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Supporting learners with mental health difficulties: Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service

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Brief description

This example describes how Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service (HAFLS) provides for learners with mental health difficulties. A strong partnership with the [Hertfordshire Mind Network](#) underpins this work and provides the means to sustain work and effective progression routes which lead towards employment for learners whose circumstances may make them vulnerable.

Overview – the provider’s message

‘When funding was reduced, not just for our courses but for other providers supporting those with mental health difficulties, we knew we had to think and work differently. We wanted to create provision that met a whole range of needs and provided a seamless pathway of care and support. From our point of view as an adult education service, we wanted to build independence and move our learners towards employability. Working with an increasing range of partners and communicating closely with our learners we’ve had real success. We have a wide-ranging programme of courses and learners who are taking control of their learning and demonstrating real change in their lives.’



Kristy Thakur, Learning and Access Support Manager with Carol Harris, Hertfordshire Mind Network

The good practice in detail

Background

When funding cuts bite it's sometimes difficult to see beyond reducing provision, or worse still, shutting up shop altogether. For HAFLS this was an unthinkable outcome when providing for a group of learners with mental health difficulties. Instead of allowing the provision to decline and disappear, they reviewed how it should be delivered, and working with their partners came up with a solution to build a better service. The latest [inspection report](#) identifies the success of this programme describing how 'learners with mental health issues develop successful strategies to manage life.'

Effective partnerships

Good partnerships mean sharing expertise and resources and HAFLS has worked hard to achieve both for the benefit of these learners. Managers have established a strong base for these developments by working closely with other departments within the County Council. HAFLS is part of the Health and Community Service and through aligning the service's learning provision with the council's overall agenda, managers are able to make the best use of staff resources and funding streams and find ways of supporting new initiatives. The service has used different pots of money to fund 'seed corn' developments and has been able with its partners to link them together to provide integrated learning experiences. Within the Hertfordshire community, by increasing the number of voluntary and community organisations involved in delivery and support, the service has been able to engage increasing numbers of hard-to-reach learners. As Kristy says, 'We have used all of this to move the curriculum forward. We have re-branded ourselves and ensure we make it clear that we are not in competition with anyone.'

A strong partnership with the Hertfordshire Mind Network underpins this work and has led to some key and special developments. The partnership has provided important targeted training for its subcontractors, including staff from the local college, sharing skills and giving the providers the ability to better manage and support learners with mental health difficulties. Crucially this partnership is providing the means to sustain the work and provide the kinds of progression routes for learners which lead towards employment.

Using scarce resources well

HAFLS and its partners know that in a time of declining resources they cannot provide the range a number of programmes learners want. To bridge the gap, the partnership is supporting learners to establish successful self-organised groups, sustaining those 'seed corn' developments so that they become established provision for learners. The partnership encourages learners who want to become group leaders and then trains them, developing their confidence and giving them management, organisational and a whole range of social skills, all of which make an important contribution to developing their employability.



Currently 14 such groups are operating within the county covering fitness activities, arts and crafts and providing support for specific mental health needs.

Groups meet at the County's wellbeing and outreach centres where staff can provide any necessary help; from professional advice and support to photocopying and ensuring that

learners and leaders feel safe.

As Carol Harris, the network's clinical director points out, 'These groups provide really important support for someone who may no longer be eligible for secondary care services.'

Outcomes for learners

The partnerships provide opportunities for learners to progress into employment through social enterprise activities – for example, a grounds-maintenance project which both develops practical and work skills and supports participants to understand and deal with their own mental health difficulties. Another project, the Green Canteen, provides horticultural training for the learners, and the community benefit from renovated garden tools and fresh vegetables sold from its retail trading shed.

For learners, the centres are happy, safe places. Jim, who attends a self-organised group, describes how it has changed his life: 'I've started to look forward to things and I simply don't want it to end.' Howard describes it as, 'A life-changing experience. I've now got my depression under control.' For some it is the only place they go apart from home. Jan describes how her life has changed a lot: 'I had real health problems but now I can look at life positively.'

Many learners value the opportunities the centres provide to volunteer and to do supported work. One learner said: 'I've been out of work for 10 years and the centre has helped me get back to working again. It gives you the armour to combat your problems.' Others point out a key problem; that there is an intolerance of mental illness in employers. As Jim says: 'The centre helps me fight that concern – that others feel I'm useless. We all come with mental health difficulties but here we are given the opportunity to turn our lives around and use our gifts and qualities.'

Provider background

[Hertfordshire Adult and Family Learning Service](#) (HAFLS) is the department of Hertfordshire County Council which runs the adult education service in the county. Much of the provision is subcontracted. However, the service has a small direct delivery team of six tutors, who along with three subcontractors, provide family learning. The majority of family learning in children's centres is delivered directly by HAFLS staff.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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