant learners were not on the best course or level for them. Some providers commented that the pace of learning has been slower than usual for the start of the academic year. However, most reported that the majority of learners were back on track by October half term.

Some apprenticeship providers said that restrictions, furlough and economic challenges meant that some apprentices were unable to finish their courses. For example, one provider told us that rail apprentices' end-point assessments (EPAs) have to be carried out in the workplace. This had not been possible during the first national lockdown. Some learners had not been able to complete their programme because they had been furloughed or because their employer had ceased trading. Others had been delayed in completing their EPA as increased work demands meant they did not have time to complete work on their apprenticeship.

## **Learners' engagement and diverse learning groups**

Learners' engagement varied across the providers we visited. However, it appears to have improved across most groups of learners since the beginning of autumn. For example, some leaders said that centre-assessed grades had had an impact on learners' engagement. They 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. Providers suggest this is due to both the social interaction gained from face-to-face contact and the structure provided by physically entering sites. Older apprentices and adults, however, appreciated the flexibility of learning online. Remote learning enabled learners who were geographically distant to access a wider variety of courses.

Some leaders said that learners who speak English as an additional language struggled to engage with remote learning. This was due to a lack of digital access, difficulties in communication, children being at home and sharing living accommodation. Similarly, many learners with dependants said that schools reopening fully had allowed them to improve their engagement and attendance. One

learner said they felt they had obvious gaps in their learning due to childcare responsibilities. However, since their children have returned to school, they have caught up and are fully engaged.

For learners who typically enrol on practical learning programmes, for example rail drivers, the 'fear of working online' posed barriers to engagement in the early weeks of remote learning. For most learners, engagement increased as they became familiar with technology. However, one specialist provider for deaf learners told us that learners found it hard to keep up when learning remotely. They lost focus, became tired of staring at a screen, missed visual cues and generally experienced frustration.

Some providers sought to improve engagement by involving other learners through pastoral roles. For example, student champions or learning ambassadors encouraged learners' engagement and participation in fun activities and those focused on well-being. Other providers encouraged staff to fulfil this role more formally as learning mentors. They contacted learners frequently throughout each week and month.

## **Learners' well-being**

Many leaders said that supporting learners' well-being and mental health were their primary focuses during the autumn. This was in order to enable learners to be 'in the right headspace' to learn well. Many leaders said that learners had been profoundly impacted by the pandemic. They were still actively working with learners to mitigate the challenges the pandemic has created and to reduce the impacts on learning.

Some learners were anxious about returning to learning on site in autumn. This was due to concerns about travelling to sites, parental/family fears for learners who are vulnerable or who live with a vulnerable family member, and uncertainty around providers' plans for learning on their return.

Staff aimed to mitigate these anxieties by using virtual tours to show how sites had met COVID-19 safety requirements, by including parents in their communications about return and by introducing face masks. Some staff recognised the important role parents play in successful induction and return.

In some providers, a focus on learners' well-being superseded that on engagement with learning. They called this 'pastoral-first' engagement. Staff said that they ensured that they supported learners, including those who were not engaging with their programme of learning. Some providers responded to learners' mental health and well-being needs by recruiting staff such as emotional resilience nurses and counsellors. Other providers revised the curriculum to focus mostly on well-being and resilience.

One provider explained how learners' well-being issues were having an impact on retention. To mitigate this, leaders had adapted their curriculum to focus on well-being and were prioritising helping learners through these elements. Learners appear to have responded positively to providers' extra support. Some talked positively

about the out-of-hours availability of staff and how helpful this has been as it 'shows how much staff care'.

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. One provider said some learners with complex needs flourished online. They made great strides in communication and personal development. Staff suggested that working remotely possibly gave these learners a lack of inhibition and helped to improve their confidence.

## **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. Staff at some providers said supported internships had been unable to run during the pandemic. They suggested that employers had few plans to resume these internships in the short to medium term. Leaders said learning was being especially disrupted for these courses because the current economic instability and COVID-19 restrictions meant that:

- employers with existing apprenticeships were ceasing to trade, so alternative placements needed to be found
- employers were letting existing apprentices go and/or ceasing to take on new apprentices
- employers were reducing their work placements and training budgets
- employers were reluctant to take on new learners and work placements due to possible infection risks
- some apprentices were still on furlough and had exhausted the theoretical work needed in order to complete their course; however, they had not yet completed the necessary practical work with their employer.

Leaders were concerned by the reduction in availability of work experience placements. Learners who would normally benefit from these to build skills in independence and working practices could only work on these in the classroom. Leaders said that, as a result of this, learners were missing the ability to put theoretical skills into practice. A few providers mentioned learners returning for an additional year because they could not set up transitional work placements.

Several leaders said that placements in health and social care settings were more challenging because of the infection risk for these sectors. Others said that retail and hospitality placements were the most difficult to find due to the economic impact on the sector.

At the time of our visits, some leaders had established links with new employers to set up placements and work-experience opportunities. One leader said they were working with a local heritage organisation to provide work experience. They had arranged this through existing contacts in the sector and self-promotion. When apprentices had been made redundant, some providers had found them posts with other local employers, often those they were already working with.

Other leaders were working closely with existing employers. For example, they were training employers' staff to provide training in the workplace and to complete EPAs virtually. A few leaders mentioned that they were offering virtual work experience placements for learners in sectors such as health and social care. A few other leaders were offering on-site work experience to their learners. This included working on reception, in the college café or in the print shop. One provider had also changed its governor recruitment strategy. It was now looking for governors with different skills to help learners find work placements, such as volunteer management experience.

## **Reviewing and assessing work remotely**

At the time of our visits, many staff were reviewing learners' work and assessing progress remotely. Some learners submitted work remotely and staff provided feedback on the work. Learners tended to submit work directly to their tutor or upload it to a virtual learning platform. Some learners submitted written assignments. Learners on practical courses tended to submit photos or videos for tutors to check their progress in practical skills.

Many leaders said that effective assessment was a challenge. Some staff said the online systems they used helped them keep track of learners' progress. For example, tutors could set tasks and the system would show when learners had completed them. However, some leaders were frustrated by assessment options within online modules. They were unable to check learners' depth of understanding due to limitations of the software. As a result, some had moved to scenario-based questions, so learners could show and explain answers in more detail. Many providers also created online quizzes, which gave instant feedback to learners. Other methods staff used included learners doing presentations on video calls or learners taking part in online group discussions.

As we reported in our first briefing, we found that apprentices' EPAs have been a challenge for providers. The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education has allowed qualification-awarding bodies to be more flexible in how they assess learners during this time. Some leaders said they had worked well with awarding bodies and employers to find remote approaches for EPAs to continue. For example, some used witness testimonies and professional discussions and recorded observations in place of face-to-face observations. A few staff said assessors had worked flexibly, including working in the evenings, so learners could finish their apprenticeships.

Remote EPAs are not suitable for all courses. This was delaying completion for some learners. For example, leaders said that driving EPAs were a challenge because they could not be done remotely and the waiting list for tests was growing.

Leaders had mixed views on awarding organisations and exam boards. Some felt they had worked together well, often in order to do remote EPAs. A few were unhappy with how awarding organisations had communicated with them. They described them as being slow to make decisions and felt that they were providing mixed messages.

## **Working with others**

Our last briefing highlighted that many providers were working closely with employers, local organisations and partners. Leaders said this collaborative work had continued in November and early December. It was often facilitated by better use of technology to speak to stakeholders. Some leaders said this was because the growing economic impact of the pandemic meant employers needed more flexibility in how and when content and assessment were delivered. For example, employers in health and social care needed apprentices' learning to be fully online due to care home restrictions. Some employers in retail required remote observation to assess learners.

Some leaders were increasingly working with other organisations and employers to support learners' well-being. For example, one had trained employers to help younger apprentices with mental health problems. They had given the employer a suite of materials and clear signposting for them to offer to learners.

Some leaders said that they were engaging more with their local community. Examples included: 3D-printing face visors for local care homes, working with community venues to host provision and working with local community groups to understand what skills are needed to access work in future.

Many leaders mentioned receiving help from professional organisations, such as the Association of Colleges, Association of Employment and Learning Providers, Hoxex and Natspec, as well as other more local networks. They said these have been an invaluable source of support, practical advice and guidance. Several leaders had created local support networks to help them, particularly to interpret government guidance.

## **Other challenges**

Our [previous briefing](#) listed a series of current challenges that leaders were facing. As we have said here, providing practical elements of courses, work experience placements, supporting learners' well-being and reviewing and assessing work remotely were still challenges for many.

Other current challenges for leaders included:

- ensuring that they provide a high-quality experience for learners, which takes into account their different needs and experiences of the pandemic
- staffing, including the logistical and financial challenge when staff members were self-isolating or ill and unable to deliver provision; one provider we visited had had 35 staff absent or self-isolating at once
- keeping up to date with government guidance for the FES sector and for the sectors that learners work with; in particular, regional tiers and differences between devolved administrations were a challenge for some leaders whose staff, learners, employers or sites spanned two or more areas
- providing more IT equipment to enable all learners without laptops to learn remotely when required
- helping staff learn how to plan for better remote or blended learning; some staff found remote teaching 'harder to prepare for and harder to deliver'
- training new staff and getting them 'up to speed' remotely
- preparing for next summer's exams
- helping learners with high needs with transitions and moving onto their next steps while many activities needed to be virtual.

## Financial pressures within the sector

Providers said the financial pressures listed in our previous briefing continue to affect them. Ongoing costs include making the sites meet COVID-19 safety requirements, improving ventilation of buildings, buying IT kit for learners and providing software and equipment for learners to access their courses online.

Staff at several providers mentioned negative impacts on their finances as a result of the pandemic. Reduced commercial income continues to affect some providers. Others reported that waiting for the funding for new learners has had more of a financial impact than usual because they have less capital in reserves to fall back on. This is due to an increase in the number of learners enrolling and the immediate costs of new learners accessing the curriculum. Some providers report a decline in enrolments in certain areas, for example in manufacturing, rail and aviation apprenticeships. Others have found that sub-contractors are reluctant to commit to training and sign new contracts. In some apprenticeships, delayed assessments result in delayed completion payments. This was a concern for those providers' cash flow.

There were instances of financial savings too, depending on the courses providers offered. Many spoke of an increase in enrolments, which would bring in associated funding in due course. The additional funding from the 16 to 18 tuition fund and similar funding for adult courses were well received. Providers have used this to offer more tuition to learners who have fallen behind. Some providers also mentioned ongoing savings on travel costs due to working remotely.



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Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231  
Textphone: 0161 618 8524  
E: [enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
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