

## **LSIS Supported Provider Collaborative Development projects**

### **LSIS funded Apprenticeship projects**

#### **Provider end of project report: July 2012**

**Project Title:** Developing skills to overcome employer perceived barriers to Apprenticeships

### **Section 1: Introduction**

#### **Lead partner**

Strode College is one of the largest employers in the Somerset area, employing approximately 600 staff. It has led a consortium of Apprenticeship providers cross county, through to resounding successes in delivery of new apprentice places in 2011.

#### **Provider partners**

- Strode College.
- Richard Huish College.
- Yeovil College.
- Bridgwater College.
- Somerset College.
- Somerset Skills and Learning.
- Acacia Training.

#### **How and why the project emerged**

This consortium has been keen to retain momentum and impact and is about to embark on a second project with greater success against clear goals. However, the need remains to address learning issues from the first project.

This is specifically the dual need to fully and further engage with micro businesses which form the backbone of the county economy, and where appropriate to secure a financial commitment by way of employer contribution in addition to wages. Wages can form a big percentage of costs in small businesses.

#### **Aims and objectives**

There are distinct barriers to the effective provision (sale and delivery) of Apprenticeships in rural areas, where micro businesses predominate. Many of these have become further evident in local campaigns as this imperative from the Coalition Government has grown. This project is to research, via new local evidence and previous informed reports, those precise obstacles in the current 2012 economy. We will then establish structures and skills to overcome those issues.

### **Project objectives**

- To research the current barriers in the 2012 economic climate which face the micro business (under 10 employees for this project), in the context of apprentices and work experience.
- To establish learning which can be shared within the consortium and beyond.
- To agree strategies to address and overcome those barriers.

### **The starting point**

The county profile with a wide geography, large boundary, significant rural hinterland, and little specialist and dedicated sector predominance all mean that there are few opportunities to secure large numbers of either apprentices or work experience placements. Whilst Bridgwater College brings some higher density industrial areas, the remainder demands high attention and determination with micro businesses regularly unable or unwilling to commit to any cost. Many prove inaccessible to all, but the local applicant.

An established consortium of five colleges and two other providers participated. They were aided and supported by key players at county level, including Employment and Skills Board, Jobcentre Plus teams, the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS), the Association of Colleges (AoC) and the local training provider network.

The consortium was involved in delivering two successful campaigns: a 100 in 100 campaign (to secure 100 apprentice places in 100 days). Mid way through this campaign, 515 apprentice places were secured. By the start of this LSIS project, a second successful 100-day challenge -100 **new** employers to support apprentices and/or work experience - was launched with a result of 156 employers.

The barriers to effective delivery had been discussed. The consortium had met about 15 times over eighteen months. It was found that individual providers were all giving their own messages to employers, who found it very confusing when mixed with the national messages and media coverage. In addition, approaches to overcoming objections varied and some were more direct and determined than others.

Specifically it was apparent that the learner journey was different at each provider. The support and number of interactions varied.

- Did the applicant get pre briefed?
- Were they helped through the National Apprenticeship Vacancy Matching Service (NAVMS)?
- Were they supported with interview skills?

Results were clearly different. Similarly, the employer journey had varying levels of support. For example, did the provider sift applicants, prioritize applicants or join the interviews? Whilst it was important to ensure that the

recruitment decision sat with the business, the level of interaction and direction varied.

## **Section 2: Activities**

### **Participants**

The Business Development Manager from Strode College, who had previous experience of running this group, led the project and was well known across the county.

An established consortium of five colleges and two other providers participated. The consortium was aided and supported by key players at county level including:

- Somerset Employment and Skills Board;
- Somerset County Council (14-19);
- Jobcentre Plus teams;
- The National Apprentice Service (NAS); and
- Dorset and Somerset Training Providers Network (DSTPN).

