

A group approach to skills development in local authorities: working smarter not harder

Introduction

About North West Employers (NWE)

North West Employers (NWE) exists to help organisations deliver public services with and for local people that reflect their priorities. An 'Employers' Organisation'-certified as part of the 1974 Trade Union and Labour Relations Act-North West Employers provides a network of support, advice and consultancy on all people matters, from human resources policy and practice, through to leadership, management development and organisational design and performance.

NWE has supported local authorities across the North West to take a whole organisation approach to embedding literacy, language and numeracy since the launch of the Skills for Life Strategy. In 2006, we developed the North West Skills Award, an adaptation of the national GO Local Government Award. Support for achievement of the North West GO Award, which subsequently evolved into the North West Skills Award to reflect the broader national skills strategies, has included consultancy support, the funding of regional and sub-regional skills network meetings for sharing of good practice approaches, and the development of a Skills Net tool which allows local authorities who are working towards the award to self-assess their progress against 40 criteria.

What we wanted to achieve

The 2012-2013 round of LSIS funded support for English, maths and ESOL was discussed at a regional skills network meeting in October 2012. Skills leads attending the network meetings are typically managers from learning and development, human resources and workforce development/organisational development services, some of whom are also Union Learning Representatives (ULRs).

Attendees were invited to identify current skills development issues and priorities as areas of focus for the LSIS support, particularly where these were presenting challenges to the achievement of the Skills Award. The common themes identified, representing a 'wish list' for CPD events, skills sharing and resource development included the following.

Supported providers

- Burnley Council
- Cheshire West & Chester Council
- Halton Council
- Knowsley Council
- Liverpool City Council
- Salford Council
- Sefton Council

Improvement partner

- North West Employers (NWE)

*Alison Brierley, NWE
Associate and Skills
Advisor*

A - Impact measures and evaluation: how you identify and evidence impact of investing in skills development; benefits for managers; development of common templates; sharing models of excellence and building the business case.

B - Refresh and relaunch corporate procedures: how to embed a whole organisation approach to skills development, using the new functional skills qualifications as a focus.

C - Digital inclusion: use as a platform for increasing manager's awareness of skills gaps, including literacy, language and numeracy; as a vehicle for increasing number and activity of learner champions; increase access to online learning, including bite-sized learning and increase access to online human resources (HR) procedures.

D - Apprenticeship awareness: long and short term benefits; 'selling' to employers in the region to increase uptake; legal side and funding for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and succession funding.

E - Support for Union Learning Representatives: recruitment activity; competency regarding functional skills; links with digital inclusion and clarity and purpose of role.

F - Priority of skills development: how to get English and maths development back at the 'top of the agenda'.

Implementation

Planning our approach

Because of the current climate in the public sector, people expressed concerns about the difficulty in being released for meetings, with the majority feeling very stretched due to increasingly demanding workloads and shrinking resources. Internal competition for LSIS accounts, with for example the Adult Learning Service, meant some authorities only had one day of funding available; the maximum number of days available for an individual authority was three. A group approach and application was decided upon, to pool and maximise the funding available, which meant that jointly six organisations drew down 14 days of funding collectively. One authority out of the six chose to use their one days support for one to one consultancy, but all others chose to participate in one or more of the three themes: **Impact Measures and Evaluation**, **Digital Inclusion** and **Support for ULRs**.

What we did

The Skills Adviser co-ordinated and facilitated a series of meetings for each theme. A common approach evolved, which included:

- clarification of the development aims for each theme, for each organisation and collectively;

- an opportunity to evaluate the current situation for each organisation and identify strengths and good practice as well as gaps and improvement areas;
- identification of the barriers and challenges which are currently preventing the achievement of the desired outcome;
- sharing of examples of current good practice, within the group and from the region; and
- planning the resources and approaches to be developed to achieve the development aims.



