

Innovation in Safeguarding

All organisations need to conduct interviews as part of their recruitment process. However 'getting the right person for the job' is especially important for schools. Following legislation and inquiries - such as the Bichard Inquiry after the murders of two children in Soham - the government has created a Safeguarding Agenda, which provides recommendations aimed at protecting the safety and welfare of children.

This has implications for the interview process because, now, head teachers and governors not only have to ensure that prospective teachers have the requisite qualifications and experience, they also have to probe and check each candidate's background, ensuring individual attitudes and behaviours support children's safety.

Buckinghamshire County Council has responded to this challenge by creating a training workshop to help head teachers and governors, of primary and secondary schools throughout the county, to interview and recruit new teachers and volunteers, in line with the Safeguarding Agenda.

Inspiring approach

The workshop, co-developed by drama-based training specialist Steps, highlights a best practice approach to recruitment in schools and gives the delegates an opportunity to practise their interview skills in live role plays, with professional actors posing as job candidates.

"Schools need rigorous and robust recruitment methods, to verify as far as they can that people are fit to work with children," said Jenny O'Neill, Senior HR Officer at Buckinghamshire County Council. "Many head teachers and governors have never been trained in how to conduct interviews. We developed the content for this workshop and Steps helped us to package it in an interesting and fun way, to make it attractive to the target audience."

Called *Safe Recruitment and Selection in Schools*, the workshop has run eight times, with around 20 head teachers and governors attending each session. It emphasises the importance of the Safeguarding Agenda and it highlights all aspects of the recruitment process, including planning and conducting interviews, shortlisting and taking up references.

"We encourage head teachers and governors to cross examine candidates by asking probing questions and to pursue any aspect of the candidate's application that isn't clear," said Jenny O'Neill. "This complements other national online training initiatives but the real value of our course is that it helps to practice skills in a realistic setting. It gives people the opportunity to look candidates in the eye and to ask sensitive questions such as whether they've ever had an allegation made against them."

In the workshop, the actor-facilitators from Steps run a 30-minute interactive drama, showing a head teacher and department head discussing two interviews they have just completed. The drama emphasises the value of having a structured approach to interviews, with clear criteria for success, and it illustrates the need for interviewers to ask open questions and to drill down into any area of a person's application that they don't feel comfortable with, challenging issues such as vague language or gaps in employment.

"The Steps team get the audience to contribute ideas and suggestions," said Jenny O'Neill. "They draw out lessons and best practice, using the experience of the audience members. This is a much more effective learning experience than having someone stand at the front and give a lecture."



The Council's senior HR officers provide tips and guidelines on reviewing application forms against job descriptions, specifying the person required, planning questions and running a structured interview.

Live action

Steps then run a live simulation to enable the delegates to put the learning into practice. The delegates are split into four groups and they review applications from three candidates who are applying for a job as a primary school teacher. The delegates then conduct a 15-minute panel interview with each of the candidates.

“The Steps actors are very well-briefed and they create realistic candidates, each of whom has pluses and minuses,” said Jenny O’Neill. “The aim is to allow the delegates to practise asking non-technical questions on issues such as team working, planning, their motivations for wanting to work with children and attitudes towards child protection. The delegates have to use their interview skills to get the whole story from each character.”

At the end of the simulation, the delegates give each other feedback and they also receive feedback from the members of the Steps team who play the candidates.

Benefit

“The delegates gain an opportunity to practise and reflect on their interviewing skills in a safe environment,” said Jenny O’Neill. “By conducting more robust interviews, schools can address Safeguarding issues and ensure they make even better choices in recruitment that will raise the standard of education.”

The Council now plans to apply this training approach to help meet other recruitment needs, such as for care workers in homes for elderly people.

“This style of training could be just as relevant to help those who interview and recruit workers who look after the welfare of vulnerable adults,” said Jenny O’Neill. “I’m sure that other councils and public organisations that interview for people who work with children or vulnerable adults would benefit from this approach.”