

Practical skills therapeutic approaches to assessment for 14-19 year old learners with very complex and challenging learning difficulties and or disabilities

Freeman College



Project Synopsis

Focus

To develop and implement innovative assessment of 14-19 year old learners with very complex and challenging learning difficulties and/or disabilities, who are vulnerable and/or at risk, through using Practical Skills Therapeutic approaches that informs and remodels assessment practices in Sheffield LA.

Key Findings

- Working with an LA in times of significant change is challenging
- Independent assessments using Practical Skills Therapeutic approaches are relevant to, and supportive of, the emerging Learning for Living Framework and S139a arrangements
- The need to establish an independent assessment centre to support legal duties of the LA

Project Aims

The aims of the project were to develop and implement an innovative approach to assessment of 14-19 year old learners with very complex and challenging learning difficulties and/or disabilities, who are vulnerable and/or at risk, through the use of Practical Skills Therapeutic approaches.

The changes the project intended to bring about for the most vulnerable learners were:

- better informed 139a assessments leading to a remodelling of assessment processes in Sheffield LA
- more appropriate placement decisions that better match the needs of learners
- better information on which to base the commissioning of provision
- the development of appropriate local provision
- reduction in the numbers of NEETS learners with LLD/D

The project was considered to be innovative in that Sheffield Local Authority Life Long Learning and Skills Service had identified the need to re-examine the process of assessment to define learning needs for ALS requirements against national recommendations and agree broad areas of diagnostic assessment. Thorough, specialist assessment was seen as the key to identifying more appropriate individual pathways for young people who have very complex and challenging learning difficulties and/or disabilities and who are vulnerable and/or at risk. This project was designed to forge individual progression pathways through the use of an innovative and creative

approach to assessment, namely through using Practical Skills Therapeutic approaches that included a social dynamic.

This approach to assessment is not replicated in other parts of the learning and skills sector.

Project Delivery

The project was very much based on data originally provided by Sheffield City Council and was to be supported through the key committees and working groups of the Council relating to developing more local post school provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

The biggest challenge was to overcome the perception that the assessments were truly independent and impartial as opposed to being within Freeman College. To this end, the Hygeia Centre was established albeit still sited within Freeman College.

Assessment documentation was produced with an emphasis on the final summative assessment report being in a format that a) reinforced the independence of the assessments and b) informed the S139a process.

The assessment process, which ranged from one day to three days, was formalised to include a range of practical therapeutic crafts such as Artisan Bakery, Jewellery Making, Copper Spinning and Pewter specifically designed to enable the learner to make something to take away with them either for themselves or as a gift for someone else. The assessments also included Drama, Movement and Spatial Awareness, Speech and Language, Community Travel & Independence Skills and Independent Living.

The infrastructure of the Hygeia Centre was established but no referrals were being made by Sheffield City Council. To an extent the whole project was almost compromised by major reorganisation within the Council and a different approach to assessments that would be driven by the schools. All this took time and the first assessments did not take place until January 2011.

For a lengthy period the relationship between The Hygeia Centre and Sheffield City Council could best be described as tentatively fluid with little apparent progress being made. This culminated in the Council asking the Hygeia Centre to have a specific assessment role that involved the Centre having direct communication with schools in order to establish assessments. In addition, six Pre-Entry assessments for Freeman College were re-framed under the Hygeia Centre to see how they could inform the S139a process.

What have we learnt?

- Developmental project work is challenging and not straight forward
- Flexibility is key in order to respond to changing circumstances
- Giving what we thought were clear messages relating to Practical Therapeutic Skills assessments were not always understood
- There is a need for an independent assessment centre to support the Council's legal duties

Were there any unforeseen issues?

The Government Spending Review and its impact on Local Authorities.

Would we do things differently next time?

Possibly established the Hygeia Centre earlier to dispel any perceptions of lack of independence

Project Outcomes

One of the original aims was to complete 20 assessments: 10 three day assessments and 10 three day and two nights' residential assessments. This had to be constantly reviewed to respond to changing circumstances as identified above, plus taking into account the needs of learners, some of whom, were extremely challenging and required a different approach to that originally envisaged. Consequently, the number and length of assessments varied.

Four assessments for extremely challenging young people were organised on two separate half day visits. Of those four learners, one learner only attended one half day. The assessments completed were successful with the learners responding positively to the practical therapeutic craft sessions and taking great pride and joy in making items to take away with them.

Three, three day assessments have taken place.

Four, one day assessments will take place for learners with severe learning difficulties over the next month.

Six Freeman College pre-entry assessments were converted to Hygeia Centre summative assessment reporting styles to illustrate the independent and impartial attributes of those reports.

The original intention was to see whether sufficient evidence could be gathered during the assessments for credits of Foundation Learning to be achieved. Of the three, three day assessments – one young man had had enough and did not want to fill in any booklet, one student did not turn up for the third day and the last one caused trouble during the assessment and wanted to leave and was taken back to school!!! So no one completed the FL booklet. However, there was sufficient reason to suggest that sufficient evidence can be collected during a three day assessment for a learner to achieve NOCN FL credits that lead to an award.

Did the project achieve its original aims?

No it didn't but that does not mean the project has not been successful. As in most projects, the process is affected by external factors and circumstances which mean changes and redirections are needed. The project has been very good at doing that.

Were there any unforeseen outcomes?

The impact of the Government Spending Review on Sheffield City Council really threw the project timescales into disarray resulting in an extension from September 2010 to March 2011. We anticipated, and were told, that assessments referrals would be forthcoming since a significant number of young people had been identified for assessment within the Project. When these referrals did not materialise, the Hygeia Centre began to focus on using the Summative Assessment Report format to inform developments within the Pre Entry Summative Assessment Reports at Freeman College. These developments included:

- producing assessment reports that were more individualised and personalised to the learner
- ensuring the assessment reports were 'reader friendly' – shorter, used easy to understand language (no jargon), bullet pointed rather than lengthy sentences and paragraphs, using the learner's name throughout

- sharing the revised assessment summative reports with other local authorities, particularly in South Yorkshire and North Derbyshire. Feedback from these local authorities has been very positive

The Project has illustrated that:

- young people, some of whom have very challenging needs, respond well to a practical therapeutic approach to assessment
- an independent, impartial and objective approach to assessments can be delivered within, and on behalf of, a local authority
- there is a need for an independent assessment centre to support the needs of young people in Sheffield and South Yorkshire
- outcomes from the Hygeia Centre can inform local placement decisions
- The Project will be sustained by:
 - formalising the Hygeia Centre as an independent assessment centre for local authorities locally, regionally and nationally
 - developing a specific site in Sheffield where the Hygeia Centre will be located
 - providing training and development for satellites of the Hygeia Centre beyond Sheffield

Sharing of Project Findings

Hygeia Centre has been invited to present at the LGA, Aoc, Natspec national conference to be held in London on 28th March 2011 – “Working Together to meet the aspirations of learners with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD)”.

Hygeia Centre to host dissemination events for Sheffield and South Yorkshire LAs, and LAs from across Yorkshire and Humber

Use NATSPEC to: post the project outcomes on their website, disseminate project outcomes through their regional networks