

Petitions committee inquiry – Work based learning provision for vulnerable young people

Purpose

Action for Children - Gweithredu dros Blant is submitting this evidence to support the committee evidence session we are attending on the 28th September. This paper will outline the experiences of vulnerable young people who are living independently, on work based learning programmes.

Background

We are pleased that the petitions committee have taken forward the issues we have raised about work based learning schemes and launched this petition committee inquiry.

Our submission covers the areas that the Committee have agreed as their terms of reference for the inquiry. Our evidence is based on our experience at Action for Children's -Gweithredu dros Blant's project Network Brynmawr, which provides services to care leavers and homeless young people in Blaenau Gwent, in partnership with Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council. The project has been providing this service in Blaenau Gwent for 12 years and has supported around 500 young people, many of whom have received personal support for a substantial time. It is our experience of running this service that enables us to present our evidence to committee.

Our evidence is presented under the headings the committee have outlined in their terms of reference.

The availability and quality of training programmes, and work based placements, particularly suitable placements for vulnerable young people

From our experience, most work based learning schemes do not cater well for vulnerable young people and a significant number of young people are failing.

The vulnerable young people on these training schemes usually have multiple difficulties such as: mental health and behavioural problems, having large gaps in their education, due to poor attendance and leaving school early, negative relationships within their families and with peers and coming from families where they may be the third generation to be unemployed, reliant on benefits, having few or no role models or support. Furthermore, homeless young people often have no support from their families.

We feel that most training providers are ill equipped to support young people with multiple difficulties. The staff who are employed in the centres often lack a social care background and the key skills needed to engage and support these vulnerable young people. Worse still, they sometimes lack empathy with the young people.

The quality of many of the work based learning schemes is poor with young people having little to do and often sent home or finishing early which can have a huge impact on motivation that may already be fragile.

A shortage of suitable work placements results in young people spending many weeks in the training centre, where they lose interest, and, in this unrealistic working environment the behaviour of the young people can and often deteriorate. Work based learning providers appear to have few resources to offer young people who are not found suitable work placements at the end of their initial assessment and training.

Furthermore, we understand that due to the limited number of 'good' work placements, young people who are 'less challenging' receive these placements. This is to prevent the employers from pulling out of the programme.

Case study: M aged 17

The availability of suitable work based placements:

Following a meeting with Careers Wales, M was recommended for a work based learning scheme that would provide him with 30 hours per week of quality training and work placements to meet his needs.

M attended for 12 weeks, was often sent home early and was not sent out on any work placements. There can be about 30 young people in the training centre, doing nothing productive and just hanging around smoking.

When our staff call to question their attendance or advocate for the young people, the provider's attitude is 'they get paid their £50 whether they are here or not'. The training provider is not fulfilling their contract but M's initial enthusiasm and motivation has diminished and he thinks that all work is like this.

Progression for the vulnerable young person building on skills and qualifications gained in the previous placement

Unfortunately even the successful participants on work based learning schemes usually only achieve NVQ level 1 – this is not good enough. We find that the most vulnerable

young people go from one training scheme to another, achieving little and after reaching the age of 18, go onto Job Seekers Allowance.

If a training provider feels the young person has “issues” (motivation, attitude, unpunctual etc.), instead of working on that issue some providers may give them a certificate after 12 weeks and do not give them a further ‘contract’. The young person is then left to move onto another scheme. This certificate is meaningless and will not help them to find future employment and we find that this practice is unacceptable.

Case study: N aged 17

Leaving the work based learning scheme with no qualifications

N commenced a work based learning scheme, which started with several weeks doing key skills in the training centre. The training provider felt that N was lacking in motivation and that his behaviour was poor. So after 12 weeks he was presented with a key skills certificate and told that he would not be offered a contract. N had no choice but to find another training scheme, but with huge waiting lists it is not easy, so he decided to claim Job Seekers Allowance.

Financial support for independently financed young people including training allowances, Education Maintenance Allowances, benefits, and funding for travel costs

Homeless young people on work based learning schemes live in severe poverty- they receive less per week than those on Job Seekers Allowance (JSA) this is due to the following:

- Young people who are economically inactive and go straight onto Job Seekers Allowance/ Income Support receive £51.85 per week as well as passport benefits like free eye tests and social fund grants.
- Young people on a college based NVQ receive £81.85 per week (£51.85 Income Support and EMA of £30).
- But, young people on work based learning receive £45 or £48 per week (£50 training allowance less a contribution to their travel costs which can be £3 or even £5).

We would recommend that training allowances should be supplemented for those young people who live independently of their families so that training pays better than JSA.

As a minimum we believe young people who are homeless or living independently and on work based learning schemes, should always be eligible to receive the additional £1.85 JSA as well as benefits, such as optician services or social fund grants. This is not currently happening in all areas as Job Centres are not consistent when assessing JSA hardship claims.

In addition, young people on work based training and living independently should also receive EMA.

To better describe how this impacts the lives of young people, one young man who gave evidence to the Petitions Committee described how he managed to live independently on just £45 per week by choosing between food and heat; he went without heating for the whole of last winter.

Case study: S aged 18

Financial impact of choosing work based learning

S lived with his Mum, younger brother and mother's partner until the relationship broke down and despite mediation he was unable to return home. S moved into emergency supported lodgings and then on to a better matched supported lodgings. He just managed to maintain his place on a computer and IT NVQ1 despite dealing with the trauma of moving out of his home and change of lodgings.

Further mediation and his family's behaviour meant S's only option was to prepare for independent living. So he moved into TS House, a supported self contained tenancy with staff attached. While living in TS House he lived on a weekly £50 training allowance plus £0.95 income support (paid three monthly) and had access to passport benefits. He caught two buses each morning and evening to get to and from his training placement in Ebbw Vale. He had £5 deducted from the reimbursement of his travel costs, which reduced his income to £45.95 and so lived in severe poverty.

His next training placement for NVQ2 was in Risca and he had to leave home at 7:30 in the morning. To complete S's work-based NVQ2 he needed to continue until he is 19. S moved to his own council tenancy with all of the expenditure of a single householder and was still in receipt of only £45.95 each week. If S was on a course with Coleg Gwent he would be eligible for Income Support plus £30 EMA and would be receiving £80.95 each week. S gave up his training without achieving his NVQ2 and is now awaiting JSA. In receipt of benefits he will be financially better off.

S has aspirations for his tenancy, his lifestyle and his future.

Personal support for vulnerable young people including differences in levels of support for care-leavers

As outlined earlier, many training providers are ill equipped to support young people with multiple difficulties. The staff who are employed in the centres can lack a social care background and key skills to engage and support these vulnerable young people. Worse still, they often lack empathy with the young people.

We feel training providers need to identify and build on the strengths of these vulnerable young people, identify and plan to address weaknesses, be more understanding and provide person centred flexible training provision and support to help them succeed.

Softer skills must be valued and seen as the key to making many of these young people more employable. This would include, supporting young people to develop responsibility for themselves i.e. getting to work on time, responsibility in their workplace, communication and appropriate behaviour in the work place. Promoting the confidence and self esteem of young people also plays a critical part in equipping these young people for employment and adult life more generally.

We would like to see greater provision for homeless young people who are seeking training and not in the care of a local authority. The inequity of provision for these two cohorts of young people who are facing the same problems is stark, as the case study below demonstrates.

Case study: J aged 17

Experience of a young person without care leaver status

J was asked to leave the family home, as was her sister before her. She couldn't move in with her Nan like her sister, there was no room and Nan couldn't manage the relationships between the two girls. J worked hard, with support, to go back home but mother quickly left the area with her partner, leaving no forwarding address.

J tried with support, to manage a flat without the knowledge she needed to be successful. She did not want another 'family' at the time as she was working through anger and hurt after her family had left her 'abandoned'. So J accessed supported lodgings and rented a room in the home of a supportive landlord and landlady. She now lives in a structured environment and there are times to be in each evening and expected ways for her to behave as she lives in a home with others. Despite the sadness she was managing, J accessed training in hairdressing and focused a little more on herself including her appearance.

J receives housing benefit (single room rent) and £50 training allowance. She pays £25 a week to her landlady for gas, water rates and food which she prepares herself. This

leaves her £25 a week for transport to work (costs £21 with only £16 weekly reimbursement), toiletries, clothes, entertainment, haircuts, mobile phone top up. She is now 17 and is worrying about services ending on her 18th birthday. Being 'abandoned' and not wishing to be 'accommodated' in foster care, she feels should not mean services should end when she reaches 18 (section 17, 1989 Children Act).

J understands that supported lodgings gives her a little more disposable income than she will have when she moves into a flat and she's afraid that she will not be able to cope financially in a place of her own. She would like to be able to finish her training, work as a hairdresser and afford her own place.

J's friends include care leavers who are much better off and her heart often sinks as she explains that she continues to feel 'abandoned' by the training department who pay her £1.95p less each week than she would receive if she was on benefits. J is expected to pay the first £5 of her transport costs out of her weekly training allowance, leaving her £7 worse off than if she was on benefits. With no element of benefits in her income she cannot access additional funding like the social fund grant.

J is determined to succeed and would prefer not to live in poverty.

Summary / Recommendations

Action for Children - Gweithredu dros Blant would like the committee to consider the following recommendations:

1. Work based learning should cater better for vulnerable young people and provide person centred flexible training that builds on the young person's strengths and addresses weaknesses.
2. Work based learning schemes should create progression and really move the young people in terms of their knowledge and skills. The schemes should ensure that young people in general achieve at least NVQ 2 and where this is clearly not possible, a comprehensive portfolio is developed evidencing the "soft skills" which have been enhanced by the training.
3. Welsh Government Assembly should take action to stop the endless churning of young people moving from one work based learning scheme to another.
4. We would recommend that training allowances should be supplemented for those young people who live independently so that training pays better rates than JSA. Homeless young people on work based learning schemes should receive £30 EMA per week (non means tested) on top of the training allowance and income support, just like young people studying a college based NVQ.

5. The Welsh Assembly Government should communicate to all providers of personal support to young people, that homeless young people on work based learning can also apply for Income Support which gives them access to additional benefits such as social fund grants when they setting up home.
6. We would like to see increased provision for homeless young people seeking training who are not in the care of a local authority. Homeless young people should receive personal support beyond the age of 18 in every area of Wales where they need it, as stated in Extending Entitlement, even if between the ages of 16 and 18 they declined to be accommodated by the Local Authority.
7. The Welsh Assembly Government should end the financial disincentive for young people who live independently and are in training – as outlined above.