# Case study: Initial and diagnostic assessment – effective approaches for adult and community learning

## Outstanding teaching, learning, and assessment (OTLA)

**North East and Cumbria**

**South Tyneside Council, Community First North East and AutismAble**

### What was the purpose of the project?

South Tyneside Council brought together community-based partners Community First North East and AutismAble, both of which were commissioned to provide education and training by the Council’s Business, Employment and Skills (BES) service. Partners evaluated their initial and diagnostic assessment tools and approaches identifying any that were ineffective and then developing processes tailored to individual needs rather than using the Council’s blanket approach.

Ofsted in their 2011 report stated:

“…the initial assessment of learners’ … skills was no better than satisfactory in 19 of the 35 providers of full-time vocational provision visited. The weaker providers either did not assess all their learners effectively, or tutors did not use the results of the assessments in sufficient detail to plan learning.”

The South Tyneside Council project team was concerned that the situation had not improved since 2011 and partners reported that the assessment practice, the Council contracted them to deliver led to disengagement with learning.



Figure 1. The problems with assessment this project tried to address

Local quality assurance work also indicated many learners were not being assessed effectively enough to sufficiently plan their learning. The aim of the project was to improve the quality and consistency of BES-commissioned providers’ initial and diagnostic assessments. They hoped this would lead to more effective personalised learning, better outcomes and a more positive learning experience for students.

### What did the project do?

All teaching and support staff from the two community partners were involved in the project, with their management teams working closely with the Council’s BES manager to coordinate and validate project activities. Providers:

* participated in self-assessment and peer review of their current practice against the Education and Training Foundation’s [Effective Practice Guidelines](http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/supporting/support-practitioners/effective-practice-guidelines/) (EPGs) (2017)
* carried out research with learners about the impact assessment had on them.
* conducted six focus groups with different young people and adult learners. The results were distilled into an impact document which particularly evidenced the negative effects of the process; for example, re-enforcing a sense of failure and ‘it’s a test’.

Staff also attended a continuing professional development (CPD) event focusing on the EPGs and completed their own ‘exit ticket’. This experience made them particularly aware of EPG 7, ‘Assess for self-belief and motivation’, which has now been incorporated into provider processes. Staff met regularly to share effective practice for the benefit of learners. Providers’ centre managers promoted their research and the outcomes at local training provider network meetings. Each provider is now implementing changes to their process, which will be subject to practitioner and peer review.

### What helped the project succeed?

Having set out to consider initial and diagnostic assessment, the project team realised they needed to focus on the impact on learners of the assessment process and on making better use of assessment outcomes, particularly within the embedding of maths and English in vocational subjects.

As a result of lesson study ideas introduced by the OTLA team, alongside action research approaches, team members are now involved in more structured peer observations. Tutor reviews and appraisals in the project’s first term were based fully around the 2014 Professional Standards self-assessment questionnaire introduced by the OTLA team. This informed the action plan for all tutors. As a result of raised awareness of the Professional Standards, tutors identified the needed to keep more up to date with research.

### The group is now considering how to manage its future, particularly in relation to reflective practice and how to ensure the sustainability of further shared research. Providers have indicated support for the development of a wider Community of Practice for South Tyneside. This includes participation in regional Professional Exchange networks and embedding the use of the Professional Standards in their own quality assurance procedures.

### What challenges did the project face?

One provider initially involved in the project did not sustain participation due to time pressures.

### What difference did the project make?

Overall, 556 learners were directly involved and benefitted from the project through the project partners. Over 5,000 more learners from across South Tyneside Council’s commissioned partners could potentially benefit from these changes to the assessment processes.

Improvements include:

* Growth Mindset training introduced into the curriculum by one provider
* another provider offering evening and daytime drop-in sessions to ensure adult learners can be assessed fully and sensitively in accordance with their revised procedures.

These changes are directly benefitting learners. Learning from this project includes:

* staff significantly improved their own knowledge and understanding of initial and diagnostic assessment and where it fits into the continuum of assessment for learning
* providers developed their own professional exchange within and outside this project
* practitioners developed their practice when measured against the Professional Standards
* the project team hopes their collaboration will lead to a more sustainable approach and the development of a wider Community of Practice for the benefit of all South Tyneside learners.

Community First North East continues to evolve its processes for initial and diagnostic assessment. It plans to continue the reflective practice into the next academic year, with tutors and learners evaluating initial and diagnostic assessment processes to determine the extent of sustained improvements. Their ‘Good Practice Guidelines’ will be used and disseminated by South Tyneside Council at all tutor induction sessions from August 2018. It is anticipated that over 100 tutors from up to 30 training providers will attend these sessions.

### AutismAble continued to refine its processes for supporting learners with autism, including developing a comprehensive and outstanding baseline assessment, which is learner- centred and establishes in detail learners’ starting points. This enables the provider to accurately measure distance travelled whilst in learning, along with the achievement of regulated and non-regulated goals. It was developed in partnership with an autism specialist and is designed for learners to complete as independently as possible.

### Where can I find more information?

You can find more detail in the [OTLA Phase 3 (North East and Cumbria) booklet](https://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/content/etf2869) (see pages 21-23). Unfortunately, the ETF does not have details of someone you can contact directly about this project.