

North West Regional College

North West Regional College (NWRC) in Northern Ireland has approximately 10,000 full-time students across five main campuses in the counties of Londonderry and Tyrone. The college offers a range of vocational and non-vocational courses including Higher Education, Further Education, Apprenticeships and Traineeships, and Adult Learning.

At the start of the project, there were no young adult carers identified within NWRC and there was limited support in place specifically for this group of students. Through the Driving Change project, the college was hoping to significantly improve all aspects of support for young adult carers across the *Quality Standard in Carer Support* (QSCS) framework. They also wanted to be able to raise awareness of the support available at the college to encourage more young adult carers to come forward.

‘So, I think it’s wee things maybe that would have such a big impact in supporting them ... [and the initial stages of the project have] been a really good eye opener for us as well too. Just seeing how much support can be available that maybe hadn’t been there before. It might have been there but it wasn’t nearly as advertised so maybe students wouldn’t have known about it so they wouldn’t have come forward whereas if it’s out there, then now they can. Hopefully, that’s our plan anyway’ (Operational Carers Lead)

Support for young adult carers

The Driving Change project has helped NWRC to implement changes across all the key actions identified in their Driving Change action plan.

Policy and strategic commitment

The college developed a new, standalone young adult carers policy, including information on the barriers faced by this group of students, and the relevant support processes that have been put in place through the project. The policy also included copies of various resources that could be used by staff and students, for example, a Carers Card and a young adult carers poster that explains the signs of being a carer and highlights the support on offer.

Having a new policy in place meant that the specific needs of young adult carers were officially recognised within the college, which was particularly important after having gained buy-in from the college’s senior management team and board of governors. Developing a college-wide commitment to improving the support specifically for this group of students helped NWRC to kick start and sustain the process of supporting young adult carers.

‘... Before we knew about the project, within the college, young adult carers weren’t a group that we had supported before ... So, I think ... the most

important part was sharing with staff that that's what we were going to do ... So, they were fully supportive and with the board of governors, which I think it was key as long as we had the management involved and they were supportive of us working towards this. We knew then it was something that we could do, and getting our young carers policy in place I think was once of the key tasks because then it meant that it was something formal within the college and that young adult carers were aware of it' (Operational Carers Lead)

Enrolment and induction

Before the project, the college did not have systems in place to identify young adult carers through their recruitment process. Through Driving Change, the college has updated their application form to include a question about caring for someone with a disability, caring for a child, or a dependant adult.

The Management Information Systems (MIS) team then compile a list of all students who tick these boxes. An account is created for each person so that they can be sent relevant information about the support available, and a link to a young adult carers video, with their acceptance letter. This video, developed as part of the college's Driving Change action plan, is on the college's website and includes a broad definition of who young adult carers are, clear information about the college's support process, and details of the Carers Lead. The video is particularly useful for prospective students who may not recognise that they are a young adult carer.

'[The video] gives a wee bit of information about who young adult carers are for any people who maybe are doing it and didn't realise that that was their job or their role or responsibility. So, just to raise awareness for them to think, 'Maybe I do that too and I could get involved in this'' (Operational Carers Lead)

As part of the new application process, an automatic email is also sent to the Carers Lead informing them of any applicants who have identified as a young adult carer pre-entry. The Carers Lead then contacts the young person to introduce themselves and discuss the support available.

Staff training and awareness raising

At the start of the project, there was limited understanding amongst staff about the needs and experiences of young adult carers, and the challenges that they might encounter at college. Therefore, as part of raising awareness for staff, NWRC developed a training package from a Carers Federation resource, which has been delivered to all Student Services staff and received positive feedback.

All new staff will also complete the training as part of their induction and within this, they are referred to a link to the young adult carer policy. This means that new staff

will be aware that part of their job role is to support young adult carers. The college plan to deliver the training every two years as a 'refresh' for staff.

Ongoing support

A key change in support implemented through the project has been the introduction of a detailed and comprehensive support plan for young adult carers. The plan is unique to each student and their circumstances, and is shared with the curriculum team alongside a direct email to the student's personal tutor. Through the support plan, the college can ensure that they are tailoring their support to individual circumstances and that each student receives the relevant flexible adjustments and financial support that they require.

'[The support plan] meant then that they [young adult carers] had a bit more flexibility so they could contact us and say 'I'm under pressure this week, could you request that I get extra time with an assignment' or 'Could you contact my lecturer' for whatever reason, or if ... they couldn't attend class one day for whatever reason that they would still get their EMA [Education Maintenance Allowance] or they would still get an authorised absence because [they have] a legitimate reason [rather than] just not attending, so it would support them too financially' (Operational Carers Lead)

Through Driving Change, the college has also created 'Feel Good Care Packages' for young adult carers and provided take-away vouchers and coffee vouchers, to offer opportunities for young adult carers to have a break away from caring and studying. NWRC has also introduced a coffee morning for young adult carers, which was held virtually by the Carers Lead during the Coronavirus pandemic. This has allowed young adult carers to make connections and develop their own peer support networks, as well as links to the local carers service, who were also invited along.

