

TOOLKIT FOR IMPLEMENTING MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING FOCUS GROUPS

All the Structures, Templates, and Questions Needed to Develop Your Own Learner Voice Focus Group for Identifying the Mental Health and Wellbeing Needs of Apprentices in the Workplace

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1. Introduction

In today's fast-paced and demanding work environments, mental well-being has emerged as a critical component of success and sustainability in professional development programmes, particularly apprenticeships. Apprentices, who often balance the pressures of learning new skills with the demands of their roles, can face unique challenges that impact their mental health. Recognising and addressing these challenges is essential for fostering a supportive and productive apprenticeship experience.

This toolkit is designed to guide you through the process of conducting focus groups aimed at understanding and improving the mental well-being of apprentices in the healthcare sector (easily adapted for other sectors). By gathering insights directly from apprentices themselves—whether current, former, or those who did not complete their programmes—we aim to identify key factors that influence mental health and develop effective interventions to support apprentices throughout their journey.

The focus groups will serve as a platform for apprentices to share their experiences, challenges, and suggestions in a confidential and respectful setting. The insights gained will be invaluable in shaping strategies that not only enhance the well-being of apprentices but also contribute to higher completion rates and a more resilient workforce.

By utilising this toolkit, you are taking a proactive step towards building a healthier, more supportive work environment that prioritises the mental well-being of apprentices. Together, we can create a culture of care and understanding that empowers apprentices to thrive both personally and professionally. As a provider increasing retention and achievement rates is both a positive for programme viability, your staff's own wellbeing and quality assurance audits i.e. Ofsted.

2. Focus group planning

To ensure the focus groups run smoothly and effectively, it is essential to follow a structured approach. This section provides a step-by-step guide to planning and executing successful focus groups on mental well-being for apprentices.

Recruitment:

- Identify and invite participants from your target groups, including current apprentices, those who have completed their apprenticeships, and those who did not complete. Our own project aimed at learners on level 2 and 3 clinical apprenticeship programmes that enables us to identify common themes based on apprentice in similar areas of work and experiences. However the audience can be any Programme, level or from any sector
- Ensure a diverse mix of participants to capture a wide range of experiences and perspectives. Consider factors such as age, gender, role, and stage in the apprenticeship journey.

Communicate the purpose and benefits of the focus group to potential participants to encourage engagement and participation. See **ANNEX 1. Apprenticeships - Invite to mental wellbeing focus groups project.**

You should also collate informed consent form as a part of the invite and as part of the joining instruction to enable you to record and collate information on responses from individuals as part of the focus groups. See **ANNEX 3. Informed consent doc** as an example of one you can use.

Scheduling:

- Schedule multiple sessions to accommodate different work schedules and ensure maximum participation. Consider offering sessions at different times of the day or on different days of the week.
- Allow sufficient time between sessions for data analysis and reflection on any immediate insights.

Facilitator Selection:

- Choose a neutral facilitator who can create a safe and open environment for discussion. The facilitator should be skilled in managing group dynamics and ensuring that all voices are heard.
- The facilitator should preferably be either safeguarding trained and / or trained in Mental health or wellbeing. For our own focus groups, we used a former mental health nurse with a wealth of experience including a DSL and mental health first aid trained. The facilitator was also one of our current Skills Development coaches with an excellent understanding of apprenticeship delivery in the health sector.
- Provide the facilitator with a briefing on the goals and structure of the focus group to ensure alignment with the objectives. We worked in partnership with employers (NHS Trusts in our instance) to agree the question structure. But also enabled our facilitators to adapt them to meet the audience (safeguarding need) and volume – some workshops had just 1 person, others had 10.

ANNEX 2: Focus Groups Structure and Questions

Data Collection:

- Take detailed notes during the sessions to capture key points and themes. Consider using audio recordings (with participant consent) to ensure accuracy, followed by transcription.
- Anonymise transcripts by replacing participant names and workplace references with generic identifiers (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2) to maintain confidentiality.
- Ensure data security by storing transcripts and notes in a secure, password-protected location.

Example: We recorded the session and added transcripts on. We then deleted the video recording but kept the transcripts. Replacing the participants names in the transcripts and all references to where they worked with generic Participant, participant 2 names

Creating a Safe Environment:

- Establish ground rules at the beginning of each session to promote a respectful and confidential atmosphere. Emphasise the importance of listening and allowing one person to speak at a time.
- Assure participants that their contributions will remain confidential and will be used solely for the purpose of improving mental well-being support systems.
- Ensure that the consent form, **ANNEX 3. Informed consent doc**, has been completed by each participant and that all staff who are involved in the project are aware of the consent forms content, so can also abide by this.

