

CITIZENS' CURRICULUM CASE STUDY

TOMORROW'S WOMEN WIRRAL

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Introduction

Taking a Citizens' Curriculum approach ensures all individuals have the core set of skills they need for the 21st Century, including English, maths, ESOL, digital, civic, health and financial capabilities. NIACE is committed to widening access to these skills, particularly amongst under-represented groups in society, as well as improving the range and quality of provision available to all adults. These interrelated skills, which underpin lifelong learning, can be made more accessible by being contextualised and developed as an integrated curriculum offer or framework.

In 2015/16, the development of a Citizens' Curriculum was taken forward by thirteen pilots across a range of organisations including colleges, local authorities and charities. The pilots tapped into what motivates adults to learn, ensuring that more people are learning skills which are relevant to their lives, their needs and their work. Particular areas of focus included provision for homeless / vulnerably housed adults, offenders, ex-offenders, migrants, families and disadvantaged young adults. The pilots provided insight into methods of adopting a Citizens' Curriculum approach, how effective the approach is in engaging disadvantaged learners, the impact on learners and providers, and key success factors for both the learner and the provider. This case study tells the story of one of the pilots.

Background

Tomorrow's Women Wirral (TWW) is a women-only community charity, which is based in Birkenhead. One of its principal aims is to offer support to women in order to prevent offending and help them through recovery. The charity aims to equip women with skills and qualifications whilst providing support and guidance in a safe environment. They currently work with around 105 different agencies.

How it worked

Tomorrow's Women Wirral felt that the Citizens' Curriculum approach fit well with their holistic approach to support and learning provision. Therefore, the aim of their Citizens' Curriculum pilot was to bring together the different aspects of learning that they offered at the centre under one overarching learning programme which would address a range of different issues experienced by their clients. One of the key targets for the pilot was to increase the employability of their learners by equipping them with a range of skills and support.

'Women who obtain employment are less likely to ever reoffend. So that's the whole objective of it.' (Tutor)

To recruit women onto the programme, information on the course was given to probation officers and the agencies who work alongside them. These key workers

then passed this information on to service users currently on and those who had just completed probation. Other learners were already visiting the centre and were encouraged by staff to join the pilot. In the end, around 12 women were recruited onto the programme.

For their Citizens' Curriculum pilot, Tomorrow's Women Wirral offered learners a suite of different courses (in varying intensity and length) which addressed the Citizens' Curriculum capabilities. The centre already offered a wide variety of different courses for women, covering a range of topics such as English, maths, cookery, self-confidence and motivation, as well as wider support and relaxation therapies, such as massage, financial advice and access to health services. Many of these were provided through partnerships with a local college. Learners undertook a range of these courses as part of an overarching Citizens' Curriculum programme and received a certificate on completion.

This approach was developed through an in-depth consultation with potential learners. Tomorrow's Women Wirral offered a very flexible learner-centred approach to determining the type of provision that would be required by learners. Firstly, they conducted one-on-one interviews to establish what the women were interested in, what skills they had and what they wanted to gain from attending. Then, throughout the provision, learners had the opportunity to give feedback, through questionnaires and informal conversations about what they thought was working, what they would like to see and any other queries or concerns they might have. This allowed tutors to make changes to the programme in response to learners' feedback. At the end of the provision, the women took part in an evaluation to gather information on how they found the course, the impact of their learning and what their future plans were.

Challenges encountered and how they were overcome

Tomorrow's Women Wirral encountered a number of challenges over the course of the pilot. One of the key issues was the intensity of the programme, which ended up being an almost full-time commitment for learners. Because many of the women involved had other commitments or children to look after, they occasionally had to miss some sessions. The full timetable also meant that some learners found it difficult to keep track of the dates and times of sessions.

'There was a variety of different stuff they had to do so people were forgetting; even though you give them the dates and that they do forget. But then life gets in the way and the children might be sick or they might have had this gone on or whatever so it's just working with what you've got really.'
(Tutor)

To overcome this, tutors made sure that they were as flexible as possible in the delivery and attendance requirements for learners. They made it clear that it was acceptable to miss a couple of sessions and that learners should continue to attend when they could. They also found that sending reminders about session times via SMS helped improve attendance.

