

Fairfield Farm College and Wiltshire College Case Study



Fairfield Farm College

[Fairfield Farm College](#) is a small Independent Specialist College which provides residential and day courses in vocational and independence training for students with learning disabilities. The college has 66 staff, 43 of whom are involved in direct delivery of teaching and learning on a daily basis. Of these, 29 are support staff, 12 are teaching staff and 2 have two part time posts, one as support staff and one as a tutor. The majority of the support staff at the college (24) either work in college houses or provide work based learning, whether that be on the college site or off site work experience. These staff work alone or in pairs, and as such contribute directly to the learning and are routinely involved in recording progress and achievements. The other support staff provide 1:1 support for students to access the curriculum on the college site or to access courses at the local mainstream college. Some work in more than one of these roles.

Wiltshire College

[Wiltshire College](#) in the south west of England has four main centres in Chippenham, Lackham (formerly land-based college), Trowbridge and Salisbury. The college offers courses in 15 subject areas and in many of these has provision at pre-entry level through to higher education. There are a high number of learners at level two and below. The college employs an Additional Learning Support Manager based at Trowbridge and has a coordinator on each campus. 63 Additional Learning Support assistants (ALSA) are employed on term-time only contracts for, on average, 25 hours a week and currently a further five are employed on casual contracts. The largest number is based at Trowbridge. ALSAs support includes 1:1, in class, with personal care and British Sign Language (BSL) signing. Most staff work under the direction of a tutor. There are eight ALS tutors. Their role is to work one to one with students who are identified as needing additional support at application/interview and once enrolled. A further two tutors work on Variable Hours Contracts. On the Trowbridge campus there are three tutors and 27 employed ALSAs. A further three ALSAs are employed on a casual contract through an agency to cover long term sickness and maternity leave.

The LSIS resources we used

Fairfield Farm College used the [Professional Development Profiling \(PDP\)](#) on-line tool and the [Organisational Audit Tool](#) for meetings with groups. Wiltshire College used the organisational Audit Tool, and planned the use of the PDP on-line tool in the final days of the project. Both tools are mapped to the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Learning Support. Staff from both colleges were largely unaware of the NOS for Learning Support at the start of the project and it was hoped that the use of both tools would provide an introduction to them.

The approach

The project ran from September 2011 to March 2012.

At Fairfield Farm, the majority of support staff are not working with or managed by teaching staff. They support the students to learn independence skills following a structured programme written by the

Support Management Team, so questions from the audit tool were rephrased to exclude reference to tutors as leading sessions where appropriate. Questions were also simplified for use with students.

The on line survey was completed by 100% of the support staff and was programmed into staff training days. The survey was introduced to small groups (up to 6 per group). The staff were supported to log in and a manager was available to discuss any issues which arose. When using the on line survey a number of staff discussed whether feeling confident in an area precluded a request for further development in that area. There was some debate on this issue and the consensus was that even if a member of staff feels confident, they can still learn more and develop professionally in that area. At the group meetings staff commented that a number of questions seemed to be a little repetitive.

For the audit tool, meetings were very difficult to facilitate due to the nature of the organisation. As students are present and have to be supported 24 hours a day 7 days a week, it was difficult to get any group of staff together without students present during term time. This was overcome by 'hijacking' other meetings – the questions were asked at team meetings, but it meant that the business of that meeting was not conducted. In addition, two meetings were held on a staff training day. Group meetings were arranged with:

- support staff who provide 1:1 support on the college site,
- support staff who provide support in the college houses,
- support staff who provide support in the college houses and on the college site,
- the Support Management Team,
- HR Officer and Quality Coordinator,
- tutors and the Curriculum Manager, and students.

For Wiltshire College, it was decided to limit the project to the Trowbridge Campus due to distances between campuses. Not all staff work over five days a week and as they are fully timetabled to support students, arranging common meeting times proved extremely difficult. The training days for ALSAs are at the beginning and end of the academic year and the timing of the project came too late to access the first training day. The project was further delayed by changes to its schedule resulting from an Ofsted inspection. Substantial staff sickness also impacted as staff were covering absences. Therefore, most of the information was gained through using the audit tool as a questionnaire and through informal discussion using the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Learning Support. The participation from ALSAs was high at 72%, plus 10 teaching staff who use support across the Trowbridge site.

Examples of the outcome and impact of the work

At Fairfield Farm College, the on line survey demonstrated a very pleasing level of confidence in many areas of the work and an enthusiasm for professional development. It was clear that Information Communication Technology (ICT) is an area for staff development and that the lowest scores for confidence were in the questions relating to supporting literacy, numeracy and ICT. The request for further development was high in all three areas. This is reflected in the staff's own level of qualifications: although 45% of staff have literacy and numeracy qualifications at level 2, 31% have no qualifications in either literacy or numeracy at that level.

The meetings relating to the audit tool demonstrated that support staff feel and are valued, and feel they have clear job descriptions and line management structure. Staff understand what is required of the role, they feel fully involved with all aspects of student learning, they contribute appropriately to assessments of students work, and they keep effective records. Support staff and managers said that training is provided which is appropriate, through the supervision and support system and the appraisal process enables staff to identify and suggest changes, which are discussed and acted on if appropriate.

“One of the benefits of the audit tool for me was getting to see and really talk to specific groups of staff I don't always get to talk to” Janet Kenward, Principal Fairfield Farm College

Overall the on line survey results were useful in identifying areas to prioritise when planning staff training to meet the development needs of support staff. The meetings with staff and students clearly outlined a

great continuity in thinking about support worker roles but it also highlighted some areas for development.

The benefit in using both tools in combination meant that the opportunity for discussion with the organisational tool allowed exchange of opinion and in some cases a revision of opinion as the outcomes from the on line tool kit are very individual.

For Wiltshire College, information to feed into quality audit usually comes from the curriculum areas and this project has enabled increased input by ALSAs which will provide a triangulated approach. Time has been available to reflect and compare the perspective of both ALSAs and teaching staff, and has highlighted areas that need to be developed concerning their working relationship. It is interesting to note that the same areas for development were also identified in the inspection.

From the information gained it was clear that the support staff felt valued and understood their role. However, lines of communication were not consistent across all areas and some further training needs have already been identified and are anticipated to be confirmed by outcomes from the PDP tool. It was clear from the feedback that teaching staff and ALSAs did not share a common view of the skills and support the ALSAs should or would provide. Plans are now in place to address this through staff development and further refining of on-line resources to support new or inexperienced staff.

Next steps and future plans

For Fairfield Farm College, the information and outcomes from both tools will be used to evidence college successes, inform the staff training programme and to inform college development. The outcomes will be included in the college's quality system and thus feed into self-assessment, quality improvement and planning for the college. Timing of future use of the tools would see the on line one run early in the year to inform planning for staff training and the second one towards the end of the year to inform the self assessment process.

For Wiltshire College, the completion of the project has been protracted. It was extremely difficult to find common time for meetings. Careful consideration needs to be given regarding the future timing and implementation of both the audit as an agreed part of on-going staff development and the on line survey which will contribute to support staff knowledge and understanding of NOS, improve observations and inform personal development reviews.

Scheduling the audit activity at the end of the academic year will be an ideal time as the information can inform the Self-Assessment Report. It needs to be programmed into the calendar so that all staff can participate. The PDP on line tool would need to be in the training days to ensure capture of as many staff as possible across all sites.

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