

**Weston College
Enhanced GP Referral
Project**

Final Evaluation Report

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1 Introduction and Methodology

The aim of the Enhanced GP Referral Project evaluation is:

- to review the Project's achievements in relation to its intended outcomes
- to aid understanding of some of the lessons learnt and recommend ways of applying and building upon them
- to enable evidence-based judgments to inform future developments and contribute to improved provision and practice.

In evaluating this Project the following activities have been undertaken:

- review of project documentation and associated reports
- interviews with the Project Co-ordinator, Weston College and the Manager, North Somerset Education and Training Consortium (The Carlton Centre)
- interviews with local GP and UNISON Branch Manager as referrers
- interview with Connexions IAG Worker linked to two GP surgeries
- interviews with a sample of tutors – Taste of College, Alexander Technique and Skills for Life
- interviews with a small sample of learners from courses including Alexander Technique, Money Management, Creative Writing, Get More out of Your Job, Start IT

2 Project Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of the Project has been to provide a pathway to education and learning for individuals with mental health difficulties currently not participating in learning and supporting their progression towards structured learning and employment opportunities.

Its stated objectives were:

- to improve the mental and social health of individuals through pathways into education and learning
- to encourage good progression opportunities for learners, promoting positive attitudes towards those with learning disabilities/mental health issues
- to demonstrate innovation, imagination and partnership in addressing equality issues
- to closely record, monitor and evaluate the progression of learners

3 Overview of the project activity and partner involvement

The Project has provided a positive alternative or additional service to those individuals for whom traditional medical interventions are inappropriate or insufficient. In addition, it has provided GPs and other referrers with an additional resource to address needs – described by one of the GPs referring to the Project as “*offering something as part of a more holistic approach – looking at aspects of their (patients’) lives that have an impact on their health in a broad sense*”

Weston College and North Somerset Education and Training Consortium (The Carlton Centre) as lead organisations, have worked with a number of key partners on the delivery of this agenda:

- Local GPs and mental health services
- UNISON
- IAG Gateway Connexions
- North Somerset Community Learning

A range of other agencies including Working Links, Voluntary Action North Somerset and the WEA have all actively supported the Project.

4 Project achievements against outputs and outcomes

Outputs

The Project has met and substantially exceeded its targets in relation to numbers of referrals received and the numbers of individuals successfully engaged in learning. It has also met its target in relation to progression and indications are that numbers will rise with learner enrolment on courses for the coming academic year.

The referral target of 120 was exceeded by 42% and the engagement target of 80-90 was exceeded by 20%.

The majority of progression has been in relation to further education and training courses, including vocational training, with a small number progressing to work and voluntary work.

Target figures were set based on experience gained through an earlier piece of work providing IAG provision within a GP practice. Given the delay in notification of the start date of this Project and the development work necessary to expand existing systems to involve a wider range of potential referrers these targets proved to be ambitious. Meeting and exceeding them has largely been due to a concerted and determined effort on the part of Weston College and the Carlton Centre in particular.

15 courses were provided at the Carlton Centre in response to learner need, covering a range of topic areas.

Outcomes

The Project has focused the latter part of its work on the areas of outcomes and progression and this has also formed a significant element of the final evaluation process. The following intended outcomes were identified in the initial funding application:

- **Providing individuals with mental health difficulties with a gateway to education, training and work with a view to improved mental health**

The Project has facilitated access to education and training for a significant number of individuals with mental health difficulties. All Weston College courses have sought to provide the opportunity for NOCN or Skills for Life qualification and this is expected to give rise to a successful outcome for most individuals who have attended consistently.

Qualitative outcomes focussing around mental health and well-being were determined by self-assessment survey, observation and professional feedback. The indications are very positive. The project has undertaken a Soft Outcomes Evaluation, which indicates participants' positive responses. Independent follow up with a small sample of participants confirms these findings. (see below)

➤ **Improved social inclusion**

Considerable research evidence confirms that involvement in learning can improve mental health. In addition to acquiring new skills, learning can promote confidence and give people a greater sense of purpose.

In designing this Project it was recognised that potential learners can be constrained by low expectations but for many people taking part in mainstream learning at the local college is too big a step. Basing the majority of activity at the Carlton Centre – a safe, supportive and specialist environment – has facilitated access for a number of learners who saw attending the main College site for provision as too challenging. A number of learners were encouraged to meet teachers inside the main site and some are now confident enough to enrol there. The fee subsidies the Project was able to offer have been an important factor in making opportunities accessible to many for whom the cost of courses presents an additional barrier. Independent evaluation also explored and confirmed the importance of these aspects of provision.

➤ **Improved rates of progression into further education, training and work**

In addition to providing opportunities for engagement and enrolment beyond the usual, the Project was able to seek out suitable progression routes for many individuals tailored to individual need. The vast majority of these have been progressions into training and education as work and voluntary work opportunities are increasingly difficult to find.

