

What Employers Want – 2016/17 Findings

Final Report

August 2017

Published by National Learning and Work Institute (England and Wales)

21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE

Company registration no. 2603322 | Charity registration no. 1002775

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from the delivery of the What Employers Want (WEW) programme in 2016/17, the programme's third year of operation.

Learning and Work Institute (L&W) worked with four partner organisations, with expertise in direct delivery of services to unemployed young people - Barnardo's, Communities First, Drive Forward Foundation, and Sheffield Futures (Talent Match) - to train young people as 'action researchers' to interview and find out what skills and attributes employers want from young people. The project was delivered as part of L&W's role as [UK Coordinator of the European Agenda for Lifelong Learning](#).

Context

Whilst numbers of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) are falling, independent research by L&W to inform the [Youth Jobs Index](#) shows that young people are spending more time NEET than government figures suggest. An average of 1.3 million (17%) 16 to 24 year olds spend 6 months out of education, employment or training, with an additional 700,000 (10%) spending a whole year NEET. These young people are in danger of being left behind and need access to specialist support to enter employment or training and sustain work in the long term.

About the What Employers Want programme 2016/17

The WEW programme provides the resources for practitioners to train and support unemployed young people to carry out face to face interviews with local employers. By bringing unemployed young people and local employers together, the programme supports young people to develop a range of skills, as well as to improve their chances of getting a job and progressing in work.

Key benefits of the programme reported in previous years are that:

- **Young people** get to hear first-hand what skills, qualities and experience are most important to employers when they are recruiting a young person.
- **Employers** gain insights that come from discussing their business planning and recruitment approaches with young people.
- **Practitioner organisations** have another tool they can use to support their service users into employment.

During its first two years of delivery the findings from the programme were used to inform the development of the ['What Employers Want' website](#). The website provides information, advice and activities to support young people to get a job and progress at work based on the feedback from employers taking part in the research. The website also provides full programme materials and guidance for practitioner organisations wanting to deliver their own WEW programme with service users. These resources are provided at no cost.

One of the key strengths of the programme is its flexibility, enabling organisations to adapt it to meet the needs of the young people they work with. In 2016/17, WEW was delivered by organisations working with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, with learning difficulties, young adult carers and care leavers to further test these flexibilities and to explore the replicability of the programme in different contexts.

Findings from the research will be used to validate and update the WEW website and its materials to ensure they are appropriate and straightforward to use for a variety of organisations and contexts. Findings from the programme will also be shared at national impact forums, through a programme of webinars and at a seminar for policy makers from across the UK and Europe.

Partner organisations

The partner organisations involved in the delivery of WEW in 2016/17 included:

- **Carefree** is a Barnardo's project for young carers, including young adult carers, in Leicester and Leicestershire. Carefree delivered their WEW project with ten young adult carers including those already actively involved in projects and others who project staff thought would benefit from involvement.
- **Drive Forward Foundation** is based in London and supports care leavers to develop skills, confidence and motivation for work, education or training. The charity's Youth Engagement team worked with nine young people on their WEW project, including young people already in contact with Drive Forward Services and those identified through outreach work.
- **Sheffield Futures** is a youth charity providing a range of services for young people in Sheffield and Sheffield City Region. The WEW project was delivered with five young people identified through their Talent Match programme. The group included a transgender young person, a care leaver, a young parent, a homeless young person and two young people with "invisible" health conditions.
- **Communities First.** First Connections works to connect with local businesses on behalf of the five geographical clusters, ACE, Barry, BRG, ECLP and STAR across Cardiff South and the Vale of Glamorgan, five distinct projects that all come under the banner of Communities First, a Welsh government funded anti-poverty programme. STAR's WEW project worked with two young people in each cluster who staff felt would benefit from the project. This included two young people with autism who were interested in exploring employer perspectives on recruiting people with disabilities.