'Being more flexible is ideal for the women because eventually once all those things are sorted they can then go on and be more committed, or they can put things in place while testing things out.' (Tutor)

Impacts and outcomes

For learners

One of the key outcomes for learners was increased self-confidence. Both tutors and learners noted that their confidence had built up as the programme progressed. The tutors felt that the two-day motivational 'Goals' course at the beginning of the programme had been particularly effective in improving learners' self-esteem and building their confidence in their ability to achieve. All learners felt that they had particularly benefitted from this aspect of the pilot.

'So the social side was good for me. Yeah, it's kind of like building my confidence up now that I'm in recovery... confidence building and just going on the courses and mixing with people.' (Learner)

This increase in self-confidence fed into an improved attitude towards learning and increased motivation to learn. Staff and learners also noted how, due to the Citizens' Curriculum approach of covering all the different capabilities, the sessions that the learners took part in often acted as a taster sessions for particular topics or courses. They found that some women would find one aspect that they were particularly interested in and then pursue this further, for example by taking an extended course in their chosen topic. This had given some learners the confidence and motivation to sign up for a further accredited programme at a local learning provider.

'They like to do little tasters. Then they're more focused to go on to, say, a full-time course or to look at it a bit more, because I think sometimes you go straight into that course, it's a bit too much of a big step.' (Tutor)

As well as progressing onto further learning, many learners wanted to get involved in either mentoring or volunteering at Tomorrow's Women Wirral as a way of 'giving back' or helping others who are in similar situations to theirs when they joined the centre. The tutors pointed out that this is an important contribution to the organisation and these women can act as positive role models for new service users.

'That's massive because they can remember what they were like when they came in and they want to help other women to achieve what they've achieved.' (Tutor)

Learners' attitudes towards gaining work and their own employability had also improved dramatically over the course of the Citizens' Curriculum programme. Their increased self-confidence meant that their outlook on finding future employment was much more optimistic as they had a better understanding of their options and also what they might enjoy doing in the future. One learner had approached their previous employer and got her old job back, while others were starting to apply for work and attend job interviews.

'There are people who have been in my situation, ended up in the prison system and got jobs. I look and I go, yeah, I could do that, or maybe I could do that, but it's confidence building, I think... it's me trying to put those barriers and overcome them and just think, you know what, maybe.' (Learner)

By the end of the programme, learners were also more confident to access other services and engage in their local community.

'Then it's helped me for confidence and to use other service places... and staff are brilliant.' (Learner)

'It's nice to see the girls go and use other services now, because it's not about, no, we need to keep you here because you need to do our courses.' (Tutor)

For staff

Staff at Tomorrow's Women Wirral felt that the wide variety of courses combining multiple capabilities acted as a strong incentive for them to continue with the course and helped to keep them engaged with the programme.

'...they don't mind doing that then. Whereas sometimes say if you go and do a maths and English course they go well, don't think I want to do this. Doing the more interesting things and throwing things in to keep them - it's like dangling a carrot isn't it really.' (Tutor)

For Tomorrow's Women Wirral

As an organisation, Tomorrow's Women Wirral felt that the flexible and learner-centred approach of their pilot was extremely valuable. This flexibility meant that women could fit their courses around their lifestyles and not have to worry about missing the occasional session, helping them to access opportunities to develop and learn that they may otherwise not have been able to take advantage of. As a result, the organisation was keen to continue using this approach in the future as they felt that it fitted well with their goals and were pleased with what the pilot had achieved. However, they would likely run the programme over a longer timeframe and get more women involved in it next time.

'We'd look at doing something similar over maybe a different time period and making sure that people commit to it and maybe put a bit more planning into it. But yeah, it's a good model to use again... I think that's a really good approach because there's a lot of organisations, courses, that offer funding for mainstream education, whereas the women we work with aren't ready for mainstream.' (Tutor)

Critical success factors

- The flexible approach that Tomorrow's Women Wirral adopted was very successful as it allowed women to combine learning with their busy lifestyles and other commitments.
- Incorporating all of the capabilities from the Citizens' Curriculum into their programme of learning helped to keep learners interested and engaged with the course as there was always at least one aspect that learners would particularly enjoy.

- Offering a package of different sessions within one course also acted as taster sessions to particular topics. This approach encouraged learners to pursue some topics further and encouraged them to consider further learning or volunteering.
- The focus on self-confidence and personal development from the start of the pilot programme was very beneficial to learners as all of them felt that they had increased their confidence and felt more motivated to continue learning.

Further information and contact

For further information on Tomorrow's Women Wirral please visit

www.tomorrowswomenwirral.org

For more information about the NIACE Citizens' Curriculum, please contact Alex Stevenson at alex.stevenson@niace.org.uk