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Reading Borough Council, New Directions: Raising Success in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

Summary

In 2010 New Directions requested assistance from LSIS Sector Support Service advisers (now the Improvement and Development Service) to help them improve success rates in skills for life, starting with ESOL which had the most complex issues. A revised curriculum offer and new approaches to learner recruitment, assessment and expectation setting were trialled in ESOL and later rolled out. As a result, success rose for all aspects of the target areas. By November 2011 the provision was judged 'good' by Ofsted.

About Reading Borough Council

New Directions (ND) is part of Reading Borough Council's Education and Children's Services. It provides adult community education for the council in three sites across the borough. The service currently has approximately 2500 part time adult learners. Around 50% follow accredited programmes.

ND offers a broad range of provision including initial teacher training, vocational learning, visual and performing arts, literature and culture, languages, family learning, skills for life and ICT.



The challenge

New Directions was judged 'inadequate' by Ofsted in 2007. Improvements were recognised at the re-inspection January 2009 which led to a 'satisfactory' outcome. However, by 2010 there was insufficient progress on outcomes. This was due to low retention in literacy, numeracy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

The activity

LSIS advisers supported ND to identify and implement several strategies to improve retention and success rates in the targeted areas.

The Lead Adviser started work in the area of ESOL which had been identified as the aspect in need of most attention. Working closely with Barry Wren, the Delivery and Development Manager, the curriculum was revised; new progression pathways were developed towards the existing accredited provision.

"We realised that our original ESOL offer was too rigid; we needed to match learner need more accurately. Once we had the correct provision in place, we could realistically raise our expectations and aspirations in terms of learner attendance and retention." (Barry Wren, Delivery and Development Manager, New Directions)

The adviser continued working with the team to develop and implement new approaches for learner recruitment, assessment and expectation setting, this included two key aspects:

- More rigorous Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) which included curriculum staff. This aimed to ensure that learners were placed on correct courses and were engaged in the steps of progression towards their longer term goals and aspirations
- Better use of data. This involved creation of data reports using Pro-achieve and Council systems. Then, support for staff to use this data in order to monitor the provision and consider consequences from the data - specifically the importance of timing and accuracy when entering learning aims

"We knew our teaching was good, so low success rates were frustrating for the whole team. It was vital to include staff in the process of development so they could understand how we could make a difference to retention and success rates, particularly the impact of high quality IAG and placing learners on correct learning aims." (Barry Wren, Delivery and Development Manager, New Directions)

"The Adviser really understood our context and learners, she had the knowledge and experience to offer us the specific support we needed. This really helped to change the attitudes of staff who had worked for the organisation for a number of years very quickly. It was particularly reassuring for staff to hear that we were not unique in our issues." (Jon White, Business & Performance Manager, New Directions)

The outcomes

During the adviser support period ESOL success rates improved by 16% to 72%

The model developed through the new approaches for ESOL was adapted and rolled out across literacy and numeracy provision, and related work was completed with ICT.

The impact

Success rates across the focus subject areas dramatically improved. The overall Adult Learner Responsiveness success rate increased by 22%, from 45% to 67%.

When Ofsted completed their inspection in November 2011, the provision was judged to be good for overall effectiveness, capacity to improve, outcomes for learners, quality of provision, leadership and management and the subject areas inspected, including ICT, literacy, numeracy and ESOL (preparation for life and work). Raising expectation and promoting ambition was judged as Outstanding.

Recent data shows a further improvement, taking the majority of success rates above the minimum levels of performance.

The lessons learned

Barry Wren describes the lessons learned through the process of improvement and offers key points for improving retention and success:

- Aspiration without context equals failure; your course offer needs to match the aspirations of individual learners and have clear steps of progression
- Don't underestimate the impact of good IAG. Identify a team of people who can specialise or be champions, include curriculum specialists within this team where possible
- Take time to understand exactly why people want to learn in order to provide an appropriate solution
- Include staff in the process of development; this enables them to feel empowered to take control, make sustainable change and have the appetite for continuous improvement. It can create healthy competition
- Ensure staff commitment is there from day one. Without that the whole process will lack momentum.
- Ensure tutors appreciate the impact of entering individuals on learning aims which match real ability, instead of their aspired long term level. Tutors now support learners to work towards long term aspirations in realistic steps; achieving one level/stage at a time; this helps to build learner confidence

"If things aren't going as they should be don't become distracted; listen to your staff, play to your strengths, they will tell you what they are." (Lesley Reilly Head of Service)

Useful links

New directions, Reading Borough Council website

www.newdirectionsreading.co.uk

Links to related case studies

If you would like to know more about this case study, please contact Barry Wren

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