

Using the Skills for Life Health Check to drive improvement

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If I can give one piece of advice to anyone involved in the Skills for Life Improvement Programme (SfLIP) it would be 'Use the Health Check'*. It is a brilliant way to show you where you are, where you can go and what you need to achieve to get there.

This information is simply not enough: to raise the profile of Skills for Life across your college you need buy-in from everyone, especially the senior management team. It is for this reason that late last year I went to our principal, Pat Bacon and showed her where we were and where, with her and her senior management team's buy-in, we could be. But first I needed to make them all understand the impact and benefits that a whole college approach to Skills for Life could have.

Ensuring enthusiasm is contagious

As a new manager at St Helens College I needed to ensure that my enthusiasm for my two passions in life, Skills for Life and teaching and learning, was contagious. I knew from previous experience that improving the English and maths skills of students would increase attendance, retention and success rates as the students would have more confidence in their ability to pass their whole programme, including the technical elements.



Using colour-coded cards to gauge the perception of the SMT to the position of Skills for Life

Buy-in from cross-college staff and senior management is the pivotal factor in this success, as without their support the staff and students would not appreciate the relevance of the Skills for Life element of their course.

Despite the best efforts of my team, our director and myself, progress was not as quick as we wanted, until one rainy day in December when our principal invited our Skills for Life Development Adviser, Isabella White, to take the first slot at the management meeting. She helped to explain the benefits of the Programme to 'the bottom line' and showed the complete business benefit of giving full commitment to the Programme. Isabella's input was essential as she was an external expert who could draw on previous experience.

Immediate buy-in from all areas of the college

We ran a Health Check using the colour-coded cards – a powerful visual tool that illustrated the perception of SMT to the position

of Skills for Life throughout the institution. It highlighted not only further development required, but also the different perceptions of the management team. We then invited the managers to walk around the table and have a look at one another's assessments. It was amazing to see what this 15-minute exercise revealed, and we immediately got the full buy-in from all areas of the college to champion Skills for Life.

One of the other main benefits of the use of the Health Check was using it to illustrate the distance that the Skills for Life team had travelled throughout the academic year. Key members of the team completed the check at the start of the year, repeated the exercise in December and then again in March. These repeating exercises clearly showed the team how much progress they had made in a relatively short space of time.

The staff perception and support for the programme has been amazing with all our staff agreeing that Skills for Life is achieving a higher profile within St Helen's College. I am really pleased that all the work my colleagues and I have put into the programme is beginning to progress the Skills for Life agenda. It has been really hard work but I am glad we are making a difference.

* The Health Check is a simple tool designed to help colleges assess the quality of their Skills for Life provision. It has a particular focus on the implementation of a whole organisation approach to Skills for Life. The Health Check has been designed primarily for use by colleges. However, much of what it contains can be used or adapted for use in other contexts.