

Quality Assured Care Learning Service - case study

Freebird Associates

Freebird Associates is a small, independent learning and development consultancy based in Cornwall. Founded in 2015 by Corinne Leverton and Anna Elwood following their redundancies from Cornwall Council, the business was born out of a shared desire to continue the work they loved – empowering learners to build skills, confidence and competence, particularly within health and social care.

Today, Freebird is run solely by Anna, who continues to deliver a range of support to care providers including one-to-one coaching, training in adult safeguarding and the Mental Capacity Act, workplace culture development, and the Skills for Care leadership programmes. At its heart, Freebird is a values-led organisation, committed to tailoring its support around the needs of each learner and service.

Anna's decision to apply for the Quality Assured Care Learning Service (QACLS) followed Freebird's earlier involvement with the Skills for Care Endorsement programme. She explains that the decision to join that framework originally wasn't just about delivering licensed programmes, it was about accountability and reflection. Freebird had always deliberately avoided formal accreditation in favour of learner-led flexibility, but Anna recognised the need for meaningful checks and balances to ensure that what she thought was happening in her sessions was actually happening.

When Skills for Care Endorsement came to an end, and at a time when Freebird was going through a significant transition, she felt it was more important than ever to seek out that external assurance. "I needed a critical friend," she says, "and I also believe organisations commissioning learning need to feel confident that what they're buying meets high standards. I often reference this when delivering training about registration and regulation in care - the same should apply to training providers too."

Anna took part in the pilot phase of the QACLS, which gave her the opportunity to get to grips with the framework early on. She found the guidance notes helpful and appreciated the opportunity to speak with the Quality Assured Care Learning Service team to clarify what the standards meant in real terms. More than a compliance exercise, the process gave her a chance to reflect on what Freebird stands for, how policies align with those values, and how that translates to day-to-day practice. "I didn't want to just say 'here's my policy', I wanted to explain how I live it."

However, it wasn't without its challenges. As a small provider, Anna had sometimes felt that Freebird might not 'measure up' to larger organisations with formal systems and structures. That mindset was very present when she first approached the QACLS. "A previous version of myself would have run a mile," she admits. But going through the process helped shift that perception. "I realised my practice is my evidence. I may not have a form for everything, but I reflect, I ask questions, I listen, and I make changes. Our values are our systems. The feedback we receive, the changes we make, the conversations we have, that's our quality framework."

The experience of completing the QACLS was ultimately very positive, if a little nerve-racking at times. The initial verification review in particular was a moment of tension, but the structure of the process, especially the inclusion of narrative reflections, helped Anna focus first on practice and then on how to evidence it. "It helped me realise that I am good enough," she says. "It made me feel more confident in what I do, and why it works."

Although external perceptions of Freebird may not have shifted overnight, Anna believes something deeper has changed. "I'm having different conversations. I'm holding my own power. That has an impact, on the way I deliver, and how others engage with the learning." That confidence has rippled through her delivery, and although the change may be unspoken, it's significant.

To other learning and development providers, especially those who are small or work alone, Anna has a clear message: "Do it. You deserve to be recognised for who you are and how you deliver learning and development." Her advice to others starting their QACLS journey is to use the guidance, speak to others who've done it, and focus on practice first. "Don't rely too heavily on policies, think about what those things look like in real life. How do you know what you know?"

Now that Freebird has been quality assured through the QACLS, Anna plans to continue reflecting, asking questions, and making sure she saves those valuable emails and comments that evidence the impact of her work. In doing so, she continues to demonstrate the heart of what QACLS is about. Not just meeting standards, but embedding quality, reflection and values into every aspect of practice.