

PRD project – case study

Building effective practice in partnership working to support young adults (18- 24) to progress to employment, including apprenticeships



Project title - ***Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) Sector organisations supporting 18 – 24 year olds with progression to apprenticeships and employment***

Worth reading if you are interested in:

- Improving your techniques for developing partnerships with employers to support young people's progression.

Contact information

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Name of Peer Review and Development (PRD) group: VOLA Learning Consortium

Participating organisation(s): Greenbank Project, Riverside LEC (Priority Management), Sefton CVS (Lead for VOLA)

What the PRD group set out to do and why

The review group comprised members of the VOLA learning consortium, a consortium of Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) Sector organisations in Merseyside. The project was coordinated and facilitated by the VOLA management team.

The group set out to review each others' approaches to developing links with employers in order to support the progression of young people into employment.

The partners work with disengaged young people, between them offering a broad curriculum including pre-apprenticeships, foundation learning, Apprenticeships, NEET programmes (aimed at 16 - 24 year olds) and employment programmes for 18-25 year olds. One has particular specialism in working with young people with disabilities, another with long term unemployed people. In general all partners work with some of the hardest to reach young people.

The partners have very well established partnerships with IAG and referral agencies e.g. JC+, Connexions. They have worked with Next Step for a number of years (now National Careers Service) and have been able to embed their contract delivery within core service delivery. They capitalise on links with Chambers of Commerce, and are all members of Liverpool Provider Network who work together to ensure the educational and vocational offer is marketed efficiently to jobseekers. They regularly participate in provider/employer fairs e.g. Your Future, Your Choice held recently in Liverpool, and also ensure learners have access to advice agencies to ensure people have the best welfare, debt and housing advice to enable them to work towards sustainable employment.

In general, initiating, developing and utilising such partnerships is one strength of the VCF sector.

Partners in the project have a number of employer engagement strategies but identified a need to improve staff skills in engaging employers both as work placement providers and as potential employers, particularly of apprentices. They wanted a focus on the preparation before you meet the employer, on what you want from a meeting and flexible approach in terms of what you can offer them i.e. on effective ways to approach employers and how to 'sell' them the idea and benefits of supporting the progression of disengaged young people.

VOLA is a consortium of VCF sector organisations delivering learning, training and employment services and as such is in a good position to disseminate findings of the project widely across the voluntary sector in Merseyside and beyond.

Another aim of the project was to continue the awareness raising work Vola had initiated with VCF sector employers around the growing importance of apprenticeships. Prior to this project's approval, VOLA had in February led an event targeted at VCF Sector employers to disseminate information about apprenticeship programmes. The aim of the event was ultimately to give VCF employers information that might lead to them taking on an apprentice. Key speakers were National Apprenticeship Service, Skills Third Sector and FairTrain.

Many government initiatives, e.g. the Apprentice Grant for Employers, DWP incentives for employers, had been very recently announced at the time of the event and there was some confusion among key speakers about the guidance.

We used this project to clarify information and to extend the work disseminating information about apprenticeships to VCF Sector organisations who, as employers, have the potential to support the government's agenda.

What has been achieved so far

Staff from the organisations reviewed each other's approaches to engaging employers.

The review was conducted through an extended working meeting with invited speakers: JC+ presented information about incentives for employers, in particular in relation to taking on apprentices, and the work placement aspect of the Work Programme. Liverpool Chamber of Commerce were due to explain local incentives and how the Chamber could support organisations in engaging employers but were unfortunately unable to attend on the day. A specialist explained sales techniques.

The participants then went on to review approaches to recruiting employers to support young people, in the light of these inputs. The focus was on planning strategies to 'sell' the idea to employers. As part of this analysis, each organisation team devised a summary of the Features, Advantages and Benefits (FAB) of their own organisation's offer to employers, focussing on the level and nature of provider support to employers, and on the potential advantages to employers of capitalising on opportunities for short or long term, supported involvement of young people in their workplaces.

The notes produced at this meeting formed a basis for the development of a summary of top tips for working with employers which in turn formed the basis of a guidance leaflet to be distributed among the partners and the wider sector.

Another project strand trawled the internet for useful advice about working with employers. Most guides we found are centrally concerned with providers developing good processes for capitalising on and supporting placements once arranged (e.g. assuring learners' safety, incorporating functional skills, guidance for workplace mentors); there was very little guidance about first attracting employers to the idea of supporting young people, which confirmed the value of the review and development work described above. The partners in this project already have advanced systems in relation to support on placement / in apprenticeships; however links to the most relevant of this guidance were included in the leaflet for wider dissemination.

One partner in the project has engaged employers, through their social responsibility policies, to support a project supporting unemployed adults. They have piloted working with employers to staff 'mock interviews' with clients, to describe employers' priorities when recruiting, and to contribute presentations that support the development of learners' work place behaviours. The mock interviews were videoed: clients benefit hugely from feedback from the employer 'interviewers', as well as from 1-1s with mentors in which they are able to review their performance through the video. The impact of this work has been shown in a higher rate of employment for participants.

This work was presented to project partners and the wider consortium membership through a VOLA practitioner-focussed workshop.

As follow up to VOLA's February apprenticeship event, research was undertaken to answer the questions that speakers had been unable to answer at the event. A Q&A sheet was agreed with NAS and the other speakers, and disseminated to Vola membership, and to all event participants, and posted on our web-site at

http://www.volamerseyside.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=313:apprenticeships-update-may-2012&catid=60:general-news&Itemid=88

Project impact

Through the peer review, staff gleaned an understanding of each other's service offer and approach to delivery. They also shared understanding of the apprenticeship model and how this can impact on employers and jobseekers. Partners developed an understanding of each other's organisations that developed into a willingness to support each other in the future and to share contacts e.g. where an employer offers an apprenticeship in childcare to one organisation they may also be able to offer a business admin-type work placement to the other.

The 'Ten Top Tips for engaging employers' guide is a useful resource which fills a gap in existing guidance, and summarises the learning in each of the project partners. Dissemination will contribute to the capacity of the wider membership to support development of employability skills among their learners and service users.

A further impact of the project is greater understanding among the VOLA membership and wider VCF sector about ways they as employers can engage with the governments' agenda on increasing access to apprenticeships.

What still needs to be done

- The Ten Top Tips guide has been made available on the Vola web-site, but needs focussed dissemination to ensure it is and fully utilised and made available to practitioners.
- There is scope for further development of employer partnerships. Learners would benefit from partnerships seeking solutions to:
 - Employer 'fatigue' – being approached by many organisations with requests for learner support can lead to employer frustration, confusion and disengagement. To explore this would need much broader development, to involve a wider range of providers from all areas within learning and skills, and possibly also DWP provision e.g. Work Programme providers.
 - Maximising opportunities from committed employers – e.g. seeking placements in other vocational departments (as indicated under 'impact' above) and 'sharing' contacts in this respect.

Resources to be shared with the sector

Ten Top Tips guide

Key learning points

Partners found value in working with other like minded third sector organisations, who want to come together to assist the greater good. In particular, there are few opportunities for staff from small third sector providers to come together with other organisations, to share best practice and benefit from staff development and this aspect of the project was welcomed.

Partnership working is key to supporting young and older job seekers and also to sustain each of the organisations. While organisations are in some respects competing with each other for the employer ear, there is scope for partnership work between providers in respect of their employer contacts – in particular around capitalising, by sharing contacts with other providers, on the potential for placements/ employment in other vocational fields than the one in which the 'first contact' provider specialises.