

# **Workforce/Attendance Case Example, January 2022 – InFocus School and College, Exeter**

## **Background**

InFocus School and College provide specialist education for young people aged 16-25 with a wide range of vision impairment and other additional and complex needs. They currently have five young people attending the school and 36 young people attending the college, with a mixture of day and boarding students. COVID-19 has had a large impact on levels of staff absence. Substantial protective measures in place have meant that transmission within the school and college to students and other staff members has been low and detailed scenario planning has meant they have been able to react to any absences.

## **Factors in Keeping School Attendance High**

- Maintaining robust protective measures, particularly regular testing for staff and students
- Creatively utilising outdoor spaces, including the forest school and discovery garden
- Using a specialist teaching agency to provide appropriately trained supplies
- Undertaking detailed scenario planning, regularly reviewed with the whole staff team

## **Approach Taken**

From the outset of the pandemic, InFocus has maintained conversations with Public Health England due to the vulnerability of their students and has kept a series of protective measures in place including robust mask wearing and hand hygiene policies, CO<sub>2</sub> monitors, good ventilation, and regular testing. Testing has been particularly important, with anyone attending the site encouraged to take a lateral flow test. When there were identified cases through LFTs, PCRs were completed for confirmation and logged on an organisation-wide database. InFocus also creatively used the facilities available on site, with more teaching taking place in the forest school and discovery garden due to the reduced risk of transmission outdoors.

InFocus was also able to work quickly to engage a teaching agency who could provide supplies with specialist knowledge. This has allowed them to maintain safe staffing levels in spite of high cases among staff, however at a considerable cost to InFocus. Training for all staff, including agency, remains important due to the needs of the young people. However, if this needed to take place face-to-face then numbers were limited to reduce the transmission risk. Additionally, in depth scenario planning was prioritised to ensure that appropriate levels of mitigation were available to prevent closures. This included utilising the therapy and senior leadership teams on site to cover staff absences and joining classes together. Any decision making was communicated effectively and quickly through virtual platforms to all staff, including MS Teams.

All of the approaches taken have been well communicated to staff and families, with a weekly letter sent out from the Principal to families to ensure everyone understands the actions being taken and the reasons for them.

## Challenges

The biggest challenge was maintaining good pupil attendance with reduced staff. This required large amounts of flexibility from staff and considerable planning from senior management. InFocus also sought to recruit a new member of staff in September to enable this flexibility which was a challenge given the timing. They have since successfully recruited which has built in additional capacity and therefore increased resilience, with 0.5 of a post available for cover.

In hindsight, InFocus believes adopting a primary teacher model from the beginning to avoid teachers unnecessarily moving between classes would have reduced the challenges of managing staff absence. If a class' core teacher was absent this would have disrupted fewer students and would have been easier to mitigate rather than managing absences across multiple classes. They have since implemented this model from the beginning of the spring term as a single teacher also provides greater security for students as there are relatively high rates of change among the enabling staff (TAs).

## Successes

A key success has been that the pandemic has made InFocus think more creatively about using their resources, enabling them to use the space around the school better. They have also built a strong team spirit where staff feel supported to work flexibly. Staff have demonstrated their resilience to go above and beyond, taking on different roles to keep delivery running. The significant attention that went into planning for 'what if' scenarios has encouraged leadership to be embedded at all levels, with staff able to use their initiative to problem solve, but also able to rely on a wider support network of staff if needed.

An unintended positive consequence of the staffing challenges has been that the EHCP meetings which had to be converted to a virtual model have had far greater attendance. This has led to better relationships with professionals and more meaningful discussions so this model will be maintained going forward. The necessary use of virtual platforms has increased staff's ability to access high-quality training virtually. This has meant that they can avoid staff having multiple days out of school due to the flexibility and reduced length of online trainings.

## Key lessons learnt

- The **value of finding new and different ways of doing things** and embedding these InFocus' future delivery as they align with the values they already hold.
- The **drive forward in accessible technology and communications** can have a profound impact on students in the future, particularly those with complex health conditions who may miss learning opportunities if not provided with alternative options