Abingdon and Witney College

About the college

Abingdon and Witney College is a general further education college based across three sites in Abingdon, Witney and Common Leys. They offer a wide range of provision to learners of all ages, including full-time and part-time FE programmes, HE courses and apprenticeships.

At the beginning of their involvement in the Targeted Support for Colleges project, the college was aware of 65 young adult carers studying with them. However, they knew from national statistics that the actual number would be much higher than this and that they needed to establish consistent ways of identifying and recording the numbers of young adult carers attending the college. In particular, the college wanted to encourage young adult carers to self-identify and declare their caring responsibilities to staff, so that they could then provide appropriate support.

In addition, while the college had a relatively comprehensive support offer in place for young adult carers, this was not formally recognised in any of the college's processes and awareness of these young people varied across staff. As a result, the support that young adult carers received at the college depended on their tutors' awareness and understanding of their situation and the support they could access, which tended to be patchy. One of the college's aims for getting involved in the project was therefore to raise awareness of the college's support for young adult carers amongst staff, including senior management and curriculum staff, to ensure consistency in the support that these young people accessed.

Provision for young adult carers

The college has used the QSCS framework to review the support it offers to young adult carers throughout their learning journey. While they already had much of the recommended support in place, the college has found the project very useful in developing and updating their policies and procedures on supporting young adult carers, and in securing governor buy-in for this.

As part of the project, the Student Advisor who leads on carers has reviewed and updated the college's protocol on supporting young adult carers. This includes information for staff on who young adult carers are, the challenges they may face and the impact a caring role might have on their experiences of college. It also includes information on the college's procedures for identifying young adult carers, the academic adjustments that tutors can put in place for student carers, the pastoral support they can access, safeguarding and information sharing, and the contact details of the college's carers lead. As well as a version for staff, the Student Advisor has developed a version of their protocol which helps students to understand the support young adult carers can access and provides contact details of the carer's lead and local services. This is available for both current and potential students on the college's website and intranet.

One of the college's vice principals has been closely involved in reviewing and updating the college's protocol on supporting young adult carers and provided the carer's lead with valuable advice on the procedures the college can put in place to support young adult carers to apply for Carer's Allowance. The draft protocol will soon be approved by the college's

senior management team and will be distributed across the college to students and staff with their support.

"You can't do any of this without having a supportive management team, and we've really seen the benefits of having that." Student Advisor

The carer's lead has also met with the college's Personal Development, Behaviour and Welfare governor to discuss the project and the college's support for young adult carers. The governor now includes young adult carers as part of their remit as it was recognised that there are many developmental needs and personal needs that come with caring. Subsequently, the college's support for young adult carers was included as an item on a meeting of the college board, which has further secured senior management buy-in.

Another key change that the college implemented through the project was a review of their student support needs form, which learners complete during their interview. Prior to the project, the college included a question on the form which asked whether students were carers. However, they found that this question was often misinterpreted and therefore resulted in an inaccurate picture of the number of carers studying at the college. Through the project, the college revised this question to ask whether students looked after a friend or family member, with a follow-up question to ask for some details. If a student ticks this box, they will then have a meeting with the carer's lead who can follow this up in more depth and find out what support they may need.

"It was also as well, even if they didn't want support at that point, making them aware of what was available, should they need it in future… Letting them know how to access that, should they need it, who to speak to, but saying at the end of the day, we're not going to make you. We want you to learn that skill of independence and being able to ask for help when you need it." Student Advisor

Finally, the college already had strong links with Oxfordshire Young Carers Service, but used the project as an opportunity to invite them in to run awareness-raising training for their Student Performance managers and academic staff. This took place towards the end of the spring term.

Challenges

The main challenge the college faced when delivering the project was a lack of time to make changes. The staff involved already had full-time jobs and the nature of their work in safeguarding meant that they could never be sure how much time they would have to commit to the project in any one day. However, having the senior management on board meant that the project was considered when work was allocated across the team, so the Student Advisor who led on the work was given fewer cases to support during the project timeframe. This freed up some time for them to meet with the governor, review the college's protocol and amend the student support needs form.

Involving young adult carers in making decisions about changes was also a challenge for the college. The Student Advisor tried to get their feedback on their experiences and input on activities for Young Carers Awareness Day but had no response to the messages they sent out to students. They felt that this may be because students want to focus on their courses and college life and may be reluctant to engage in discussions about their caring role unless they need support. This is an area that the college will continue to work on.

Outcomes

The main outcome of the project has been the increased awareness amongst staff at all levels, which is already resulting in young adult carers being offered more consistent support across the college.

"I think it's been raising the profile amongst other staff, because I've been a lot more vocal about it, over the last few months. I think it's been making other staff aware of the adjustments that we can make for these students, so they then offer them more readily." Student Advisor

Additionally, the college already had good support in place but the QSCS award will enable them to promote this externally to potential students and wider services.

"I think us having this quality standard will strengthen that and it will make it clearer that we do provide good support for young adult carers and so, it may get to the point that actually, students choose us over other colleges as a result of that." Student Advisor

Success factors

- Gaining strong senior management buy-in has been key in raising awareness of staff across the college and embedding the changes made through the project, ensuring their sustainability.

- The QSCS assessment pack provided the college with a comprehensive framework against which they could review their support and identify areas for development.

- The short time scale of the project provided motivation to make changes that otherwise would have happened over a much longer period of time.