



include
YOUTH



Evidence to the Committee for Employment and Learning:

The Aiming Higher Project

“A mentor is a second brain, someone who supports you and provides knowledge and advice.” – young person

“This is a unique programme for Young People that gives them a hand up rather than a hand-out.”- mentor

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Business in The Community NI (BITCNI)

Business in the Community is a membership organisation for companies that are committed to doing business responsibly and working together on societal issues where they can make a real difference. We help businesses to impact positively on the Planet, their People and the Places/Communities in which they operate.

Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. The organisation works directly with young people to support them to be engaged with policy decision-making processes and to improve their employability.

Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to brief you on our partnership – Aiming Higher – a project where young people in care are connected to and mentored by people from business.

The presentation itself is very much an overview and will include highlighting the origins of the project, its drivers, benefits and then the specific recommendations we have based on our learning. We hope to discuss all of this, in particular the learning and recommendations, in more detail during the Q&A afterwards.

Before we give you an overview of the Aiming Higher programme itself, we thought it would be useful to locate it in the wider context of youth unemployment, young people who are NEET and efforts across the board to address these serious problems.

Broader context and challenges for young people in care and education, training and employment

The wider social and economic context within which this project is being delivered is undoubtedly a challenging one - and none more so than for young people in and leaving care. Indeed given the current economic climate, young people in care (who are vulnerable and disadvantaged in any case) face even more difficulty entering and sustaining ETE than their peers in the 'general population'.

Figures demonstrate persisting high levels of youth unemployment and numbers of young people who are 'NEET', despite positive indicators in relation to overall unemployment levels and economic recovery; latest figures indicate that over one in five young people are unemployed while 16.8% are classified as being 'NEET'.

Young people in Northern Ireland become looked after by the state by virtue of their life circumstances through no fault of their own. There are a wide variety of reasons why young people are taken into care, the primary reason being for their own protection in situations of neglect, abuse or violence.

Despite the concerted efforts being made by OFMDFM, DHSSPS and DEL, among other government departments, the outcomes being achieved by young people in and leaving care still compare extremely unfavourably with their peers in the general population. Latest statistics¹ show that only 18% of these young people obtain 5GCSEs or higher, compared to 77% of general school leavers. One in three young people left care with no qualifications, compared to 2% of the general population, and roughly a third of all 16-19 year olds in/leaving care were unemployed or not in education/training (NEET).

These statistics give an indication of the levels of inequality and disadvantage experienced by young people in and leaving care (even without a difficult economic climate), who are trying to overcome added barriers in order to successfully access and sustain education, training and employment (ETE).

Introduction to the Aiming Higher Project

The Aiming Higher programme is a joint employability programme between Include Youth and Business in the Community NI, with BITCNI the lead partner. The project is targeted at young people leaving care aged 16 to 21 years and aims to inspire them to take up employment, education or training opportunities by enhancing their exposure to and engagement with employers.

Programme activity includes one to one support through access to a business volunteer mentor as well as group focused activities, visiting workplaces and engaging in employability focused workshops with input from employers.

The targeted outcomes established for the programme are:

- Work with a minimum 60 young people who are NEET across three years
- 70% move into Full time ETE within 6 months of a phase finishing
- Young people become more aware of ETE opportunities
- Young people have enhanced business networks through a positive work experience
- Enhancement of skills & improvement in young people's self-esteem & confidence through the mentoring process

Aiming Higher is delivered as a one day per week initiative over 5 months and was **purposely designed to be niche, complementing and interlinking with other**

¹ http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/statistics/ni_care_leavers_aged_16-18_2012_13_.pdf

public/voluntary sector programmes in existence. It was the intention that young people on other programmes could attend Aiming Higher in tandem with their other programme commitments, so as to benefit from the unique offering available and to assist with retention rates if young people struggled to attend elsewhere.