The more limited progress in relation to the area of work related outcomes – due in part to lack of available suitable work/voluntary work opportunities locally - highlighted in the Interim Evaluation has been addressed with some success via partnership working with Working Links, the establishment of some volunteering opportunities within existing classes and by an increased focus on progression to vocational training opportunities where appropriate.

➤ **Identifying and sharing good practice**

Key staff within the Project have demonstrated a commitment to collaborative working and reflective practice to develop high quality provision.

Some of the good practice developed within the Project has been collated into a Good Practice Guide and learning shared within the partnership and with the South West region generally. The Project has linked effectively with the SW Regional Network group organised by Equality South West and provided regular updates and report. In addition, a workshop will be delivered at a regional event of the LSC in Taunton entitled “Breaking the Mould” on 29th April.

Weston College saw the development of this Project as an integral part of its commitment to implementation of its Single Equality Scheme and learning from this work is being used to inform developments in relation to other equalities issues.

5 Challenges

The Project has experience a number of significant challenges.

- The late notification of start date effectively meant that the Project had to be delivered in seven rather than eight months.
- Accommodating the sometimes differing agendas of partners required key partners to work sensitively to ensure that issues were dealt with positively and for the benefit of the learner community
- The pace of referrals both from GPs and UNISON was initially slower and less formal than had been anticipated
- Limited capacity in IAG provision from the Connexions Service meant that it was not possible to provide a formal IA service in each GP practice and some referrals were made direct to the Carlton Centre where formal and informal IA was made available

Difficulties that presented themselves were generally overcome by creative management and a positive solutions-focussed attitude from partners with the benefits for the learner community remaining paramount.

6 Key messages from Project participants

A range of monitoring information and qualitative data has been collated by the Project regarding all aspects of activity. This has been supplemented, as part of the evaluation, by a series of face to face and telephone interviews with a range of individuals those involved to consider what real difference the project has made to their lives and/or professional practice.

The following summaries some of the key messages and findings:

Learners

6 learners were interviewed. Some referred by their GP, some by UNISON and some were engaged via other partners. They highlighted a number of positive benefits from the Project including:

- increased confidence and self esteem
- increased social contact and improvements in health generally

All had enjoyed the various courses they had been involved in and gained knowledge and insights which they could use in their lives and work. A number had already progressed or planned to progress to other learning opportunities including courses at Weston College.

"I have benefited health-wise. It's made me think more about some of the things I take for granted and it has helped me in my workplace. The course was relaxed and the tutor was good. I didn't want to commit to a long course so a taster like this was a really useful way of finding out if it was for me" (Unison member on Alexander Technique)

"It's been really helpful – I've done something for me and have more confidence. It's really helped. I'll look at the prospectus (Carlton Centre) and see what I can do next" (Learner with mental health issues progressed to Weston College IT course based at the Carlton Centre)

"It's helped my confidence and self-esteem and I really enjoyed it. I started with a taster course in cookery, I've done some IT and I've just started doing Forensic Science at the College. I would never have had the confidence to go to the College on my own but now I'd be willing to give anything a try if they asked me" (Learner with mental health issues initially engaged via North Somerset Community Education)

"Some of the information at the beginning was a bit unclear but the course has been useful – and I've been able to use some of it in my work" (Unison member on Get More Out of Your Job)

"I have enjoyed it and benefited – it's made me more aware and more conscious about movement. The Carlton Centre was a good venue because it's small, attractive and convenient. I would probably move onto something different next – some sort of leisure interest course" (Unison member on Alexander Technique)

"I have enjoyed the English course and I have benefited and learnt a lot like spelling and using the computer. It's been interesting. I'm not sure what I'll do next but I'm going to ask at the Carlton Centre what they can suggest" (Learner with mental health issues on Money Management and Literacy courses)

"It was an oasis of calm in the midst of an otherwise horrible hectic week" (Unison member on Alexander Technique)

GP referrers

GPs see this type of provision as a very valuable additional resource to meet the needs of some patients. They have been able to identify benefits and the preventative potential in terms of patients' health and well.

"People's lives are not and should not be based on illness but on social health – we are changing the way we think"

"This has the potential to contribute to improvements in health because many issues – like lack of confidence, low self esteem, stress at work, lack of direction – can become mental health issues and can become chronic when really they're about health in a more general holistic sense and by appropriate help like this people can be re-directed and options offered which can prevent people developing chronic mental health issues"

"I see this as part of a developing whole – I'd like to see it expanded"

IAG Worker

The worker had been involved in the initial IAG pilot work with one GP practice, which acted in some respects as the forerunner to elements of this Project. Her experience is that this Project has addressed a number of the issues identified by the initial work in particular the need to have an appropriate range of learning opportunities and engagement activities available to refer individuals onto.

"The increased range of activities available – especially those related to confidence building in the broadest sense – have been really valuable and have provided much more choice for clients and much more scope for referring on. These are pitched at the right level to meet the needs of a more diverse group of people and are more inclusive"

UNISON referrers

The ability to promote education and learning opportunities as part of the support the union can offer its members has been helpful.

