Implementation of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for Newly Qualified Social Workers in Southampton

Overall achievement

Overall, respondents were extremely positive. All involved felt that the programme fostered a positive dialogue between the NQSWs and the organisation and that concerns were heard and responded to and that the quality of programme delivery was constantly improving as a result.

ASYEs felt that the programme had enhanced their practice and increased their confidence in dealing with complex issues. They felt that the programme safeguarded both themselves and their service users.

Perhaps the biggest single success factor was the way in which the programme was coordinated. Without such clear lines of communication it was felt that the organisation could not have moved forward as quickly or effectively as it had done.

The Skills for Care Employer Transition Fund was very useful in enabling the authority to offer the programme to Agency and other non-Authority staff.

Finally, a measure of the programme’s success is that voiced by the Service Manager (Adults), the quality of the programme is such that: ‘it has encouraged people to work for Southampton City’.

‘I started work on the 18th and received everything I needed to know on the 19th’.

Background and context

Southampton City Council is a unitary authority with a population of approximately 240,000, characterised by:

- Rapid growth - 9 per cent since 2001, a major component of which is migration from Europe - with an increase of 200 per cent from 2001-2011 (from 5,519 to 17,461).
- An increasing elderly population.

The authority employs some 50 qualified Adult Social Workers. They are engaged with the 18+ population, principally adults with learning disabilities, mental health issues and the elderly.

Within the past year 29 NQSWs have joined the ASYE programme. Of these two are non-local authority employees; one NQSW is employed by the NHS and one other is based in a voluntary organisation. This number also includes several Agency staff who have been accepted on to the
ASYE programme.

The large numbers of NQSWs has meant that the local authority has brought in external Assessors to help deliver the ASYE programme.

The Learning and Development function of the Authority has been outsourced and is managed by Capita. Capita have a dedicated learning and development lead who manages the operational aspects of the ASYE programme under the guidance of, and with the close support of, the Service Manager (Adults) and the Authority’s ASYE Programme Co-ordinator.

The Adult Social Workers work closely with local NHS providers, including hospitals, GPs, Professions Allied to Medicine, Universities and voluntary and private sector providers.

Usefulness of support materials and initial information

There was general agreement that the quality of support materials provided by Skills for Care was good, however, not all were available for the start of the programme.

To facilitate access to key documents a local ASYE handbook was produced. This captured, in one place, all key aspects of the programme and explained how it was to be delivered. It included the Learning Agreement, details and dates of the support available, contact details of key personnel, protected time, assessment requirements and FAQs. Similar handbooks were produced for Assessors, Line Managers and Supervisors and all were well received.

One of the lead Service Managers for Adult Social Care also mentioned the importance of the Standards and Supervision Framework which gave consistency and helped clarify what constituted appropriate evidence. This helped make the assessment process effective and efficient. It also assisted in allocating work at a level appropriate to the needs of the NQSWs. The Skills for Care Learning Agreement document was praised for its clarity and for the way it assisted all participants to gain an overview of the process.

Two NQSWs, however, suggested how it could be improved:

‘I would like to see more in there about my needs and how they can be met - for example arrangements for coping with the demands dyslexia, or flexing the schedule to cope with my other needs of ASYEs who are carers outside the workplace’.

It is interesting to point out that the Authority has acted on this issue and now provides dyslexia support and that the issue of learning needs will be addressed in updated editions of the local ASYE Handbook. Another NQSW commented:

‘Perhaps the Skills for Care document should make specific reference to a nine month review - as this is at a critical period in the development process’.

One Assessor also made observations about some practical difficulties in maintaining the currency of the Learning Agreement. External Assessors, in particular, may have difficulty in getting all of the four signatures required on the day and wondered if this issue had caused any difficulties elsewhere. In addition, one (external) Assessor felt that the number of contacts with NQSWs needed to be examined further:

‘Although this worked well I wonder whether six meetings with my ASYE is enough; after all I only had two direct observations’.

Communications

Communications were seen as excellent both nationally and locally by all involved in the programme.

Support materials were collated and presented to ASYE candidates in good time for the commencement of the programme: ‘I started work on the 18th and received everything I needed to know on the 19th’.

A critical feature of the success of the Local Authority’s approach was the establishment of central coordination for the programme. In practice this is shared by the Service Manager (Adults) and the learning and development lead. Several respondents identified the coordination function as pivotal, particularly as this was a
new and potentially complex development programme. The hands-on model of the coordinators afforded a rapid response to questions - as one Assessor noted: ‘I always got an answer within 24 hours’.

Operationally, the learning and development lead planned, coordinated, arranged workshops advised the Practice Assessors, delivered reflective practice support and conducted second marking. Everything was clearly documented including session handouts, assessment documents, due dates, handbooks and ASYE files. Having clear lines of responsibility was viewed very positively in that it simplified communication and eased implementation. As a result, all participants knew who to contact if issues arose. Internally, communications were further reinforced through a range of support mechanisms which are described below.

**Implementation, delivery and assessment**

Work-based supervision support was offered to NQSWs weekly for first six weeks, fortnightly until six months, then monthly thereafter - in line with social work professional standards.

The programme also provided monthly taught days and a half day per month facilitated learning set. NQSWs were also provided with a mentor. The mentor role was as a listening friend, away from assessing practice, with whom NQSWs could talk to regarding issues and concerns. This aspect worked well and helped foster a climate of openness and trust.

In order to help ensure that assessors were adequately prepared they undertook a Practice Assessor course at Solent University and, thereafter were provided with face-to-face and e-mail support by the learning and development coordinator and the Service Manager (Adults).

In order to standardise assessment, assessment evidence is reviewed by the learning and development lead. In addition, a Standardisation Panel was established with Hampshire and the Isle of Wight Council, representatives from the Royal Navy and from the voluntary sector. This panel identified some inconsistencies in practice which was fed back to Assessors. As a result of this process, a regional Practice Assessor workshop was held - led by local higher education institutions.

Assessors and NQSWs acknowledged that the Authority was keen to receive feedback and act upon it. NQSWs also felt that they were able to positively shape the emerging model of ASYE support and that this process was enhanced by the fact that the learning and development lead and the Service Manager (Adults) were always available to discuss issues.

As a result of the above, the organisation believes it now has a clear and robust assessment process which is understood by candidates and Assessors; Assessors are confident in their role and feel that everything is working well.

Reflective practice has been underpinned by courses provided for all senior practitioners and supervisors and by one-to-one sessions between the learning and development coordinator and NQSWs.

As the programme has developed respondents noted that the process of peer review had elicited powerful and probing questions which were able to be addressed in a safe, non-threatening environment. In addition, NQSWs felt the range of support activities had accelerated the building of networks and fostered powerful informal learning.

The investment in peer review and reflective practice stimulated a proactive response from NQSWs regarding potential improvements to the programme and, together with the external mentorship, had helped encourage a powerful and positive dialogue between the NQSWs and the organisation. One suggestion which has emerged from this dialogue, and which has been adopted, is the utilisation of NQSWs as programme ‘reps’ for future ASYE intakes.
There was some evidence of NQSWs experiencing difficulty in accessing academic literature and two respondents recommended that all future participants be offered access to university on-line library services during the programme. As a result, the Authority has now made this facility available.

One Assessor commented that it might have been preferable to have had an in depth evaluation of the first cohort before subsequent candidates were taken on to the ASYE programme. It was noted that recently the organisation has moved from a batch intake to a ‘roll on, roll off’ (‘ro-ro’) model and that staff were keen to ensure that the potential complexities of such an approach for Managers, Assessors and ASYEs would be managed effectively.