In 2016/17 partner organisations were asked to deliver the programme with limited support from L&W in order to understand the extent to which practitioners are able to independently use the materials provided on the WEW website, in particular the [‘Project in a Box’](#) resource.¹

Partners were also asked to provide evidence of the findings from the interviews with employers and were encouraged to be creative in how these were captured and presented. Young people captured and shared their findings with their peers using a variety of creative ideas including videos, a blog and posters.

Partner organisations were provided with an £800 honorarium for their contribution to the project (including taking part in evaluation activities). The money was primarily used to reward and recognise young people for their participation either with vouchers or through a celebration event and thank you gift. Other potential spend included staff time, equipment, and travel costs.

¹ The ‘Project in a Box’ resources include information about the project and tips for delivery, training materials for action researchers, briefing sheets for employers, sample interview questions and employer feedback forms.

KEY FINDINGS

All four partner organisations were able to successfully deliver the WEW programme between December 2016 and March 2017. L&W undertook research activities in order to explore: how the programme was delivered in practice; the extent to which it met its objectives to be flexible and appropriate for the organisations' needs; the suitability of the materials and support available for delivery organisations on the WEW website; and the impact the programme had on those taking part. The research activities conducted by L&W included:

- Conducting interviews with the project lead from each partner organisation, both prior to and at the end of the project, to understand their experiences delivering the project and its impact on those taking part.
- Analysing feedback from a short questionnaire completed by the young people at the beginning and end of the programme.
- Reviewing the findings of the young peoples' research with employers.

The following section explores the findings for the 2016/17 programme as a whole. Case studies have also been developed outlining the experiences and findings for each participating organisation and are included later in this report.

Reasons for engagement

What Employers Want appealed to partner organisations for a variety of reasons including: the programme's objectives were consistent with their own organisational objectives, the opportunity for young people to engage directly with employers, and the chance to increase employer awareness of issues relating to the young people they work with.

A key part of the WEW programme is ensuring that young unemployed people themselves are at the heart of the work and this aspect of the model also resonated with partners working to empower young people on their route to employment.

Delivering the project

Each of the partner organisations recruited and supported up to ten unemployed young people (aged 16 to 24) to take part in WEW. This involved:

- Bringing the young people together to attend a research skills session.
- Supporting the young people to conduct short face-to-face interviews with local employers.
- Recruiting employers to participate in the interviews; and
- Working with the young people to write up the notes, analyse and present the findings from the interviews in whatever way they chose.

Feedback on the materials was positive from all the participating projects. The resources provided a starting point to prompt discussion, develop ideas and validate approaches to

delivery. Project staff and participants found the sample interview questions particularly useful although the young people were encouraged in all cases to adapt or build on these to suit their own needs and interests.

Two of the four organisations requested that L&W deliver the ‘action researcher’ training as they were unsure of how they would deliver this. However, once they had observed the training they felt confident to replicate it again in the future.

Project outputs

Project participants chose to evidence the findings and outcomes of their research in a variety of formats.

Barnardo’s Carefree – young adult carers produced a written report which brought together their personal experiences of the project together with the results of participant questionnaires completed following the training and interview sessions and follow-up discussions with employers.

Drive Forward Foundation – Participants created a poster with key findings from the notes and audio recordings captured in their research including tips on preparing for an interview, ‘what you can bring to the table’, the skills and values employers are looking for and positive stories from employers about the in-work progress of young people they had recruited.

Young people from **Sheffield Futures** worked together to share their findings using a Powerpoint presentation. This included a summary of responses and key quotes from employers to each of their interview questions

Communities First captured, and plan to share, some of their findings through videos of participants interviewing employers (with their permission). The young people were also keen to share the outcomes of their research and their experience of the What Employers Want project using social media.