Need for the project

The rationale for the project was established via two clear and logical steps:

- 1) BiTCNI had just completed a pilot mentoring programme with young people from one of its member organisations, the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Evaluation deemed it a success but with potential to become improved and funded over a longer period.
- 2) Joint research with stakeholders - this both reiterated and built upon the theory that 'volunteer mentors' from a business background could create excellent personal development and employment opportunities for young people in care. Young people consulted indicated that 'role models' and business mentors were top of their 'wish lists' due to the perceptions they had about the world of work, while the majority of employers consulted felt that they would be able to offer a guaranteed interview to project participants if a suitable job became available.

Based on this, BiTCNI and Include Youth successfully applied to the BIG Lottery Fund NI in 2011 for a **project that was designed to address a gap in service provision.**

It is important to note that at this time, there was considerably less local (Education and training) provision than today as funding streams such as the Collaboration and Innovation Fund (CIF) were not yet in existence.

Alignment with key government priorities and strategies

This project intended to help reduce the numbers of young people in and leaving care who are unemployed, economically inactive or otherwise NEET, through the development of a partnership between the business and the community and voluntary sectors. In this regard it aligns with and complements a number of key government priorities, including the Programme for Government, the NI Economic Strategy, the Economic Inactivity Strategy, the Skills Strategy and Delivering Social Change.

The NI Executive's Pathways to Success Strategy, the overarching strategy to address the issue of young people who are NEET recognises young people in or leaving care as amongst those most at risk of becoming or remaining NEET and includes a number of targeted actions to address this.

The critical role that employers and the business sector have to play in delivering on the overall strategy is highlighted:

“Employers will have an important role in supporting and engaging with the community, voluntary and statutory sectors and in providing opportunities and support for young people of all ages and abilities and the Department for Employment and Learning will work in conjunction with Business in the Community to consider what more could be done to support the access of young people with particularly difficult problems, to the labour market”²

The recently completed joint DEL DE Review of the Careers Service underscored the importance of exposure to the world of work and strong partnerships with employers and greater exposure of young people to the world of work. One of its five key recommendations focused on the need for more meaningful work placements for young people. It specifically recommended that young people be supported to develop meaningful CVs as well as the development of an employer engagement strategy.

Indeed as part of their time on the project young people obtain exactly this - the Aiming Higher project aligns with this recommendation.

Outcomes and benefits

Direct benefits for young people

4 out of every 5 of young people have moved into Education training or employment as a result of participation in the Aiming Higher project.

- 100% of young people’s circumstances are ‘assessed’ using a bespoke assessment tool to identify barriers preventing them from entering and sustaining ETE
- 80% of young people matched with a business mentor, 100% are mentored by project staff
- Establishment of a ‘Looked after Children’ employers forum – creating work experience and employment opportunities specifically for young people in care
- 70% of young people participate in at least one work experience opportunity
- Learning groups – 100% of young people share their positive/negative experiences with employers and the project team in order to improve opportunities
- Graduation ceremonies held in Parliament Buildings – MLA present as keynote speaker and young people speaking about their experiences

² NI Executive (2012) Pathways to Success: Preventing Exclusion and Promoting Participation of Young People paragraph, paragraph 3.21

- Young people from previous phases are now coming back as role models for current participants

Benefits for employers

- Employers have connected with young people and inspired potential employees of the future
- Employees have developed their knowledge and skills on a personal and professional level
- Employers have been able to network whilst meeting their corporate social responsibilities

“Being a mentor on the Aiming Higher programme has been challenging me as an individual, this was a new experience but I have found the experience really rewarding.”

“I found attending the weekly activities and sessions with the Young People very insightful and enjoyable. Coming from a professional work environment I found this experience very refreshing”

Building effective partnerships

As two very diverse organisations, the partnership between Include Youth and Business in the Community has been highly complementary; bringing different expertise to the programme which has enabled clearly defined roles and responsibilities in the implementation of Aiming Higher.

