

Rural colleges work collaboratively to improve their offerings, despite 'isolation'

■ Christine Roberts, Development Adviser for the Surrey Specialist Colleges Cluster

'Our Development Adviser has been able to moderate observations focusing on the delivery of embedded Skills for Life – an extremely useful exercise which will improve the feedback we give to staff.'

Mary Hillier, Head of Basic Skills at the Orpheus Centre

The setting for some of the more rural or semi-rural Specialist Colleges can often contribute to a sense of isolation and of being cut off from the 'bigger picture' and the mainstream of education. As members of a small 'cluster group' under the Skills for Life Improvement Programme (SfLIP), four such colleges in the Surrey area were able to work together to meet some of the challenges for improving their work with learners head-on.

The four members of the cluster group were:

- The National Centre for Young People with Epilepsy (NCYPE) at Lingfield – providing education, assessment, rehabilitation, treatment and care for children and young adults with epilepsy and other neurological conditions
- The Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) FE College, situated on the rural fringes of Redhill
- The Orpheus Centre, Godstone – an inclusive performing arts centre that provides opportunities through music and drama for the personal development of young disabled adults with associated learning needs
- The Brain Injury Centre, in Banstead – a rehabilitation centre providing education for young adults who have acquired disabilities and associated learning difficulties as a result of brain injury.

Each college provides further education for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Apart from the obvious link of helping young adults find a future, either in a community or independently, all the providers help learners acquire literacy and numeracy skills. They are meeting the challenge of embedding these skills throughout their curricula. For these colleges that means working around the clock!

All have found themselves needing to come to terms with new approaches to Skills for Life. These include:

- the whole organisation approach, particularly the embedding of Skills for Life throughout the 24-hour curriculum
- improving initial assessment
- the use of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs).

With the need to become more aware of 'what is going on out there', cluster work seemed the ideal way of supporting this agenda and working together to share expertise and explore new ways of working.

The group members held three cluster group meetings under the Improvement Programme. Agendas were a mixture of negotiated topics for discussion and updates by the Development Adviser (DA). An example of the latter was a presentation of the changes to initial teacher training in FE and continuing professional development (CPD) requirements.

'One shoe does not fit all'

Working together clearly provided much mutual support, but these colleges could not forget their own contexts. Sharing practice doesn't automatically mean the dissemination and adoption of that practice. For example, the Brain Injury Centre's ILP with its innovative use of ICT for customising programme tutor notes, would not work for learners with epilepsy (and this included a few of their own clients), and so would not work for NCYPE. They therefore continue to explore ways of making their own ILPs more fit for purpose.

Sharing is still valuable – there is always something to be gained from it. At almost every meeting one of the most frequent frustrations expressed was how to ensure that support and teaching staff are qualified to an appropriate level. Cluster group



Luke, a learner at the Brain Injury Centre, uses Excel to access his customised programme tutor notes

members took advantage of the Improvement Programme's training opportunity. For example, the Numeracy Energiser training event was much appreciated, but there was still frustration in accessing Level 4 qualifications either because of location or freeing very busy staff to attend. Training remained a standing agenda item.

The year was not without its challenges – closure, inspection, and so on. However the colleges have learned from being involved in cluster meetings and staff say they feel much more confident about their ability to manage and deliver Skills for Life.

Peer review

The DA supporting the group also introduced the notion of peer review and development. This is seen nationally as a key quality improvement strategy to support colleges in their progress towards self-regulation and something the colleges found themselves engaged in. The Brain Injury Centre wanted to make links with a general FE college and the DA brokered an opportunity for this to happen. The college has

also established formal links to support lesson observation with the Orpheus Centre, with joint observations already taking place.

The way forward

- NCYPE is focused on the process of embedding Skills for Life in its vocational programmes and in the residential aspects of its learners' time at college and has shared their progress on this topic.
- The Orpheus Centre looked into embedding and has shared booklets it has prepared for support staff, for example *Making Reading Easier*.
- RNIB has been using the Open College Network accreditation for some time. This became a topic of discussion for the group as, at that time, they were all considering using it. Cathy Hunter, LSC Programme Manager at RNIB, was able to talk to the members of the cluster about their experiences.
- The Brain Injury Centre welcomed input from the DA and other group members on key skills as some of their

'In our college there is a huge pressure to meet learners' individual needs and there are so many stakeholders involved – for example, at a recent learner review meeting there were 17 people round the table. Being part of a cluster group gives you the opportunity to share, to know that you've got support from the DA and other cluster members. It's reassuring to know that you're not alone and that your problems aren't unique.'

Julia Taylor-Evans, Basic Skills Co-ordinator at NCYPE

clients are better suited to this form of accreditation rather than literacy, language and numeracy skills at Levels 1 and 2.

- Exploring practice, sharing it, adapting it and reintroducing it have all brought benefits for staff and learners. Annual Assessment Visit reports testify to the improving Skills for Life provision in these Surrey Specialist Colleges.

As peer review and development strengthens, the colleges expect to strengthen the quality of their provision while at the same time enjoying the collaborative experience which membership of the cluster group has brought them.