3. Analysis:

Analysis is a crucial component of your project for several reasons, and it plays a significant role in ensuring the success and impact of your focus groups on mental well-being for apprentices. Here's why analysis is essential and the expected impact it can have:

Types of Analysis that can be used as part of focus groups:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Begin by reviewing the transcripts and notes to identify recurring themes, patterns, and unique insights. Group similar responses together to form overarching themes that reflect the experiences and suggestions of participants.
- **Cross-Group Comparison:** Compare findings across different focus groups to identify consistent patterns as well as any unique perspectives that may arise from specific groups. This comparison can highlight common challenges and potential areas for intervention.
- **Quantitative Support:** If applicable, complement qualitative findings with any quantitative data collected during the focus groups (e.g., survey responses, demographic information) to provide a more holistic view of the issues.

Reporting:

- **Comprehensive Report:** Compile a detailed report that summarises the key findings from the focus groups. Include an executive summary, methodology, thematic analysis, and recommendations for action.
- **Visual Aids:** Use visual aids such as charts, graphs, and infographics to effectively communicate the data and make the report more engaging and accessible to stakeholders.
- **Anonymity Assurance:** Ensure that the report maintains participant confidentiality by using generic identifiers and avoiding any personal or identifiable information.

Example: For our project analysis, we used a thematic study. This comprised using the transcripts and breaking them down into subsections from each question, which we were then able to analyse as key themes and emerging trends. This, in turn, allowed our employer partners to see where there was a need to

ensure activity was embedded into their own practices, i.e., communicating where support is available, building on that support, and also helping inform us of key messages, terms, and content for our well-being workshops."

4. Expected Impact

The analysis of focus group data is not just an academic exercise; it serves as a foundation for meaningful change within apprenticeship programmes. By translating participant feedback into actionable insights, the project aims to create a ripple effect that enhances the mental well-being of apprentices and contributes to the overall success of both individuals and organisations including the provider. The following are the key impacts expected from the focus groups and in turn analysis.

Improved Mental Well-Being Support:

- The insights gained from the analysis can lead to the development of targeted interventions and strategies that better support apprentices' mental well-being, addressing specific challenges they face working in partnership with their employer and their own mental wellbeing services / referral mechanisms including occupational health referrals.

Higher Apprenticeship Completion Rates:

- By addressing mental health challenges effectively, the project aims to reduce apprenticeship discontinuation rates. Improved support systems can help apprentices overcome barriers to completion, leading to higher success rates, a reduction in Breaks in learning – that in their own right reduces need to repeat learning.

Enhanced Organisational Resilience:

- Organisations that prioritise mental well-being are likely to cultivate a more resilient workforce. Apprentices who feel supported are more likely to be engaged, productive, and committed to their roles. This is true for the provider as well that has been show through this project.

Example: *"Through this project, we implemented a mental health strategy for learners that has had a positive effect on our own staff's understanding of mental health issues of learners and their coworkers. It has fostered a more communicative environment for all, which has grown and supported our inclusive ethos."*

Informed Policy and Strategy Development:

- The findings from the analysis can inform broader policy and strategy development within the organisation and potentially influence industry-wide practices regarding apprentice support. See Mental Health Strategy template

in wider toolkit.

Strengthened Stakeholder Relationships:

- Demonstrating a commitment to understanding and improving apprentices' mental well-being can strengthen relationships with stakeholders, including apprentices, employers, and mental health professionals. See **Getting to know you** – questions to ask your employers regarding mental wellbeing templates and toolkit.

ANNEX 1. Apprenticeships - Invite to mental wellbeing focus groups project.

(This can be adapted easily to be specific for the sector of your choice)

Dear all,

I hope you are all well. We are excited to share details about an important project we are undertaking to enhance the safeguarding and mental well-being support of our apprentices. As part of this initiative, we are conducting focus groups to gather valuable insights and feedback from our key stakeholders, including current and former apprentices across our employer base.

We have been working with a number of NHS Trusts to get their views and insight on this subject as part of this project and as such are now looking for persons to attend our focus groups to get your thoughts and opinions on this subject.

Project Overview

Our project aims to address the mental health challenges faced by apprentices in the healthcare sector, particularly in light of the increased pressures post-pandemic. We are focused on developing a comprehensive support system for apprentices at critical stages: pre-enrolment, during the apprenticeship, and post-apprenticeship. We are trying to answer the following through this project: "How can interventions, strategies, and techniques be effectively implemented to support learners with mental health issues in the healthcare sector to improve apprenticeship completion rates?"

