

# Working with Life

## Swarthmore Education Centre



### Project synopsis

Focus: To improve employment and life prospects for young disabled people and create a community of employers with a positive view of employing people with learning difficulties and disabilities.

### Findings:

- Individualised programmes of educational preparation courses and work placements change life chances, plans and ambitions.
- Employers show commitment to improving the job prospects of the young disabled but are hampered by the current economic climate and also need guidance and ongoing support.

### Project aims

The project aimed to;

- Build a network of employers sympathetic to creating employment opportunities for young people with learning difficulties and disabilities employment for young people.
- Create an innovative learning programme that would include a mix of academic and experiential learning which would prepare young people for a positive future including the realistic prospect of paid work.
- Raise the expectations and ambitions of young people and their parents/carers so their future can be expected to include independence and employment.
- To bring together a variety of organisations and use an innovative mix of professionals – teachers, employment specialists, employers, to deliver a personalised learning programme for each individual young person.

### Project delivery

The aim of involving a variety of organisations created the problem of managing different expectations and styles of delivery. The project involved a manager and a director from two different organisations and two newly appointed Job Coaches whose role involved negotiating with a variety of organisations. The initial planning meetings aimed to create a committee style for decision making however this resulted in some confusion which then led to establishing the need for final decision making to reside with the project director thus avoiding any misunderstandings. At the beginning of the project the Job Coaches had two bases to work from, however this proved to be difficult and a single base was established.

Evolving a project can be unsettling for people more used to being given inflexible direction. Support meetings were put in place to encourage the positive benefits of experimentation and the learning that comes from both negative and positive results eg the Employer breakfast meeting was planned for twice but, due to very little response, did not take place. We learned

that employers do not have the time for 'extra' commitment unless there is a direct outcome for them, especially in difficult economic times.

In future a project of this nature, designed to promote creativity, would be planned to include frequent formal reporting –thus giving the staff a more defined structure within which to develop creative solutions (rather akin to an excellent lesson plan which gives a structure within which diversions can happen but still has a clear destination).

Key stakeholders included education providers, employers, health and wellbeing providers, referral agencies, parents and others, all of whom were surprisingly willing to participate and take risks, primarily because of their commitment to exploring new ideas and taking chances. There was little risk for most of the stakeholders and parents/carers of the young people often expressed their opinion that they saw this programme as offering real opportunities never available before. Employers had the confidence that their involvement would be fully supported through the work of the Job Coaches.

## **Project outcomes**

- Work by Job Coaches with young people has changed their attitude and that of parents/carers /other professionals to the possibility of work. Previously they wanted to work but had no belief anyone would give them the chance to prove themselves. The attitude of many professionals/employers was to categorise those with learning difficulties and disabilities as unemployable. The young people now want to show what they can do. They understand the importance of good timekeeping, a positive attitude and of having proof of their skills. All the young people in the project have 139a statements and would be 'categorised' as having moderate learning difficulties - many of them also have additional health problems.
- 16 young people received Job Coach support during the project (skills, applications, interviews, job placements, CVs). 10 young people were supported in work placements – some accessed more than one placement in order to extend their skills – 13 placements in all. One of the young people has been working for 18 months, supported by the Job Coaches and by the employer (Seagulls) when finances allow he will be taken on by the firm.
- Employment preparation input has been given by Job Coaches to groups of learners on Swarthmore foundation courses
- 2 groups of young people have developed a business idea and delivered their products at community events – see video
- Creating the employer group- variety of approached tried - face to face always best. Database created of the 83 employers contacted – 12 of these have resulted in active support for the project. 7 employers signed pledge forms, 12 employers offered work placements – some more than once and some long term
- Cooperation with Leeds Mind to use their premises (art café) for training and work experience. Mutual support to work with young people with learning disabilities and Leeds Mind volunteer's .Establishing a training café was frustrated by bureaucracy beyond our control or influence, therefore a craft project was substituted. The Job Coaches, consequently, focussed their efforts on individual planning with young people and establishing appropriate work placements
- Identifying importance of audio/visual resources in marketing and education – Strong image/logo produced to identify project for variety of resources. Power Point presentation created –recognition of employment related added value through educational programmes for use by tutors.
- Participation of project manager in Local Authority 14-25 Learning and Support Partnership LDD development group has led to adoption of the Learning with Life Network as the basis for establishing a Personalised Learning Service to create individual, destination focussed

learning pathways using traditional and non-traditional education suppliers and unit based learning.

- Participation of project manager in LDD employment task group has led to the personalised learning service being written into Leeds LDD Employment Strategy.
- Despite having had at least 11 years of compulsory education and in many cases more there was a general lack of any independence or 'risk taking' skills developed in the young people . Job Coaches used very basic, supported, experiential learning to provide the young people with essential skills – telling the time , independent travelling ,by foot and on public transport, time keeping , using money , social skills and confidence and ability to cope with the unexpected .
- Employer's attitudes are slow to change therefore video CVs are combined with written ones when making applications for employment. Work placements have been created for young people who have never before experienced the work place but the goal of paid work for any of the young people has not yet been achieved. This looks to be , realistically , a long term aim which will result from increased employer awareness and an improvement in the country's economic well being generally.
- Sustainability - Referrals and requests are being made by agencies we don't directly work with – so they are demanding this kind of service and from parents /carers/young people

Igen has contracted for NEET engagement (ESF) and ongoing Foundation Learning 2011-2012. A Service Level Agreement with Job Centre plus has been made and proposal that we establish a 'work club'

### **Sharing of project findings**

Project outcomes are being used to influence strategic planning in the city, challenge funding protocols (SFA and YPLA- where does responsibility lay for funding provision for 19-24 LLDD learners?? ), promote cooperation and partnerships and develop new initiatives in education ,advice and support services and in opportunities for progress to employment.

Videos have been created which give the young people a voice with which to represent and promote themselves – persuasive evidence for innovation.

The project recognised the need to create promotional materials – leaflets, posters – which have a strong identity and this has informed the materials created to promote further provision. Information about the project , about the positive effects of personalised learning and support programmes and the importance of experiential learning have been shared with at local authority planning meetings, Igen information and networking events, internal and collaborative information and training events.

Collaboration is ongoing with the awarding body to develop appropriate accreditation for this approach to preparation for work.