Benefits for young people

The following benefits for young people were observed by project leads and participants:

- Development in confidence and self-esteem helps to open up opportunities for involvement in other projects and positive activities.
- Increased aspirations and self-belief in ability to gain employment and to achieve at work.
- Greater awareness of the range of skills and characteristics employers are looking for and recognition of the transferable skills young people bring from their own experience.
- Development of skills including communication, team-working, preparing for job interviews, planning and research skills.
- Changes in perceptions relating to barriers to employment for specific groups, for example for people with disabilities.

- Employment related outcomes. A number of employers offered the young people work placements or volunteering opportunities, one young person was invited for an apprenticeship interview with the construction company they had interviewed and another left the project half way through to take up a job offer.

Benefits for employers

The following benefits for employers were observed:

- Provides an opportunity to talk to individuals directly about what they are looking for when they recruit a young person.
- Businesses can benefit from building links with the local community.
- Enables new ways of thinking and insight from young peoples' perspective.
- Smaller employers gained increased awareness and a wider understanding of the needs of different groups of young people, for example young adult carers, and the transferable skills they can offer.
- Potential new recruits!

Benefits for partners

Partners reported the following benefits for their organisation as a result of taking part in WEW:

- A new model of learner-led working. Having observed the benefits of the learner-led approach in their WEW project, Drive Forward plan to build this model into other areas of their work.
- Information from the interviews can inform existing support. Sheffield Futures Talent Match staff have used learning from the interviews to inform mentor support for young people to develop their employability skills, for example in C.V. writing. WEW findings have been used as part of Carefree's wider work on careers to develop a set of resources around developing young adult carers' career aspirations and skills.
- Developing links with local employers. Involvement in and learning from WEW has helped STAR Communities First to take forward its work on employer engagement and to work together as a team, across the clusters, for the benefit of young people.

LESSONS LEARNED

Challenges

Two of the partner organisations experienced challenges in recruiting participants, this included: young people's initial perceptions about the duration and amount of time they would have to commit to the project; the method of recruitment – via other practitioners working with the young people rather than a direct approach; and concerns about travel to take part in the project.

Approaching and securing the involvement of employers could also be time consuming depending on the nature and extent of partner organisations' existing relationships with employers and the preferences of young people in selecting employers for interview. However the response from employers was mostly positive.

The specific circumstances of the young people involved in the projects created challenges for a number of organisations. For Barnardos for example, the biggest challenge was setting up interviews that fitted with young peoples' caring responsibilities and commitments such as college work, whilst at the same time offering flexibility to employers. Similarly, although they put support in place including help with costs for transport and childcare, Sheffield Futures encountered challenges in maintaining the longer-term involvement of young people facing issues associated with being a young parent or, experiencing homelessness.

Critical success factors

The following success factors were identified as key to successfully delivering the WEW project:

- Young people's ownership of the project to encourage active involvement and ensure they get the most benefit from their participation.
- Flexible approach to delivery of the project to accommodate young people's wider commitments and to allow space for young people to get involved in other activities.
- Direct contact with young people at the recruitment stage rather than through third party approaches.
- Activities to develop confidence at the start of the project to secure engagement and support young people to be fully involved at each stage.
- Ensuring sustained engagement with the programme by ensuring young people understand what the project is about, what their involvement is and how they will benefit.

None of the partner organisations identified the honorarium as a deciding factor in their engagement with the programme; however, it was recognised that its significance will vary amongst potential partners. It was noted that the honorarium's importance would differ depending on the type and size of organisation, how they are funded, and factors influencing the required resources to deliver the project, such as the presence of existing links to employer networks.

Top tips for organisations planning a What Employers Want project

The following tips are based on a review of good practice emerging from the partner organisation case studies.

- Support young people to take the lead on the project.
- Ensure young people have time together at the start of the project to get to know each other and build confidence before meeting employers.