Why This Matters

Mental health challenges are a leading cause of apprenticeship discontinuation in the healthcare sector. By intervening effectively, we aim to reduce the attrition rate due to mental health challenges, thereby supporting the NHS's long-term goal of building a resilient and capable workforce. This project is a shared commitment to our learners' well-being and professional success, reflecting our collective vision for a healthier, more supportive work environment in healthcare.

The focus groups will not discuss any personal circumstances and will be fully confidential. We will be focusing solely on experiences and your thoughts on what went well and what you would have liked to have in place.

We invite you to attend one of the below sessions:

- **Add option of dates and times.**

The sessions will be conducted via MS Teams.

Each session will last no longer than an hour.

If you would like to attend one of these and have sought permission from your line manager please email myself, **EMAIL ADDRESS** with which session you would like to attend and joining instructions will be sent to you.

ANNEX 2: Focus Groups Structure and Questions

Focus Group Structure and Questions

1. Introduction (10 minutes)

Welcome and Purpose: Briefly explain the purpose of the focus group and how the information will be used.

Ground Rules: Establish ground rules for the discussion (e.g., confidentiality, respect, one person speaking at a time).

Introductions: Have participants introduce themselves (name, role, current status with the apprenticeship program).

2. Warm-Up Questions (10 minutes)

Icebreaker: Start with a light question to make participants comfortable.

Example: *"Can you share one positive experience you had during your apprenticeship?"*

3. Mental Well-Being During Apprenticeship (30 minutes)

Current State of Mental Well-Being:

"Can you describe your overall mental well-being during your apprenticeship?"

"What were the main factors that influenced your mental well-being during this period?"

Specific Challenges:

"Did you experience any specific mental well-being challenges during your apprenticeship? If so, can you describe them?"

"How did these challenges affect your ability to complete your apprenticeship?"

Support Systems:

"What kind of mental well-being support/ resources was available to you during your apprenticeship?"

"Did you feel that the support provided was adequate? Why or why not?"

Workplace Environment:

"How did your working environment impact your mental well-being?"

"Were there particular aspects of your job or workplace that contributed to stress or anxiety?"

4. Impact of Apprenticeship on Mental Well-Being (20 minutes)

Positive Impacts:

"Can you share any positive impacts the apprenticeship had on your mental well-being?"

"Were there any aspects of the apprenticeship that helped you manage stress or improve your mental well-being?"

Negative Impacts:

"Were there any negative impacts on your mental well-being as a result of the apprenticeship?"

"How did these negative impacts manifest in your daily life and work performance?"

5. Suggestions for Improvement (30 minutes)

Programme Structure:

"What changes to the apprenticeship programme do you think could have helped improve your mental well-being?"

"Are there specific interventions or support systems that you believe should be included in the programme?"

Workplace Adjustments:

"What changes in the workplace environment would have helped mitigate mental well-being issues?"

"How could your employers have better supported your mental well-being during the apprenticeship?"

Feedback on Existing Interventions:

"Were there any interventions or support mechanisms that you found particularly helpful or unhelpful?"

Functional Skills

"How has functional skills impacted your mental wellbeing"

6. Closing (10 minutes)

Summary: Summarise the key points discussed during the focus group.

Final Thoughts: Ask participants if they have any final thoughts or additional comments.

Thank You: Thank the participants for their time and contributions.

ANNEX 3. Informed consent document

CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Enhancing Mental Well-being in Apprenticeships

Name of Researcher/Project Lead: [Insert Name]

Purpose of the Project:

This project aims to address the mental health challenges faced by apprentices in the **NAME OF SECTOR** sector. We are focused on developing a comprehensive support system for apprentices at critical stages: pre-enrolment, during the apprenticeship, and post-apprenticeship. Your participation in this focus group will help us gather insights to improve mental well-being support and reduce apprenticeship discontinuation rates.

Please initial the boxes:

1. ☐ I confirm that I have read and understand the purpose of the project as outlined above and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, prior to data analysis.
3. ☐ I understand that my data will be stored securely and confidentially and that I will not be identifiable in any report or publication.
4. ☐ I understand that the researcher may wish to publish this study and any results found, for which I give my permission.
5. ☐ I agree for the focus group session to be recorded either via audio or transcribed and for the data to be used solely for the purpose of this study.
6. ☐ I understand that if any safeguarding issues are raised during the focus group, the information may not be kept fully confidential and may be shared with relevant parties.
7. ☐ I understand that the focus group will not discuss any personal circumstances and will focus solely on experiences and suggestions for improving mental well-being support for apprentices.

Participant Name: _____

Participant Signature: _____

Date: _____

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