Eighteen months ago our organisation developed an Internal Panel for the scrutiny and moderation of Assessor recommendations about NQSWs’ ASYE. We also established an External Panel to moderate the judgments of the Internal Panel. These different levels of moderation support the quality assurance system of our programme and help drive consistency in decision-making.

Currently, we have 40 NQSWs on the ASYE Programme in Children’s Services. This includes a cohort of 10 NQSWs who have joined our Social Work Academy, which started in September this year. The Academy is an important part of the plan to develop the workforce in the Children’s Services Directorate and in the future all NQSWs recruited to the Directorate will be supported in their learning and development through the Academy. The Directorate is also supporting the ‘grow your own’ strategy and a small cohort of Social Workers who have been through the scheme have also joined the ASYE Programme this year.

It is a mandatory requirement that all its NQSWs, in both Children’s Services and Adults Services, undertake the Programme. This is because the Council understands the benefits that accrue from the ASYE Programme for the development of its workforce and for the provision of its social care services.

What we wanted to achieve

In setting up the External Panel process we wanted to achieve the following objectives, namely:

- Scrutiny of the Internal Panel's judgments and the moderation of the quality of the support arrangements provided by the ASYE Programme through a moderating body outside of Cumbria County Council and within a partnership arrangement
- Involvement of people in need of care and support in these tasks as we believe they represent a significant dimension of the public interest in this process
- Strengthening of the ASYE partnership arrangements across the statutory and private, voluntary and independent sector and
- Meeting the quality assurance standards promoted by the DfE.

We wanted the outcomes of the External Panel to correspond as far as possible with these objectives:
For the people who use the service:
(i) participation in scrutinising the decisions of Cumbria County Council
(ii) a meaningful voice in identifying how the standard of work submitted might be improved and how the Programme might be developed
(iii) promotion of the transparency of the decision-making process in ASYE.

For the workforce:
(i) the knowledge that the Internal Panel judgments would be more likely to be right because any of its decisions could be scrutinised for accuracy, consistency and robustness. This would afford NQSWs confidence that the judgements would not be arbitrary or unconsidered
(ii) the expectation that NQSWs and Assessors would receive further feedback on the standard of their work from a moderating body
(iii) the communication of key messages to NQSWs about how to improve their portfolios and for Assessors, their assessments.

For the organisation:
(i) information about the quality of its final decision-making in ASYE
(ii) information about the functioning of its support arrangements and key messages about areas for improvement
(iii) assurance that the ASYE Lead, NQSWs and Assessors would be receiving feedback about the standard of their work and how it might be improved in the future.

What we did

Establishing the External Panel involved liaising and networking with the local Universities, carer and service user groups and obtaining the approval of the ASYE Steering Group in Cumbria County Council, which oversees and guides the work of the ASYE Lead. It also involved writing standard documentation such as Terms of Reference, templates for Agenda and Minutes and Feedback.

The Panel presently comprises of 6 members drawn from both local HEIs, representatives from the service user and carer community, our Principal Social Worker and the ASYE Lead. The representatives from the service user and carer communities were drawn from one of the University’s Panels and their networks. They were trained along with other members of the Panel. Internal Panel members also attended the training to strengthen their understanding of the roles of each panel and their relationship.

The External Panel meets bi-annually and scrutinise a minimum of two portfolios at each meeting, which are selected through the random sampling method by the Chair. The Assessors and NQSWs whose portfolios are selected are informed of this; in the communication about the Panel’s purpose it is emphasised that the Panel does not have the power to override the final judgment of the Internal Panel on the Assessor's recommendation.

The portfolios are accessed and read by all members through Objective Connect (OC). OC enables the storage and sharing of portfolios and other Panel information with people and agencies outside of our organisation with an UK Government level of security. It is a practical solution for the dissemination of documentation to all Panel members who are located across a large geographical area covering Cumbria and north Lancashire. At our most recent meeting a Panel member was unable to attend and so posted their assessment of the portfolios on the OC External Panel site.

In the Panel meeting the Chair facilitates first the scrutiny of key documentary evidence and then any other documentation identified for scrutiny by a panel member. The members’ views about the quality of the assessment decision and the support arrangements are summarised and recorded by the Chair. Panel members are confident in their scrutinising role so meetings can be animated.

We are still a ‘young’ panel in terms of our length of existence and so are only now beginning to embed a settled process.

Following the publication by Skills for Care of the ASYE (adults) external moderation guidance in September, we have arranged to crystallise the panel process in writing for current and new members. Ideally, we would like to import SfC guidance on adults’ panels into children’s, as we consider it to articulate best practice. One
element of best practice that we will struggle
to implement currently is the involvement in
the Panel of another employer with at least two
NQSWs, an element that promotes consistency
of decision-making between employers. We
know of no ASYE Provider within the PVI sector
in Cumbria that currently supports at least two
NQSWs through the Programme. I have already
called on the goodwill of the Lancashire ASYE
Leads network for their support in meeting the
guidance of the Adults External Moderation
process and feel it would be unfair to draw
further on this goodwill, as it could not be
reciprocated in full.

The Panel provides specific and timely
feedback to the Assessors and the NQSWs
whose portfolios have been considered. It also
provides feedback about the Programme to
the organisation, which is taken to the ASYE
Steering Group. The key general messages from
the Panel are communicated to the NQSWs and
their Assessors within a few days of the Panel
meeting.

What we achieved

The outcomes from this process are more than
were envisaged at the start of this work. Some of
the more significant are:

■ issues and themes about our ASYE
Programme identified in the scrutiny and
moderation process are taken back to the ASYE
Steering Group for consideration and action

■ the confirmation of exemplar pieces of work
for sharing with NQSWs and their Assessors

■ the key messages for NQSWs and
their Assessors about how their portfolio
documentation may be improved and
occasionally, the standard of work. These
messages are incorporated into end of year
sessions for NQSWs who are due to submit their
portfolios

■ the validation from the Panel of the social
work practice undertaken by our NQSWs and
Assessors

■ the working relationships we have been able
to build through the Panel with members of the
ASYE community in the PVI Sector.

What we learnt

The key learning point has been the value of this
process in contributing to the goal of achieving
consistency and quality in our ASYE Programme.
It has also been helpful in confirming the
calibration of the ASYE practice capability
level. With the publication of the proposals for
the Approved Child and Family Practitioner
status, it is unclear what space there will be for
the External Moderation process in the quality
assurance of the Employer Endorsement stage.
Given the many benefits of this process, its
continuation would be valuable to our ASYE
Programme.

The External Moderation Panel
process is an important element in the
system of quality assurance for our
ASYE Programme. It has helped to
improve the consistency of decision-
making in the Programme and is
also a resource for developing good
practice across the ASYE community

Cumbria Chair of External Panel
Skills for Care Recommends

Skills for Care has helped to develop the ASYE process and provides some practical resources and funding potential for employers involved in providing adult social care.

**Assessed and Supported Year in Employment**

Our special website section provides an overview of the process and includes related examples and guidance to demonstrate how other employers are delivering this process.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/ASYECF

**Continuing to develop Social Workers**

Skills for Care has produced core principles, resources and guidance to support employers to develop the social work workforce.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/swcpd

**Action Learning for Social Workers**

Action Learning facilitation as a useful support package for NQSWs undertaking the ASYE. Our resources include a number of videos which provide the views of, managers and facilitators.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/actionlearning