



City Learning Trust, Stoke-on-Trent

A tailored approach helps City Learning Trust drive staff development and improvement

About the trust

City Learning is a multi-academy trust established in 2014 and based around the city of Stoke-on-Trent. Comprising two Primary schools, two Secondary schools and one Further Education college, the trust serves around 3500 students and has around 260 classroom staff. With a strong emphasis on collaboration and cooperation, the trust is committed to providing a world class standard of education for all students, and places school improvement through continuous professional development for all staff at the heart of the trust's strategy.

Key takeaways

- Platform supports a consistent approach to developmental objective-setting across the trust
- Intuitive features encourage continuous engagement with feedback and CPD
- Customisable features allow trust leaders to adapt platform to support trust priorities

“ With BlueSky everyone's got the same entitlement, everyone's getting the same experience. BlueSky gives us parity, clarity and consistency for all staff. ”

Deb Poole, Director of Staff Development

What was the challenge?

City Learning Trust serves an area with a high proportion of students that receive pupil premium, and as a result they have a large number of Education Support Staff (ESS) that provide additional support for children, including teaching assistants, inclusion teams and pastoral teams. Ensuring that all staff have the skills and knowledge to deliver the best support to students is a core element of the trust's priorities.

"We needed a system that could support our core priority of staff development consistently across the trust, as it is key to our ability to attract, recruit and keep great staff," says Deb Poole, Director of Staff Development. "We are committed to providing CPD for every staff member that works directly with children, which supports our commitment to delivering excellent education."

"Our biggest challenge was finding a platform that could facilitate our Professional Growth package. Our process of selection needed to ensure that whichever platform we chose was able to do everything we needed in one place. We wanted to make sure that people didn't have to use a number of systems, as this would be needlessly complicated and was one of the barriers we already had."

The five organisations that make up the trust are located in different parts of Stoke-on-Trent, which created challenges for consistency and integrated processes.

"With our previous system, we couldn't see what was happening across the trust, which was preventing us from collaborating effectively," Deb explains. "When we realised BlueSky would allow us to manage appraisal and CPD activities more effectively across the whole trust, we were in. BlueSky was vital when we moved all our training online. It's much easier to link the PMR and CPD together now, and have the same system in every school."

How is BlueSky Supporting the trust?

City Learning Trust has a clearly defined strategy that ensures the trust's core priorities are threaded through the professional learning objectives of all staff.

Deb outlines the approach: "We start our strategy with our three core priorities: to provide a world-class quality of education for our students, ensure best practice in business compliance, and engage all staff in professional development. These feed into each headteacher's PMR, which informs the priorities that they will focus on within their schools. Each school has different priorities, depending on the needs of its students, but they are all linked back to the trust's core strategy. Once we've established teaching and learning priorities within each school, we can create a review of progress towards these objectives."

The trust has developed six different standards that are aligned with the teaching career journey and are linked to the National Teachers' Standards. Staff review against the relevant standard set and upload comments and evidence to BlueSky. Alongside ongoing conversations with line managers, this allows staff to identify areas for training and development. The trust has a detailed professional development programme which provides targeted CPD for all teachers and ESS. All staff that work directly with children are entitled to 100 hours of CPD each year, and are allocated dedicated time across the year to participate in trust-run seminars, online training or their own research. CPD and training activities are assigned, booked and documented through the BlueSky CPD module, creating an ongoing record of CPD activity for every member of staff.

"BlueSky is so helpful for our CPD programme," says Deb. "It allows us to drive the programme but it also provides a resource bank for all our previous training, where we can link all research, handouts and online training that everyone can access. This is particularly useful for ECTs and trainee teachers."

“BlueSky's Customer Support Team have been amazing with their help to customise the platform. That's the main thing that keeps getting better about BlueSky; it fits in with us, rather than us having to fit in with a standard process.”

Deb Poole, Director of Staff Development

An ongoing process of development

Quality assurance practices are managed through BlueSky Education, with bespoke proformas used to record observations or learning walk feedback directly into the platform where line managers can also make recommendations for training and assign the relevant CPD.

Education Support Staff are entitled to a similar level of feedback and development, but the trust ensures that they are evaluated against relevant criteria. BlueSky Education allows the trust to have a differentiated view for ESS staff so that they are only assigned the relevant PMR criteria, quality assurance processes and CPD resources.

BlueSky has been readily adopted by staff who found the new system more user friendly and intuitive, and many have appreciated newer features that encourage continuous work towards development priorities, such as the Timeline view.

"Staff have responded positively to the Timeline because they can easily add evidence and see progress on an ongoing basis," says Deb. "The information is clear and in one place, so it's more effective for everyone involved."

Bespoke features support trust priorities

As Director of Staff Development, the ability to build bespoke proformas for reviews and quality assurance practices, as well as customising the terminology used in the platform, has helped Deb to ensure everyone is using the system in the same way across the trust: "The fact that you can use your own terminology and that is then consistent across the trust, means everyone's got the same entitlement, everyone's getting the same experience. BlueSky gives us parity, clarity and consistency for all staff."

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Deb uses BlueSky's reporting functions to review how the trust's priorities are being achieved across the four institutions: "I can now easily run reports at a trust level to review what is being done within each school to meet the trust priority of quality of education, as well as looking at progress on the priorities of each individual school. I can feedback to our CEO (Carl Ward, ASCL Past President) and trustees on how they are doing and identify any areas that need to be addressed."

"We genuinely could not run the same process without all of the facilities and customisation that BlueSky Education allows."

What's next?

Deb wants to ensure that all staff across City Learning Trust are consistently recording all of their CPD activity in BlueSky Education, as this helps build up the best picture of progress towards improvement priorities.

"BlueSky makes it so simple and easy to make a note and add evidence to the timeline so that it links back to their PMR objectives, and it demonstrates the best performance and practice that is being carried out in each of our schools. Now they know that I am presenting the evidence in BlueSky to our trustees every half term, they make sure that it is done and we know that it represents the best version of us."

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