

Functional Skills and Family Learning: An introduction

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Supported Provider: Shropshire Family Learning
Improvement Partner: Shropshire County Training



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Summary

This case study relates to the implementation of functional skills within a family learning context. Functional skills are new to the Family Learning service nationwide, and there has been relatively little background support and training for this specific sector to date. Shropshire County Training, as the improvement partner, was able to provide Shropshire Family Learning with specialist help to integrate functional skills within the family learning context.

After preliminary discussion between the Family Learning Manager and the improvement partner lead, a comprehensive familiarisation programme for staff was agreed. This included forming a working group to adapt internal documentation, resources, working methods and procedures. Sub-groups were formed to address specific topics such as initial assessment, diagnostic testing and learner-focussed activities.

The familiarisation training programme was made up of:

- introductory sessions to highlight the changes needed in delivery;
- subject-specific training such as English, Maths, Wider Family Learning delivery; and
- reviewing, adapting and the development of resources.

From this, the Family Learning team were able to fundamentally revise their methods of delivery to amend the length of courses, adopt different methods of assessment, introduce the 'problem-solving' characteristic of functional skills, encompass new challenges such as the assessment of speaking and listening as part of the accreditation process, and revise existing procedures for entering learners for examinations.

With LSIS support through the improvement partner, Shropshire Family Learning has now introduced Functional Skills across their provision through a comprehensive training programme and development of appropriate paperwork and documentation. The service has now delivered three pilot courses, with 100 per cent success rate at examination.

Introduction

About Shropshire Family Learning

Shropshire Family Learning has been delivering an average of 120 basic skills qualifications per year since 2004. All tutors are employed on a casual basis. Our provision includes English, maths and IT and a broad range of Wider Family Learning (WFL) activities within a large rural county. Courses are delivered in areas of economic and social deprivation, which includes rural poverty.

Implementation

Planning our approach

Implementation details

- Initial meeting between the Family Learning Manager and improvement partner to discuss partnership working and early training activities: May 2012.
- First workshop with working group delivered and sub-groups established: June 2012.
- Introductory sessions delivered to the whole team by Managers and improvement partner: July 2012.
- Subject specific training delivered to small teams by team leader teams. Groups established to take forward the activity: August 2012.
- First pilot studies launched.
- Observation and mid-point assessments completed.
- Updates and reviews within staff meetings undertaken.
- Assessments conducted in November 2012.
- Qualifications awarded in December 2012.
- Expansion of delivery across the rest of the service/introduction of functional skills and replacement of basic skills by July 2013.

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

Our aim was to gradually replace basic skills with functional skills during the course of the 2012-2013 academic year. We could not have imagined that this process would be achieved so quickly or smoothly. We are delighted with our early and comprehensive success.

Fewer problems than we envisaged have been experienced and we attribute this to steady, carefully planned development. All of the learners on the pilot programmes have chosen to progress to the next level of study and have provided full and positive feedback on their functional skills learning experiences.

What we are taking forward

We are now delivering an increasing number of functional skills programmes with great success. Increased confidence and motivation within the team has led to ready involvement in the development of other new programmes and projects.

How we are sharing it

We are providing direct and indirect support and advice to other Family Learning teams within our region.

Key lessons learned

Shropshire Family Learning was determined to be ready for the introduction of functional skills. We wanted to ensure that, by involving the whole team in the process, a positive impression of the functional skills process would be perpetrated within the team and to the learners.

1. From the initial workshops, the potential and differences of functional skills were celebrated to ensure an enthusiasm for the change. This proved extremely successful, with both tutors and learners welcoming the new developments.
2. Tutors quickly appreciated the benefits of an integrated style of teaching and the opportunity to refresh their teaching approach, with most rapidly overhauling their resources, lesson planning and teaching methods.
3. Learners were also consulted, and a group at a local primary school were enthused enough to agree to become a pilot for the new qualifications. At mid-point, and at the end of the course, they were again consulted and the feedback received was positive and encouraging. Most reported that they preferred functional skills, enjoying the thematic approach to study and the holistic method of learning.

This structured development resulted in a smooth transition from basic to functional skills, with the Family Learning team and their learners sharing 'ownership' of this new development. From a management point of view, the necessity for change was more readily received and, in fact, underpinned the cohesion within the team.

This is an on-going process, with further training planned as functional skills delivery is rolled out across the service. Workshops and CPD activities are planned, utilising the experiences of the earlier pilot studies.

Having quickly adopted functional skills, and achieved early success, the Shropshire Family Learning team have been able to share their experiences with other teams in the region who have not yet fully embarked on a programme of delivery.

What advice we would give to others

Don't panic! Plan developmental activities carefully to ensure staff are involved, consulted and feel a part of the whole process. This ownership will pay dividends with their enthusiasm, commitment and willingness to contribute and promote positively to their learners. Seek the support of others who have already been through the transition, thus avoiding a reinvention of the wheel.

Contact information

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