

## STRATEGIC INVESTMENT IN SKILLS FOR LIFE FOR RECRUITMENT, RETENTION AND PATIENT SAFETY

### North Bristol Trust

#### Why did you choose to bring the delivery of functional skills in house?

North Bristol NHS Trust has been an apprenticeship centre since 2010 and has delivered Functional Skills alongside the in-house apprenticeship delivery of healthcare and administration apprenticeships since 2012. Prior to that, NBT had been set up as an NVQ centre and had run various Skills for Life courses alongside and in addition to these, so maths and English have always been seen as a pivotal part of the delivery of apprenticeships and of the upskilling of staff. NBT also delivered various Skills for Life programmes and study support programmes centred around maths and English for the wider workforce.

This was seen as a key strategic project by the senior management team at NBT who recognised that upskilling existing staff and training new staff through both apprenticeship and Skills for Life programmes aligned to several key organisational strategies such as recruitment, retention and patient safety. It also ensured that NBT was safeguarding its future workforce pipeline. The all round package that Skills for Life and the wider apprenticeship centre delivered was seen as having key benefits across multiple staff groups, which ensured buy-in from the senior management team, but of course required a lot of hard work to demonstrate and bring people on board in the beginning.

#### What were the benefits of having the programme delivered in-house?

Delivering ourselves had the benefit that all learning for apprentices was done in-house and could be tailored around work demands and designed to fit alongside the delivery of the apprenticeship material. It also meant that apprentices were learning English and maths in a familiar environment with familiar faces, and most importantly, on site so they didn't have to travel anywhere.

At the outset, there were 2 part time teachers, one for maths and one for English, but as the apprenticeship numbers increased, this became one full time manager (band 6), one full time maths teacher (band 5) and one full time English teacher (band 5). All three had responsibility for teaching hours, generally 3-4 days of teaching and 1 day of admin, planning, quality assurance and initial assessment work across an average week. The team also had a full-time administrator (band 4), as well as occasional invigilation requirements from independent staff (usually administrators within the L&D team).

Other resourcing costs were kept minimal through the use of free and online resources, as well as resources provided by the examining body, along with in-house production of teaching materials. NBT invested in a state-of-the-art education facility with IT equipped teaching rooms, which became essential for Functional Skills delivery. Additionally, the education team linked in with the library, ensuring access to further resources and IT equipment 24 hours a day for learners.

### **What were the main challenges in setting up your in-house delivery and how did you overcome them?**

The main challenges originally were around attendance, and communication with both apprentices and line managers to ensure attendance and understanding of commitments to the course along with their wider apprenticeship programme. Being hospital staff, learners were often pulled from lessons to work shifts instead, which led to places on courses being lost. To resolve this, a long-term communication strategy was set up to better inform line managers and apprentices of the commitment and benefits of their apprenticeship and Functional Skills programmes, and the importance of attendance, along with better tracking and monitoring systems and a clear escalation policy to management where attendance was still proving an issue.

Other challenges were ensuring that high quality maths and English teachers were recruited, which is not always easy when these staff are at a premium in the education sector in general, and many do not consider working in Further Education. NBT are perhaps somewhat fortunate to have employed a really strong teaching team with a background in various areas of education, and this is a major strength for the organisation. Another challenge whilst the team had more limited resources in the earlier days was the quality assurance process and ensuring that the centre gained and maintained its status as a registered exam centre for the awarding body, meaning that all assessments could be carried out in-house. As numbers grew and the team expanded, the team manager position was created to ensure that all quality assurance and centre management activity was properly managed.

### **What were/are the main challenges now that the programme is running and how did/do you address them?**

The main challenges now are down to the increased robustness of the Functional Skills qualifications and the challenges that presents to any learners who come in at a lower initial level. Whereas prior to the Functional Skills reforms, an entry level learner had a good chance of passing their Functional Skills exams with only a few weeks tuition, now it is far more difficult and they often require longer and more in-depth input from teachers. In response to this, NBT created both fast track and progression courses – fast track for those that already had a high level at initial assessment and only required a short period of tuition, and progression for those with lower initial assessment scores where they needed more classroom time and more in-depth resources to ensure exam readiness.

The centre has also utilised online resources such as BKSB to wrap relevant home learning around each course and to ensure robust initial assessment. This was generally successful and success rates remained consistently above national average in all subjects, and in some cases, well above national average.

However, further reforms have challenged this model again and NBT is constantly coming up with improvements to the courses to meet these demands. Another key element was the involvement in recruitment, ensuring that suitable entry criteria was set and that no one was recruited for an apprenticeship course with such a low initial level of maths and/or English that they would not be able to pass the Functional Skills qualifications within the duration of their apprenticeship. Any applicants who did not meet the criteria were signposted to local colleges to undertake maths and English courses before re-applying once they had improved.

### **What advice would you give to an employer wishing to set up their own in-house functional skills learning?**

For any organisation interested in setting this up for themselves, NBT would recommend that you are already an established delivery centre for other education, such as apprenticeships, to ensure that there is sufficient infrastructure in place, as it is not cost effective to run as a standalone provision. It is essential to invest in the right teachers to provide a high quality of education, along with the right resources – do not underestimate the importance of IT equipped classrooms – you will need at least two available every day, one for each subject. To get set up, it does take hard work and investment, but for the learners there are huge benefits – contextualised, local learning that is on-site with familiar faces. And of course, there are benefits to the organisation too – a staff base who are better trained, better communicators, more committed to their job roles and better able to progress onto new roles and higher education.

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