"Members felt there was something on offer that wasn't here before. For many people traditional courses were too costly and too lengthy. Providing shorter, subsidised courses has encouraged more people to get involved and the fact that these were provided in what was seen as an informal way was good. From a union perspective it's helped raise our profile and could encourage members to make use of us in other ways" (UNISON Branch Manager)

Tutors

Three tutors from a range of different courses were interviewed. Each felt the courses they had been involved in had been successful and highlighted positive outcomes for participants:

“It’s been really successful. For some people who have been in rehab there’s a real sense of not knowing where to go next once their treatment has been completed. Those on the course have really developed a focus for the future and most are progressing to other learning including music technology, art, catering and construction” (Taste of College)

“Attendance has been good and learners have enjoyed the experience – all have progressed and a number are now really actively looking for work” (Skills For Life)

“It’s been helpful for people to address some workplace issues in a general sense and in an independent environment and a number are now wanting to learn more” (Alexander Technique)

They also identified some learning for themselves in terms of their professional practice and development.

“I was a bit scared of the responsibility at first because some of the learners were fragile and had experienced such difficulties. I didn’t want to let them down or see them fail. I’ve really enjoyed seeing people grow in confidence, develop a more positive outlook and focus. There is a big potential market for these types of activities but provision needs to be very individualised. I had to adapt some of my teaching methods to make everything very personalised and individual to match the very diverse skills and personalities of learners”

“Having much more support time built into the initial session would be helpful and it would be worth considering running this course as a roll on roll off activity”

“Working with groups who have very diverse backgrounds, issues and levels of prior learning has been challenging but the mix has worked surprisingly well”

“It would be good to develop this model further – and mix more people referred from GPs with those referred by the union – I think a greater mix of learners would enable us to do this even better”

7 Learning points, areas for future development and sustainability

One of the broader objectives of the Project was to build on lessons learnt and use these to inform future developments. Work has already begun to address some of these, which should ensure that the Project has an impact beyond its funded period.

- **On-going work with GP practices** will ensure that a pathway to education and learning for individuals with mental health difficulties and supporting their

progression is maintained. Work will continue to refine the model with a view to informing the potential roll out of this provision to a larger number of GP practices.

- **Meeting the needs of a very diverse group of potential learners** has highlighted the need for a wider range of starting points and an increased potential for individuals with mild to moderate mental health issues to be referred into education and learning from a variety of routes including primary care. Longer term plans include offering a broader range of classes – taster activities and longer courses - with closer links to health related activities and engagement activities to attract a wider group of learners and help to develop more a more holistic set of services. **Developing The Bridge Project** (a charity established by the Carlton Centre to support its work and raise funds with a focus on innovation and preventative provision for individuals with mild to moderate stress related issues) will provide a vehicle for some of this work and will help to build further the close links between health and education.
- **Embedding the lessons learnt from closer partnership working** will help to strengthen progression routes including establishing more robust systems to monitor and track the progression of individual learners. The Project has helped strengthen the working relationships between partners – in particular that between Weston College and the Carlton Centre – and future developments can only profit from this.
- **Reviewing the IA component of the Project** has prompted a larger scale review of IA provision and systems. This will involve a potential redesign of IA delivery within the College and the Carlton Centre to provide greater clarity in terms of objectives and increased differentiation. This will include making more IA available during courses and longer-term tracking and follow up in addition to an initial advice session focused mainly on engagement.

8 Comments and conclusions

The Project set itself an ambitious and challenging agenda demanding creative and innovative approaches to re-defining and re-thinking ways of supporting people with mental health difficulties to more fully participate in learning and achieve positive outcomes.

Project staff have demonstrated a strong commitment to improving the mental and social health of individuals through pathways into education and learning by:

- providing greater opportunities for learners to access local provision
- boosting the demand for learning
- extending the choice of high quality learning
- sharing good practice and change to aid capacity building

A good number and range of learning opportunities have been provided and these activities successfully met the differing needs of learners from various referral sources.

The Project has experienced a number of significant challenges but key staff have been able to respond creatively and pragmatically to these demonstrating a commitment to finding solutions that resolved difficulties and moved things forward but which have ensured that key principles and objectives were not compromised.

It will take time for the full impact of the Project to become clear both for individual learners in terms of their progression and longer-term outcomes and for the legacy of the Project as a whole as learning is taken forward and embedded in further developments. However, indications at the Project end are very positive and prospects for further developments very encouraging.

A commitment to and enthusiasm for the principles and practical implementation of this Project from key staff have been crucial in achieving the Project's positive outcomes and establishing a legacy of sustainability.

In summary:

- **The Project achieved – and in most cases exceeded - all its targets**
- **Feedback indicates significant benefits to learners, referrers and partner agencies**
- **Partnership working has been enhanced**
- **Project learning and good practice has been shared widely**
- **Lessons learnt are being used to inform future developments and ensure that these are embedded in on-going work**

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