These additional stakeholders attended the meetings and updated the group on current developments. For example, when considering the impact on other providers cross county, the involvement of NAS was useful. When seeking wide marketing support and a council perspective the impact of Somerset County Council was useful. They provided publicity in 78,000 free newspapers at no cost. In addition, the local training provider network - who has run many schemes - was a useful ally and a sounding board. The involvement of these outside partners was exceptional in supporting the project.

### **A summary of what has happened**

*Get Somerset Working* was the title of the second campaign driven by this consortium, Somerset County Council and Somerset Skills and Employment Board. This campaign saw 156 employers commit to creating a raft of new working opportunities.

*“Apprenticeship starts across Somerset rose by 45% to 4,500 in total last year. The recent Get Somerset Working campaign shows that employers are still keen to invest in their workforce and that they value the role of apprentices in developing their businesses”.*

County Councilor, David Hall: Cabinet member responsible for economic development.

However, the group were all picking up barriers to Apprenticeships from those employers they were unsuccessful with. Therefore, monthly meetings were held to look at how these barriers could be overcome, and the number of Apprenticeships increased. Everyone was keen to be involved, to learn and to share that back with colleagues. The power of the group with mutual trust was

stronger than the power of any one provider with experiences multiplied many times over.

Firstly, the group conducted a survey via Survey Monkey to establish primary research. They then used a raft of additional secondary research to confirm and add to their own findings.

The analysis was given to an external trainer, who devised and delivered a one days training event to help partners overcome barriers when selling Apprenticeships to employers.

We also created a toolkit to help employer-facing staff from all providers to deliver a consistent message about Apprenticeships.

### **Changes to plans**

We designed the project to help inform the third campaign and to build on the success of the first two. The date of the third campaign was delayed due to the positive nature of the project work. The third campaign will now start on the 16 August 2012.

## **Section 3: Working in partnership**

This was an established consortium working on their second and planning their third campaign/project together. They are a motivated and committed group so maintaining the partnership was relatively easy. The original platform was agreed two years ago, in that all had an equal voice regardless of size or catchment. This was critical in gaining contributions from all partners.

### **Issues to overcome**

Not all participants completed the required number of surveys initially, and therefore secondary sources on barriers to Apprenticeships were researched to add substance to the findings. However, the number gained from the survey was considered representative, and aligned to other research. It told the team they were not working in a different sphere nor had exceptional challenges. Indeed, it showed that many rural and micro businesses have exactly the same issues as others.

Case studies produced did not give any additional information for the toolkit that existing case studies on NAS, DSTPN websites or the Excellence Gateway provided. Consequently, the consortium decided to show the links to these sites rather than collect more or rewrite original ones.

### **Advice to providers in future projects, which are new to partnership working.**

- Build trust first, you cannot expect someone to share their own challenges or issues without a reason.
- Let everyone have an equal voice, the smallest provider may have the

best remedies. Size does not matter.

- Keep everyone involved and valued, rotate venues. Continuity comes from the Chair only.

## **Section 4: Impact**

### **Changes and differences that the project has made:**

#### **Impact for providers**

- An improved understanding of the employer landscape and their issues and needs.
- Better targeting of activity in the sales process to agreed outputs.
- A staged employer journey to ensure support is felt at every step: an example of best practice new to many.
- A staged employee journey to ensure support is felt at every step: an example of best practice new to many.
- Stop the jargon: adopt that rule elsewhere in your work.

#### **Impact for the project provider group**

- Better informed planning and targeting for future campaigns.
- Success breeds success, an improved longevity for the group.

#### **Impact for learners**

- Better informed and engaged employers to aid the learner journey.
- Better support throughout the process from expression of interest to recruitment.
- Clearer use of English, which is jargon free.
- Consistency.

#### **Measures that demonstrate the impact the project has had**

This will be felt in the third campaign scheduled from 16 August 2012.

However, there are anecdotes already of changed approaches. Two providers have already agreed delivery of the project back to their teams. Others will be doing so after the summer break.

