



Climb every mountain

Noelle O'Brien describes how the Workforce Quality Initiative recognises Positive Futures workers' natural strengths and builds on these to help them address the difficult issues of social exclusion, drugs and crime.

Positive Futures is a sports-based social inclusion programme managed within the Home Office Drug Strategy Directorate and delivered by 108 local partnership projects throughout England and Wales. Positive Futures workers need very special personal qualities to be able to empathise and engage with young people, involve them in sports activities and motivate them to build a better future for themselves and their communities.

However, Positive Futures has long recognised that personality and life experiences are not sufficient qualities for the delivery of a strategically-led, sports-based social inclusion programme. Consequently, it has sought to develop a comprehensive programme of training in line with the skills base identified in the strategy document, *Cul-de-sacs and gateways* (Home Office, June 2003). The strategy introduced the concept of the Positive Futures Workforce Quality Initiative, which has subsequently been designed to ensure that individuals working on projects have the knowledge, skills and personal qualities to perform their roles effectively.

The objectives of the programme are to:

- identify the National Occupational Standards

(NOS) Positive Futures staff should be working to

- assess staff's performance, knowledge and skills to identify any training and development needs
- provide relevant and targeted training and activities
- evaluate the development of Positive Futures staff
- record and recognise the achievements of Positive Futures staff.

The Workforce Quality Initiative is managed by Management and Performance Solutions Ltd and is underpinned by the Performer software. The process has been refined through working with Positive Futures over the past two years. It follows the cycle of continuing personal and professional development. (See diagram.)

At the start of the cycle, Positive Futures workers and staff from other community sports projects attend a half-day workshop to introduce them to the Workforce Quality Initiative and provide them with a kick start.

At this highly interactive workshop, they use the Performer software to create and refine their role profile – the set of National Occupational Standards

relevant to their work roles. Typically, these role profiles will include units from sport and recreation, youth work, youth justice and drugs and alcohol national occupational standards. For the managers and co-ordinators of Positive Futures projects, they also include management standards.

During the workshop, staff are asked to prioritise up to four units from their role profile to get them to focus on areas of their work that are really important, but about which they are not 100 per cent confident. All Positive Futures staff are required to include within their list of prioritised units, the Drugs and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS) unit AA1 Recognise indications of substance misuse and refer individuals to specialists – this core aspect of Positive Futures work has been found to be a blind spot for many workers.

Also as part of the workshop, staff assess themselves against their prioritised units to confirm their strengths and identify any gaps in their knowledge and skills, or ways in which they need to adapt their performance to bring it into line with the benchmarks of good practice as described in the National Occupational Standards.

Armed with this clearer understanding of the requirements of their role and their individual learning needs, staff are able to identify for themselves relevant training courses and other learning activities. Performer's learning resources database holds details and provides hyperlinks to over 300 learning resources throughout the UK that have been mapped to NOS; users can quickly find a local training course to meet their own particular needs.

However, anticipating staff's learning needs, Positive Futures offers a core training programme in each English region which covers:

- engaging with, working with, supporting and protecting young people (delivered by NACRO)
- preparing, leading, concluding and reviewing sports sessions (London Community Sports Network/Chartstage)
- raising awareness of substances and their effects and helping young people address their substance misuse (Crime Concern)
- dealing with abusive and aggressive behaviour (Eric Yates)
- managing projects and delivering quality to stakeholders' requirements (Human Performance Ltd).

Typically, a member of staff will participate in two or three of the core training sessions and also other training arranged by their own organisation, according to their needs. The workshops are designed in such a way as to encourage staff to apply their new learning to their work and reflect on how this has improved their own performance and results.

Towards the end of the Workforce Quality Initiative cycle, staff return for a second half-day workshop using the Performer software. They reassess their performance in the units they prioritised for development and evaluate their improvement since their initial assessment. They reflect on their learning and record their achievements in their personal portfolio. They are also awarded certificates of attendance for the core training courses they went on.

The cycle continues with staff reviewing their role

profiles – How has my role changed during the last year? What new challenges are likely to confront me this year? – and prioritising new units on which to focus their learning and development in the coming period.

Challenges for 2005

2004 saw significant developments in the Workforce Quality Initiative, particularly the delivery of the core training programme and the invitation to other sports-based social inclusion programmes to participate. 2005 will offer new challenges around the issues of:

- further development of the core training programme
- accreditation of learning, achievement and competent performance
- future funding of the Workforce Quality Initiative.

Further development of the core training programme

The 2005 core training programme must take into account the learning needs of:

- existing Positive Futures staff, and the new priorities they will have for 2005, having already addressed the subjects covered by the 2004 training programme
- a smaller number of new Positive Futures staff, who will need training in the subjects covered by the 2004 training programme (and existing Positive Futures staff who did not avail themselves of these course in 2004)
- a growing number of non-Positive Futures staff who would like to participate in the programme.

The new priorities for 2005 will emerge as a result of the second round of half-day Performer workshops in April 2005. Once these results have been analysed, the priorities for new training courses will be clear.

Accreditation of learning, achievement and competent performance

This is an area that is underdeveloped in the Workforce Quality Initiative. Currently, participants are only provided with certificates of attendance at training courses.

Staff need to be encouraged to apply their new knowledge and skills and provide evidence of their competent performance in NOS units, which can then be independently assessed. The Performer software has facilities for recording evidence of competent performance in each member of staff's personal portfolio and for online assessment for NVQs and other competence-based awards.

NVQs may be an appropriate longer-term goal, but many Positive Futures staff are sessional workers and they need smaller, more manageable competence-based awards. Sector Skills Councils and awarding bodies are now looking at developing cluster awards, comprising three or four NOS units. Four cluster awards could meet Positive Futures' immediate needs, covering youth work, substance misuse, project management and sports leadership (this latter is already under development). These would be achievable by Positive Futures workers within a 12-month cycle, and would provide them with a nationally-recognised qualification, showing their transferable skills and providing parity of esteem with their colleagues in mainstream sports development or youth work contexts.

Future funding of the Workforce Quality Initiative

To date, all the direct costs of the Workforce Quality Initiative have been borne by Positive Futures and Sport England. Positive Futures will move out of the Home Office in 2006 and it is likely that a broader funding base will need to be found. Possible future funders include:

- European Social Fund project funding

'Since its inception in 2000, more than 70,000 young people have been involved in regular Positive Futures activities, offering them the opportunity to re-engage with their communities and develop a brighter future for themselves.'

- national organisations, such as the sports national governing bodies
- local Learning and Skills Councils, particularly for qualifications-based training and accreditation
- sponsors and commissioners of local Positive Futures and other community sports projects, through the grants they provide to the projects.

Since its inception in 2000, more than 70,000 young people have been involved in regular Positive Futures activities, offering them the opportunity to re-engage with their communities and develop a brighter future for themselves. *Staying In touch* (Home Office, February 2005) analyses the impact of the Positive Futures programme on young people and the neighbourhoods in which they live. 72 per cent of partner agencies report reductions in anti-social behaviour, 63 per cent report a fall in local crime rates and 42 per cent identify reductions in substance misuse as a result of Positive Futures projects. In many places, Positive Futures has also contributed to neighbourhood renewal through a revival of interest and participation in sporting activities.

Over the next 12 months, Positive Futures will experience significant changes as its management moves out of the Home Office and it becomes part of mainstream community sports provision. The Workforce Quality Initiative will help to ensure that project workers have the required technical competencies as well as their natural flair for working with young people, and that project managers have the skills and abilities to navigate the transition.

Noelle O'Brien is project manager at Management and Performance Solutions Ltd

The Workforce Quality Initiative Model

