

Wakefield College

About the college

Wakefield College in West Yorkshire is the largest education provider in the area, with approximately 8,000 students. The college offers courses at a range of levels including A-levels, vocational courses and apprenticeships, adult learning, and Higher Education courses. The college has sites in Wakefield City and at Castleford

Before the project started, the college felt that when they identified a student with caring responsibilities, they generally offered good support. However, they recognised that this support was inconsistent across the college.

Whilst the wellbeing team was increasingly encountering students caring for siblings or parents with mental health, drug and alcohol problems, they recognised that it was unlikely that they were aware of all the young adult carers in their student population. As a result, when the college joined Driving Change a key focus for the project was improved identification of young adult carers and mechanisms to ensure more consistent support across the college.

“this is one of the reasons we wanted to take part in the project because we have a system at the minute where it's self-declaration by students through enrolment, but we've not enforced through our enrolment process what the definition of... young adult carers is. I don't think we can put hand on heart and say what that is at the minute, and that's one of the things that we need to get to, actually identifying who that cohort is and what support we need to put in place for them.”

Although being able to identify young adult carers was a priority, the college acknowledged that talking through the QSCS Framework at the initial meeting had helped them to recognise other areas of the Framework where they could improve their support for young adult carers.

Support for young adult carers

Since the project began Wakefield College has made good progress in developing support across many different areas of the Framework.

Policy

The college has developed a comprehensive standalone young adult carer policy which is available to all staff through their Virtual College and has been included in training for new staff. Lockdown has prevented plans to directly involve young adult carers in shaping the policy, but Wakefield was able to take inspiration from a policy document shared by Solihull College following one of the Driving Change webinars.

A Carers Lead has also been identified, whose roles and responsibilities include developing and delivering training for staff across the college.

Induction

The college were keen to tailor their enrolment and induction process to ensure young adult carers could be identified and support put in place from the start of their time in college. A new enrolment form includes a question about caring responsibilities, and an explanation of what being a young

adult carer means. As a result, 68 young adult carers have been identified at the start of the 2020/21 autumn term. Once a student is identified as a carer they are added to a young adult carer group communications list and supported to complete a Pattern of Care form. The student's young adult carers status is also flagged on the college's data management system. The college emphasise that this increased awareness of who their young adult carers are, has been key to ensuring that effective support is in place;

"We are able now to have all of us, including our heads of curriculum, our support leads ...to go on the system, [to] be able to see who the young people are that have identified themselves as being young adult carers. We're able to see which curriculum areas they're in, which site they're on. ...So, [the Carers Lead] alongside youth workers are now able to consistently keep in touch with those young people.

Although the college already had a robust data management and monitoring system in place prior to joining the project it was not able to make effective use of data on young adult carers due to the lack of accurate data on numbers of carers in the student population. As a result of improved processes to identify young adult carers and increased numbers flagged on the system more meaningful data on attendance, achievement and retention is now being used as part of monthly Student Experience Team meetings to review identified student carers and identify those at risk of dropping out.

Staff training and awareness raising

Before the project started the college did not provide specific training on young adult carers. New training, developed as part of the Driving Change project, includes online young adult carer awareness training for all staff as part of the induction process, more in-depth training for frontline support staff to improve student identification as well as awareness raising across teaching and curriculum teams. As part of this awareness raising activity the college has developed an interactive prospectus including a video for young adult carers which provides information about the Carers Lead and the support the college can provide. The video is also used as part of the induction process.

Ongoing support

A key change in support implemented through the project is the introduction of a carers card for young adult carers. This allows student carers to identify themselves easily to teaching staff and ensures that adjustments can be made, for example changes to timetabling where this has been possible or extra time for assignments. The college has also adjusted the qualifying criteria for the bursary fund to best support young adult carers. To ensure they receive the support they are entitled to, young adult carers are flagged to Finance as a priority group through the colleges report system.

Young adult carers have also been a focus of college activity to support students learning remotely during the pandemic. For example, young adult carers are on the priority list for additional IT equipment purchased by the college to ensure vulnerable learners can continue to engage with their learning.

Partnership working

Prior to their involvement in Driving Change, the college had identified that there was a lack of local support for young adult carers but had struggled to make effective links with the local authorities across the different districts from which students who attend the college are drawn. Through the project the college has joined forces with the local authority in Wakefield to focus on young adult

carers as a priority group. As a result, the college has forged a strong working relationship with the local authority and now sits on a strategic working group to improve the local offer for young adult carers.

Involving young adult carers in improving support

Wakefield are committed to ensuring that the voices of young adult carers are heard in shaping and reviewing support. As part of the project they have developed a survey for student carers to provide feedback on their experiences of support and learning and to identify what they would like in relation to different aspects of support. The survey is about to go live and will be available on the college's Moodle for students to access throughout the year.

"We've been able to ask them what they want from the college in terms of support so that we're not assuming that this is the right thing for everybody, because they've all got different needs, obviously, but we've kind of got a standardised approach"

Challenges

The main challenges for Wakefield have arisen from the pandemic. This meant that during the Driving Change project the college was juggling different priorities and had to adapt some of the planned changes in their action plan. For example, the QSCS initial assessment meeting coincided with an extended enrolment period. The lack of face to face engagement with young adult carers due to lockdown also made it difficult to fully engage young adult carers in the project in the way the college had hoped to.

Outcomes

For Wakefield College the main positive outcome of their involvement in Driving Change is that they have achieved what they hoped to through the project; they now have consistent processes in place to identify and support young adult carers across the college. However, they stress that coming to the end of their time on the project does not mark the end of their journey to improve support for young adult carers.

"I think it's on-going. I think it's just the start, to be honest. We've achieved what we set out to achieve in terms of our structure and the mechanisms, and everything else, and getting that standardised approach and some consistency, but we've got meetings booked in throughout the year for the project team, so we will continually go back to the plan...things will constantly change"

The college had already started looking at their recruitment system for the next academic year for example, so that young adult carers who are prospective students can be identified and the college can talk to them early on about what support they can offer.

Key success factors

- Having a Driving Change project team, including senior managers and the Carers Lead, meant the college could drive their action plan forward at all different levels and through different areas of the organisation. The college strongly recommended this approach to colleges joining the project in the future.

"...if it was, for example, a manager in [a college's] student services, [if it's] their job to put this in place, I could see them hitting brick walls with it. I think if you can do something in terms of making sure you get the buy in at different levels and...create

that project team so that everybody is aware of the action plan and everybody is aware of the things that you need to achieve, and everybody does their bit with that, I think you're going to get a much more successful outcome with it."

- The college already had effective relationships with schools to support the transition of young adult carers into college but had struggled to make effective links with other local partners. Allowing sufficient time to build these relationships, in this case, with local authorities, was seen as vital to make support work for young adult carers.
- The college perceived that making full use of the support and resources on offer through Driving Change has enabled them to get the most out of the project and improve all aspects of their provision..."use those networks, really, and don't try and do it in isolation."