- Ensure clear information is provided at the outset about what the project is about, what the involvement of the young people will be, how they will be supported, and how they will benefit from participating.
- Be as flexible as possible in how the project is delivered to enable all young people to participate.
- Encourage young people to be creative in the way they present and share the findings from their research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on what has been learned through the 2016/17 delivery of the WEW project L&W make the following recommendations for the ongoing development of the programme:

- The WEW website should be maintained and materials reviewed and updated to highlight the findings for successful independent delivery of the project for different organisation types.
- Information about WEW should continue to be shared by L&W through events and webinars to promote it to practitioner organisations that may find it useful for their service users.
- L&W should continue to identify likely sources of funding that would allow us to further develop and test the model with different user groups e.g. with older adults.
- Suggestions for additional optional questions should be added to the topic guide to help stimulate discussions with young people regarding what they may want to add/ask based on their own experiences.
- Partner case studies should be added to the WEW website to help practitioner organisations considering using the approach to understand how the programme is delivered in practice and the potential benefits for their service users.
- An additional consent form should be added to the Project In a Box for permission to audio record or film interviews where appropriate.
- A breakdown of likely direct and staff costs of project delivery should be included in the Project in a Box to help practitioner organisations determine whether it is suitable for them.

CASE STUDIES

Sheffield Futures

About the organisation

Sheffield Futures is an established youth charity providing a range of services for young people in Sheffield and Sheffield City Region including careers advice services, youth clubs, Sheffield Young Advisors, Sheffield Youth Cabinet and UK Youth Parliament, Community Youth Teams, Duke of Edinburgh and Talent Match. Much of the charity's work is with disadvantaged communities within the city region.

What Employers Wants (WEW) fits well with the overall aims of Sheffield Futures and with their role in the Talent Match programme, a targeted project for young people aged 18-24, who have been not in education, employment or training (NEET) for 12 months or more. The programme helps young people overcome barriers to employment through one-to-one work with a coach and work experience opportunities with local employers.

In discussions with young people on Talent Match and other programmes, the attitude of employers frequently came up as a perceived barrier to employment. It was hoped that as well as helping young people to understand employers' expectations, taking part in the What Employers Want project would help employers to better understand young peoples' needs and would break down some of those barriers.

Delivering the project

Five young people, identified by their Talent Match coaches as best able to contribute and benefit from participation, were recruited to the project. The group included a transgender young person, a care-leaver, a young parent, a homeless young person and two young people with 'invisible' health conditions.

Sheffield Futures already have good connections with local employers – approximately 60 employer champions, mainly voluntary sector and SMEs, are signed up to their Talent Match programme. The charity also has links with the Employers Forum in Sheffield providing contacts to 'big name' employers. Although it proved a challenge, seven employers, ranging from small community based organisations to a large popcorn factory, were engaged in the project, one employer from each Sheffield City Region.

Sheffield Futures wanted the young people to be at the heart of the project and to make decisions about how the project developed. Having brought the young people together to deliver the initial training programme, provided as part of the Project in a Box materials, they worked with the young people over several weeks to find out which industries or sectors the young people were interested in; to support them to develop their own questions for employers and to discuss different research methods for capturing responses. In the final meeting, the young people developed a presentation bringing together all the key points and quotes from the interviews they had done. The information from this has been condensed for use in different resources by Sheffield Futures. The participants were keen for example, to

produce a booklet for young people across the city region, about what employers are looking for when they recruit a young person.

To support the young people at the start of the research, the first interview was undertaken as a group, with an employer already known to them.

"I think that gave them the boost of confidence where they'd met the employer, they knew they were nice, they knew the questions they needed to ask so they were then comfortable enough when they were going out on their own to take more control."

Project lead

For the remaining interviews, the young people arranged to go out to the employers in pairs, taking it in turns or deciding amongst themselves who wanted to ask the interview questions, if for example one of them had experience in the specific employment area or they wanted to ask specific questions to that employer. If needed, a member of the Talent Match team went with them, particularly as some young people, who require additional support to participate, can find travel across the city region, quite difficult. In all instances, the young people led the interview, and asked all the questions, and staff acted as note-takers only.