BITC has brought to the partnership access to employer networks which has enabled effective employer engagement in the programme. This was essential in the recruiting of volunteer mentors, providing opportunities for work visits and the inclusion of employers as guest speakers and champions, for example.

Include Youth has brought access to young people leaving care in Belfast, and experience working with young people through a youth work based approach which has influenced the delivery of a flexible and diverse programme with a focus very much on the needs of the young people. Include Youth was also able to use its experience in the training of mentors supporting young people from a care background, recruited by BiTCNI.

Project staff are based within the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust offices in order to maximise the potential of strong relationships with both social work staff and young people. This project is an example of public, private and third sectors working effectively together in partnership.

Provides value for money

Based on independent assessment of the wider social and economic value of this project, the estimated Social Return on Investment (SROI) for Aiming Higher is that for every £1 spent, £5 pounds are saved elsewhere in the public service system.

Learning points

A positive relationship with a young person based is the key to success.

The positive relationship is most often established through a youth work approach. This is consistent with the growing international consensus exists around the contribution youth work makes to achieving positive employment related outcomes for young people. This is based on a strong evidence base, including a recent major report published by the European Commission which provided extensive evidence of the role of youth work in delivering employability outcomes throughout member states. ¹ Research conducted in the Republic of Ireland¹ and by the Youth Service Sectoral Partners Group in Northern Ireland¹ echo those findings.

Mentoring works

- The voluntary nature of the relationship, based on a youth work approach is central to its success. Consultation with young people found that a really important aspect for them was that the mentor was ‘not a professional and not getting paid’ as significant.
- Commitment of mentors to the young people was key: one mentor reported that despite the young person “*acting up*” she still stayed engaged and this was a turning point in their relationship as the young person recognised how committed the mentor was to staying with, and supporting her.
- Training and support for mentors is a crucial part of the process. Mentors have reported that training was crucial in preparing them for their role with young people with complex needs and challenges. Mentors are trained to OCN Level 2 Mentoring Young People at Risk. All mentors meet with a mentoring supervisor.

Stable personal circumstances are critical for young people to engage effectively

Young people can be dealing with a myriad of issues at any one time. Mental health problems, unsettled accommodation, lack of money or any financial security, trauma, responsibility of being young parents – recognising these difficulties and addressing them through the positive relationship is central to success.

People in positions of influence want to help

Employers, MLAs and other influential people have generously given their time and experience to aid the project and help young people. The major difficulty comes in finding

consistency in levels of commitment due to hectic work schedules - the solution to which is to continue finding buy-in from more people. **The project relies on people of influence encouraging their colleagues and connections to get involved too**, thus spreading the load.

Making a successful transition into employment

In addition to consultation with young people and businesses we drew on existing research evidence which highlights a significant degree of consensus among experts as to the key factors involved and capabilities required by disadvantaged young people to sustain a successful transition into work. Most recently, research carried out by Impetus in 2014 identified the following key themes.

Along with having appropriate level qualifications, 'ready for work' capabilities include:

- Self-aware
- Receptive
- Driven
- self-assured
- Resilient
- Informed

Recommendations

- 1) We recommend the committee gives consideration to formally lending their support to a Care Leavers Mentoring Week. This could fit well as an initiative within national Care Leavers week in October, further helping to raise awareness. BiTCNI and Include Youth are committed to working in partnership with the committee or department of Employment and Learning to achieve this.
- 2) BiTCNI and Include Youth are committed to running an Education, training and employment conference in late 2015 to build on learning and extend good practice – again we would very much welcome the Committee's endorsement and support for such an event.
- 3) This project has provided valuable insights which may assist DEL in its programme development, including in the refreshed Careers Service and ESF provision for young people who are not in education, training or employment.

"I now feel more comfortable within groups and feel able to express my opinions since completing Aiming Higher."

"This is the 3rd phase of Aiming Higher I have returned as a mentor. Once you get an involved with a programme like Aiming Higher you're hooked."

Organisations that have assisted the project so far:

