

Up-skilling the Volunteers

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Sunderland voluntary sector workers have gained new skills and qualifications thanks to a new pilot programme aimed at upskilling voluntary workers, volunteers and service users.

Sunderland-based charity, Education Business Connections Limited (EBC), is working with Access Training to deliver the NVQ Level 2 in Community Development as part of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) funded Train to Gain service.

Thanks to the pilot, which has enabled voluntary sector organisations to deliver quality training for the first time, some 477 people across the region have now gained or are working towards achievement of their Level 1 and 2 qualifications, supported by some 94 employers. For many, it is the first time they had taken part in any learning since leaving school.

Margaret Heskett and Doug Frater, who both work at the Farringdon Jubilee Centre, near Sunderland, have both benefited at work and personally. Having taken the first step into learning for many years, they have both achieved a Level 2 in Community Development and have signed up for a Level 2 Apprenticeship in Advice and Guidance.

Margaret, 42, now works at the centre, a community facility which is the focus for key advice and learning services in the South Sunderland area, as a community

education development officer, organising courses for local people. But she started her career there as a volunteer, working her way up over the past few years.

“Gaining this qualification has really helped me do my job better, handling all the relevant paperwork and managing a varied workload, but it has also helped me personally,” Margaret said. “This is my first formal qualification and the first time I have been in learning since I left school. It has really helped with my self confidence, dealing with the variety of people I have to deal with in my current role. I’m looking forward to getting the next qualification and to the future.”

Jemma Amer, Project Manager at the Jubilee Centre, said “Margaret and Doug are valuable members of the team here and while they both have a natural ability, the Community Development qualification has enabled them to grow as employees and individuals.

“We have benefited, as their employer, as the learning has embedded their existing skills with a formal qualification, giving them the confidence to flourish and develop the level of service they provide. It has been invaluable and continues to provide advantages to us and the staff.

“Both Margy and Doug now lead and support community groups, providing them access to learning, help with applying for funding and raising awareness of local issues. This in turn frees up my time to concentrate on the strategic and financial development and sustainability of the Jubilee Centre.

“Thanks to the flexible approach by EBC, the centre has benefited greatly as we have been able to put employees through training which is specific to our needs and relevant to what we do.”

Since EBC began its partnership with Access Training, some 43 learners, either employees or volunteers, have taken part in the programme, supported by 20 employers.

The Train to Gain service, part funded through the European Social Fund (ESF), ensures that flexible, responsive training is delivered to meet employers' needs through an independent brokerage service which offers impartial advice to match training needs to local learning providers. A core element of the service is the access to appropriate funding of qualifications from Skills for Life right through to higher education.

The North East is currently one of the top performing regions in the country when it comes to learners achieving through Train to Gain. Since the service was launched nationally in 2006, 12,000 learners have achieved their qualifications and some 5,000 businesses have benefited.

Barbara McClennan, Chief Executive of EBC, said: "EBC is traditionally an education business partnership working with young people, so becoming involved with the LSC's Train to Gain service was a natural progression for us.

"We are a very active voluntary organisation committed to training and developing our own staff and It made sense to us to support other third sector organisations to offer similar standards of training and accredited learning to their staff and volunteers. Becoming a Train 2 Gain provider has also allowed us to diversify the products and services we offer and to build up our expertise in working with adults."

Dorothy Smith, Interim Regional Director, LSC North East, said: "The voluntary sector has very specific needs and as such, requires training providers that have knowledge and experience of the specific requirements within the sector. This pilot programme is not only benefiting the workers in the voluntary sector but enables the organisations themselves to diversify and grow, by breaking down the barriers to participation and improving the support given by the LSC and Business Link.

ENDS

Editor's notes:

Picture caption: Margaret Heskett pictured at work in the Farringdon Centre

The LSC exists to make England better skilled and more competitive. We are responsible for planning and funding high-quality vocational education and training for everyone. We have a single goal: to improve the skills of England's young people and adults to world-class standards. Our vision is that by 2010, young people and adults in England have the knowledge and skills matching the best in the world and are part of a truly competitive workforce. Established in 2001, we work nationally, regionally and locally from a network of offices across the country.

Education Business Connections (EBC) works in partnership with schools, employers and the community. A team of dedicated staff deliver a wide range of creative work related learning and enterprise education programmes to people of all ages and abilities across Tyne and Wear and County Durham. All activities are designed to develop key employability skills and entrepreneurial flair in people of all ages and of all abilities. We offer both accredited and non-accredited learning opportunities and specialise in developing programmes and activities to meet our customers' individual needs. Use the links on the left to find out more.

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