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Cheshire West and Chester Council Using a merger to improve quality

Summary

Following local government reorganisation, disparate teams from former local councils came together to form a new Employment, Skills and Learning department in a newly merged council, now known as Cheshire West and Chester Council. Support was requested from LSIS Improvement and Development Service to develop cohesion across the provision. They received an Organisational Health Check (OHC), a few days advisory support and used the strengths of a passionate and committed staff with good teamwork to develop a new quality framework. Central to the quality framework is an E Quality Handbook.

The results of their hard work were rewarded with a good Ofsted inspection report.

About Cheshire West and Chester Council

Cheshire West and Chester Council is a new authority which was created through merger of Cheshire County Council and three district councils as a result of local government reorganisation. The new council began its operations on 1st April 2009. The newly structured department of Employment, Skills and Learning within the Council delivers adult learning programmes, skills development and employment preparation programmes.

The challenge

The merger not only brought together different councils but also teams who had previously had responsibility for different aspects of skills and learning. Team members in the new department of Employment, Skills and Learning now had to work together to carry out a self assessment, prepare for a joint inspection rather than be inspected as three separate strands and make a cohesive whole from very different cultures, policies and procedures.

The activity

The department team wanted to ensure that they were positioned to meet current and future learner needs and develop coherence across the provision. They requested an OHC from the LSIS Improvement and Development Service. The OHC gives a diagnostic assessment of fitness for purpose and provides action points for development. In this case, the OHC provided several recommendations. Those most relevant to developing a strong team geared to quality improvement were to develop a framework that could be used by the whole department which would show how excellence could be achieved and to introduce key performance indicators that would be owned at all levels of management .

Following the OHC an IDS adviser worked with staff for a few days. The adviser helped the team to determine a position statement on different aspects of the Common Inspection Framework (CIF) to update the self assessment report. They also worked together to develop those key performance indicators recommended by the OHC and started the project of bringing quality processes and systems together. One of the team continued this work to produce an interactive electronic quality handbook.

The outcomes

The Quality Handbook amalgamates all policies and systems in one interactive document with direct hyperlinks to any policy or procedure a user might be looking for. The exercise of producing the handbook allowed gaps in quality systems to be identified and filled. All the tools that are deployed to assure the quality of provision of services are detailed in the handbook. An example section for health and safety includes a policy statement with immediate links to essential forms such as a risk assessment form and a venue checklist.

Here is a sample paragraph from the Handbook on the Quality Cycle, consisting of a general statement and the link to a timetable.

Quality Cycle

There are a series of activities throughout the year, some generic to the entire department and some specific to each team. The timetable of these activities can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

A further outcome was the position statement on various CIF aspects so that an up to date self assessment was prepared by the whole team. This proved invaluable when the team was informed that an Ofsted inspection was imminent. This was to be the first inspection of the combined strands forming the Employment, Skills and learning department.

Key performance indicators are now provided for every section and role within the department. These provide clear targets for everyone to work to and own.

The impact

The OHC was highly regarded as it gave everyone in the department a voice on assessing the current position and how to move forward. This included administration staff whose support is valued by the rest of the team. The team felt they now had one vision and felt like a real cohesive team.

Lisa Conway, the senior manager in the department, said, 'I'd like an OHC every 2 years to ensure we are on track'.

Updating the SAR and examining strengths and weaknesses in different areas gave the team confidence. They knew they were working holistically and had clear mechanisms for sharing good practice within and externally to the department.

The team was delighted to receive Grade 2s across the board in their inspection in 2011. This demonstrated the strength of the new team and the excellent work they had done in improving quality. The inspectors were impressed at how far the team had come in such a relatively short time.

Clare Latham, Adult Learning Manager, says

The support contributed to our whole service development and helped the new team focus on what we needed to do to improve quality and at the same time prepare for Ofsted.'

The lessons learned

The team was successful because they were open to receiving external support and indeed requested it. They understood the advantages of an objective, independent view of their work.

Jill Gates, Senior Officer from Learner Information and Support, says

'Staff had the opportunity to raise concerns to an independent person so were more open. This helped to bring team concerns to the fore and be addressed.'

They realised the importance of involving everyone in activities such as producing the self assessment including administration staff and sub contractors who also contribute to the strategic objectives of the organisation. Updating the self assessment is now a regular exercise, not carried out as an annual chore, but as a means of assuring continuous quality.

The E quality handbook can be emulated by any organisation. It takes some time to set up but once it exists it is easily accessed by all, explains all quality systems and can be quickly updated.

Useful links

www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk

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