

Solihull College

About the college

Solihull College and University Centre in the West Midlands, offers both Further Education and gold rated Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) higher education provision. The college has two main sites, one in the north and one in the south of Birmingham. Good bus and rail links from the south of the city to Birmingham mean that about 60% of students are not Solihull residents.

Identification of young adult carers was a key issue for the college. At the start of the project, Solihull had no means of identifying the numbers of young adult carers among the student population but based on national statistics, estimated that they may have around 290 young adult carers among their 3,500 sixteen to eighteen-year old students. Approximately twenty young adult carers were known to the student welfare service.

Within the past year, one of the student welfare officers has, informally, taken on lead responsibility for young adult carers and, through close working with Solihull Young Carers, begun to identify ways that the college could improve support. Consequently, the Targeted Support for Colleges project came at an opportune time and provided a vehicle to push actions forward with the management team. The welfare officer viewed the project as a double-edged opportunity;

“...the college would be keen to be part of something national ...raising the profile of the college, and it also has some really valuable work attached to it... and will give me a bit more power to my elbow.”

The lead had already begun to make links with other colleges prior to the project, for example talking to York College about their young carers card and was keen to use the project to continue to link with other colleges and learn from effective practice elsewhere.

The long-term focus of the project was the early identification of young adult carers, so the college can work with each individual young person to identify how best to support them and develop a ‘care pathway’ through college. Shorter term targets included setting up a user group of young adult carers and getting promotional materials out to raise awareness across the college about the needs of young adult carers and the support available.

Provision for young adult carers

One of the big changes in support for young adult carers, which the carers lead had anticipated would take much longer to achieve, is access to the enhanced 16-19 bursary offer. Provided a student is registered with a carers organisation, such as Solihull Carers Trust, they can apply for additional financial support through the college’s enhanced bursary, of £1,200 over the academic year.

Early in the project, Solihull developed a specific young adult carers policy adapted from an example shared by another participating college.

Solihull has undertaken a range of activities to increase awareness of the needs of young adult carers and the support services available, with college staff. These include training sessions, delivered jointly with Solihull Young Carers, to raise the awareness of support

staff, for example, student support officers, the college nurse and counselling staff in addition to course tutors. Input on young adult carers from one of the college directors is also planned for the next whole college development day. For the future, the carers lead is keen to develop e-learning for new support staff and exploring working with a group of young adult carers to develop their skills, so they can also deliver awareness raising training to staff and governors.

Solihull is also about to launch a 'young carers card', developed with input from young adult carers. Information circulated about the card has already resulted in requests from staff wanting to know more about young adult carers and how the card works.

Solihull's schools' liaison officer now shares information in schools on what the college offers students with caring responsibilities, in relation to, for example, the enhanced 16-19 bursary offer for registered students and the young carers card.

The college is still working on formal processes to identify young adult carers. One option, currently under discussion, is to add a box, where students can disclose that they are a carer, to the student 'learning agreement' form, which every student completes. The current student finance form already includes a box asking if the young person is a carer. However, analysis shows that of 42 students now known to be young adult carers, only 20 had applied for finance and, of these, 15 had issues relating to attendance. As payments are made based on levels of attendance, many were not being paid. The carers lead is negotiating a reduction on the attendance level required (from 86% to 76%) for young adult carers, to enable greater numbers to access financial support.

Despite the absence of a systematic induction process to identify young adult carers, staff training and awareness raising activities more generally have made a significant difference in terms of numbers of young adult carers known to the college. Student support officers for example, are beginning to ask different questions to young people on disciplinarys for attendance issues and young adult carers known to the service are bringing other young carers along for support.

Prior to the project, Solihull collected basic data on the numbers of young adult carers and compared retention and achievement data for young adult carers as a group, year on year. The carers lead has now broken down this year's figures by gender, age, ethnicity and primary disability cared for, alongside the financial analysis data. This more comprehensive data, backed up with national data, will be used to demonstrate to management and wider staff that numbers of young adult carers at the college are growing and that they typically face multiple challenges, often relating to their own health and wellbeing.

Challenges

As many students are from Birmingham, the carers lead has been working hard to build a closer working relationship with Spurgeons, the young adult carers service local to the city. Students referred to Spurgeons may have to wait two to three months for an assessment, and subsequent registration, which can delay their access to the college bursary. To overcome this, students 18+ can register with the YMCA in Sutton Coldfield. For 16-18 year olds, an arrangement has been agreed with college management that Solihull Young carers will provide a temporary assessment. The carers lead has also shadowed assessments delivered by Solihull Young Carers with a view to performing the assessments in-house.

Time to develop improvements and to provide the individual support required, particularly as the carers lead works part-time is the main challenge. Involving students in feedback on work done so far, for example has been valuable, but time-consuming;

“My frustration is feeling as though we’re not servicing them well enough... we’ve identified them, we know who they are...it is a challenge of time and balancing that with my other role.” Carers lead

Future plans include training a small number of young adult carers as ambassadors for students with caring responsibilities in the college. The challenge of resourcing support, as more young people are identified, has been acknowledged by the college.

Outcomes

Financial support provided through the bursary, and the increased profile of young adult carers with staff across the college means that life in college should be becoming easier for young adult carers, *“without having to go into a lot of detail with members of staff they may not want to.”* Carer’s lead.

Additionally, involvement in the project has helped to set up a group of young adult carers who are now actively interested and involved in improving support at Solihull College and are supportive of each other, as carers.

Success factors

- Having a designated lead, and support from the college directorate, has been key to improving support *‘I think it’s got to be a whole college approach really. “I think buy-in from the top, all the way down is really, really important.”* Welfare officer
- Partnership work with carers services, in particular Solihull Young Carers, has also been invaluable in developing support. It has also enabled the establishment of effective two-way referral processes.
- Collection of comprehensive data about young adult carers is enabling the college to implement discrete support and milestones that are specifically tailored to young adult carers’ needs, for example attendance targets linked to bursary payments.