Meeting of the 'Supporting ULRs' group, with Mark Rowe from unionlearn contributing as a regional partner

The Skills Adviser set up three groups, one for each theme, on the education social networking site 'Edmodo', which provides a platform for document sharing, communication via forums, group email alerts and sharing of diaries for event planning. This allowed for any examples of good practice to be shared remotely, but also facilitated group working and remote communication and networking. Apart from the time saved by the need for face to face meetings being minimised, it provided an efficient way to stay up to date with how things were progressing in terms of resource development and avoided 'version control confusion'. With everything available in the one place, it allowed each group member to evaluate what resources were available and readily identify what still needed to be developed, and to 'cherry pick' from what was already there.

The meetings on the group themes of Digital Inclusion and Support for ULRs provided a platform for joint working with regional workers from unionlearn, who were able to respond to the specific needs of the participating authorities and provide access to resources such as a Digital Inclusion toolkit for ULRs, which was a resource gap identified in the first group meeting.

Outcomes and impacts

What we achieved

The collaborative approach meant that:

- all participants benefited from the shared experiences and organisational knowledge of the group;
- group meetings with the ULR and Digital Inclusion themes provided an opportunity to invite contribution from regional partners, unionlearn;

- it allowed for group support, including moral support;
- it provided the morale boost of discovering that others are struggling with similar issues and barriers, and the opportunity to solve them together;
- the time commitment for each individual was manageable and small relative to the outcomes;
- it facilitated access to models of good practice from other group members and, through the Skills Adviser and NWE, from the region;
- we used the shared micro site for ongoing resource sharing, development and discussion via the forum allows for 'smart' working and minimises the time required to meet face to face; and
- aided by the history and culture of joint working and sharing good practice provided by NWE support through skills network meetings over previous years, individual participating authorities were comfortable pooling the LSIS support and funding, and contributing and sharing their resources.

What we learned

- The co-ordination of meetings and managing the set up and population of the Edmodo groups was time-intensive for the facilitator in terms of ongoing communications and support.
- Arranging face to face meetings with a large group rather than individual organisations where each group member inevitably had full diaries proved challenging within the tight timescale.
- Calculating each authority's entitlement to support within the complex model of individual and group working, and ensuring that it was proportionate to the amount of funding drawn down proved mathematically challenging.

What we are taking forward

The work is ongoing and resources are still in development, but the group is on track to achieve the individual aims and outcomes identified at each initial group meeting by the end of the development period, June 2013. The group members have already agreed that the Edmodo sites will continue to be used for ongoing development and sharing of the resources, and for feedback on trialling of resources and approaches within each authority.

The **Impact Measures** group had the biggest representation, and this theme was identified as the one representing the biggest challenge generally at the skills network meeting where the priorities for group work were originally discussed. The desired outcomes included an evaluation toolkit, providing a 'pick and mix' approach to evaluating impact, which is flexible enough to be adapted to different purposes and contexts, including evaluation of impact at the individual, team/project and organisational level. Another shared outcome was a framework and guidance to support staff in discussions with managers to identify training needs and required outcomes.

The **Support for ULRs** group has had two main group outcomes: unionlearn regional workers are working with their project workers to get the individual unions to focus on the participating authorities through a joint action plan. They are also arranging to attend and brief executive meetings and senior management team meetings, with the overarching aim of raising awareness of the role of ULRs and gaining buy in for release time for the role.

The Digital Inclusion group have also received support from unionlearn and were updated as to resources available to support Digital Inclusion and GO ON programmes generally. During the group work, it became apparent that the Digital Inclusion agenda and Digital Skills courses would provide the focus for recruiting more ULRs and therefore learners into 'first step' learning programmes, including functional skills.

How we are sharing it

Whilst the resources are still in development, existing models of evaluation toolkits and frameworks for guiding discussions with managers have been sourced and shared, and gaps in the 'ideal' evaluation toolkit have been identified. Support to the individual authorities on the ULR and Digital Inclusion agenda is ongoing. The full set of all new resources developed will be available to be shared with all North West authorities by the end of July 2013, as will any 'toolkits' of existing resources collated to support work on each of the three themes through the Edmodo sites.

Contact information

Date published: June 2013

Provider names: Burnley Council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Halton Council, Knowsley Council, Liverpool City Council, Salford Council and, Sefton Council.

Contact: Jane Lyon, Workforce Development Practitioner, Knowsley Council,
jane.lyon@knowsley.gov.uk