'To start with, after we had met with them, we sent each of them a Just Eat voucher just as a 'have a night off just to order a takeaway'. I think from then they were so appreciative and just wee things like that can make a difference. I think getting them involved in the coffee morning relaxed things and they got to know who each other were too so they got more comfortable' (Operational Carers Lead)

There were two students in particular who had enjoyed the coffee morning and kept in touch with each other afterwards.

'The two students who were able to relate to each other so much ... and they were planning to keep in touch so that they could just talk, and they could just offload about how they were feeling, whereas beforehand, they felt no one really understood' (Operational Carers Lead)

In addition, the college's 'Canvas' intranet now includes a peer support group for young adult carers, which is in the form of a discussion board where students can speak to each other at any time. This has also been used as a way of sharing information with young adult carers.

'It just means that they can go online and chat to each other and they can talk about whatever they want, and talk about their own experiences ... and it's been a good way for us, being able to promote different things that are coming up. We were able to share their information we received from Barnardo's and Action for Children, just so that they were aware that if they didn't see social media and things' (Operational Carers Lead)

A post-enrolment survey for all students has also been adapted through the Driving Change project, as a way of highlighting to young adult carers the support that's available.

'So, we set up the Talk Don't Walk, so after they've started their course in September, they complete a survey 6 weeks in. At that point it asks, 'are you aware of the support available for young adult carers' and anyone who says no, then they're provided with the support' (Operational Carers Lead)

Partnership working

Prior to NWRC's involvement in Driving Change, they had no links with local carers services or other local partners working with young adult carers. However, through the project, the college has developed a new working relationship with local carers services, resulting in a new two-way referral process, information-sharing, and providing supported transition for young adult carers starting at the college. Carers services have also been involved in the coffee morning and will be participating in future extracurricular activities. Their resources are available to students and their services are referenced on the college's 'Guide for Young Adult Carers'.

Involving young adult carers in improving support

The new coffee morning for young adult carers has provided a platform for them to voice their opinions and give feedback on the college's ideas for support, which has been used to inform the young adult carers policy, plans for flexible adjustments, and the development of a Carers Card. A young adult carers survey, alongside conversations in one-to-one meetings with staff, provide additional opportunities for young adult carers to share their views and feed into improvements to support.

'We have the Young Adult Carers survey ... the last question is 'is there anything that we could do better and anything that would benefit you' as well too so they can give their opinions at that stage too' (Operational Carers Lead)

Challenges

In common with other participating colleges, the restrictions arising from the pandemic have been a key challenge for NWRC in taking their plans for improvement forward. The move to remote learning has sometimes made it difficult to fully engage young adult carers in certain aspects of the project, such as the virtual peer support group.

'We had planned on ... inviting them in, making them a cup of tea ... and getting to know each other. So, because we're unable to do that, we find it a wee bit more challenging because it was always on Teams. And I know a lot of students, accessing Teams just for their class was difficult enough. They didn't really want to do anything extra than what they already had to do'
(Operational Carers Lead)

Outcomes

Through their involvement in Driving Change, NWRC have achieved their original goal of confidently being able to identify and provide effective support for young adult carers. This was a key change in provision at NWRC, considering that before the project, the college did not know who the young adult carers were in their student population.

'I think the main benefit was for us being able to identify the young adult carers and for them to realise that they are a group that deserves to be supported and for us to be able to do that for them' (Operational Carers Lead)

Key success factors

- A key element of NWRC's plans for improvement was ensuring that the support for young adult carers is ongoing and accessible throughout their whole college journey.

'I think that as much as they know that we're there, not just having the initial meeting and setting things up, continuing to support them throughout the years is really important. Different times of the year can be more challenging for different people, so just always knowing that we're there no matter what time of the year it is' (Operational Carers Lead)

- Focusing on making a difference to the lives of young adult carers, and having this at the forefront of their minds, was also key to successfully embedding support across the college.

'Our thought from the beginning wasn't about what's going to be involved or what work it's going to take. It was, 'how this is going to impact our students'. Thinking that, beforehand, there wasn't support set up in place for young adult carers and now, there is so much support. So, it's making a difference to

children's lives and that's what our jobs are and that's what we're here to do'
(Operational Carers Lead)