#### **Unintended outcomes**

None apparent. Although the variety of outcomes from other groups in this project (witnessed at the Birmingham close out event) has been very stimulating and will be followed up.

## **Section 5: Success and challenges**

### **Key achievements**

- A workshop delivered by a sales trainer, local to the area with expertise of working with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro rural businesses.
- Some key outputs, adopted by the whole group.
- Renewed trust and empathy within the group.

### **What has been critical to the project's success**

1. An effective project manager to drive the project to a successful outcome.
2. Barriers to Apprenticeships clearly identified, to give the project a firm base on which to build.
3. The engagement of a sales consultant, familiar with the Somerset business background and with experience of working with micro businesses in a rural setting. This brought an outside perspective and added value.

### **Key challenges**

1. Attendance at monthly meetings by the same person. The project lead kept in regular contact with participants through email, and they all met at various regional events and DSTPN meetings. Continuity was a challenge at times.
2. Participants completing tasks outside of the meetings due to other pressures of work such as Ofsted and holidays. This could delay progress.
3. Initially, insufficient survey responses, reflecting a glut of surveys including from the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and business pressures. We sought alternate sources to confirm and validate.

## **Section 6: Resources produced by the project**

The project has created three resources to share with the sector.

1. **Strode College: Apprenticeship Toolkit (Effective employer engagement in a rural area).**
2. **Toolkit for Selling Apprenticeships.**
3. **Barriers to Apprenticeships Workshop.**

## **Who they are for and how they can be used?**

### **1.Strode College: Apprenticeship Toolkit (Effective employer engagement in a rural area)**

This **toolkit** is a versatile resource, which introduces Strode partnership's project: *Developing skills to overcome employer perceived barriers to Apprenticeships*. The toolkit contains the 11 survey questions, raw responses and analysis gained from carrying out the survey to rural SMEs and micro business, on their perceived barriers to Apprenticeships.

Section three provides a one page training plan demonstrating how the partnership's second resource, *Toolkit for Selling Apprenticeship* can be used to train new staff or those currently working for the provider in a new job role.

Sections four to six provide resources that can be used by employer facing staff, including an internal process for supporting employers through Apprenticeships, a flowchart to aid Apprenticeship recruitment and a jargon buster. Section seven contains tips and guidance for learners applying for Apprenticeships by C.V, application forms and interviews.

### **2.Toolkit for Selling Apprenticeships**

The **Toolkit for Selling Apprenticeships** can be used to help employer-facing staff deliver a consistent message about Apprenticeships. This toolkit will help staff successfully place apprentices with businesses, based on experiences gained during their "100 new employers in 100 days" campaign. The toolkit provides a set of tools and techniques on how to prepare, approach, engage and deliver to industry. It can be used by as a useful refresher, self study or training tool.

The toolkit can also be used as a coaching document, used stage by stage to work through the flow of an applicant/new business, playing out the scenario and dialogue. The suggestion would be that experienced staff are observed using the material originally, before roles are reversed and finally independence achieved.

### **3.Barriers to Apprenticeships Workshop**

**Barriers to Apprenticeships** is a workbook that can be used to develop or adapt a one-day sales training event for staff, helping staff develop a range of techniques to overcome barriers when selling Apprenticeships to employers.

## **Section 7: Future planning**

This group have agreed to continue to work together and will start their third campaign together in the middle of August 2012, to coincide with A-level results day.

The new campaign will align with the Coalition Government's 16-24 age imperative and grant availability will reinforce the drive. All providers remain committed and a new one has joined. The prior successes and commitment have attracted the interest of a nationwide newspaper group through their regional outlets, and they are seeking to stage an awards ceremony to close the third campaign in apprentice week. The intention is that this jewel in the crown becomes a legacy for the group.

### **Section 8: Contact details**

Name of lead organisation: Strode College  
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**Please confirm that you and your organisation agree that LSIS may put this report on the Excellence Gateway**

*(double click in box below)*

**Yes X**

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