Some of the young people struggled with writing notes at the same time as interviewing, so the project team designed a consent form to request permission from employers to record the interview. These recordings proved especially helpful as the young people frequently identified things, when they listened afterwards, that they had not noted down or had missed during the interview.

Challenges

The main challenge in delivering the project was recruitment. Sheffield Futures worked with five young people from the Talent Match programme, half the number planned.

This may have been due in part to some of the Talent Match coaches making decisions, on behalf of the young people they were working with, that they were not ready to engage in this type of project. Some young people may not have been aware that project staff were prepared to come out to venues around the region and were deterred from involvement by the prospect of making the journey to Sheffield.

Many of the young people with whom Sheffield Futures engage require extra support to make the most of their lives, for example young people with mental health needs, young parents and young people experiencing homelessness, or at risk of harmful behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse or offending. Maintaining engagement on a project, particularly over a longer period, with young people facing these kinds of issues can be challenging. Although supported by the project team, two of the young people were only partially involved, at various stages of the project. The involvement of the young parent, for example was restricted due to childcare issues.

Sheffield Futures have found, with previous projects, that when young people come together from across the region they learn a lot from each other. With any project, bringing young people together at the same time can be problematic. To try to overcome this, the organisation funds taxis where public transport is limited, provides transport expenses, and offers lunch to encourage attendance.

Benefits – for young people, organisations and employers

Project staff noted that the young people grew in confidence from their experience of interviewing employers. This was demonstrated, not only in the way they behaved during the interviews but in their reflections on the process and their conversations with the project team and other young people in the group.

Participants also benefitted from a greater awareness of the range of skills and characteristics employers are looking for.

“...They now could say, ‘This is what I need to say to an employer.’ They have got more of an idea of what would be asked of them and they realised it wasn’t always as scary as it was made out.” Project lead

Through their research, young people also developed skills in note-taking, C.V writing and working to deadlines.

Participation in the project gave employers the opportunity to engage directly with young people and to tell them what they were looking for in employees.

“...it actually gives the employers an opportunity to say, “Well actually, in our business we recruit these types of people, and if you’re interested, then here’s some of the skills or some of the areas that you might want to develop.” Project lead

Talent Match staff have used learning from the interviews to inform mentors’ one-to-one work with young people, for example on C.V. development.

The project team also plan to produce and disseminate information about the project findings, to benefit young people across the Talent Match partnership.

Success factors

Allowing young people to take the lead was key to the success of the WEW project. Participants were more actively involved and enthusiastic because of their “ownership” of the project.

“It got them more motivated about it, they came up with more ideas and they started talking amongst themselves more...” Project lead

Planning in time at the outset to enable participants to bond as a team, and to develop their confidence, also made a difference to how young people engaged with the project

Project resources

The Project in a Box toolkit proved a useful resource to start conversations with the young people taking part and to get going on the project. Participants found resources such as the sample interview questions particularly helpful, rather than starting from scratch with a blank piece of paper.

Drive Forward Foundation

About the organisation

Based in London, Drive Forward Foundation was launched in 2012 to support care leavers, aged 16 to 26, to develop skills, confidence and motivation for work, education or training. They work with a range of young people for example, some with no qualifications or work experience and others who are graduates, and so tailor support to the needs of each young person.

Drive Forward recognise that many young people, unsure of what is expected of them in an interview, or what employers want to hear, are afraid to go to interviews and can limit what they achieve as a result. The idea of What Employers Want (WEW), which puts the young person in the position of the interviewer and helps them to look at the process from a different perspective, appealed to the charity.

Delivering the project

The project was led by the Outreach Co-ordinator in the charity's Youth Engagement Team.

The Team worked with nine young people, aged between 16 and 24, on their WEW project. The Outreach Coordinator targeted both young people with limited or no interview experience and those with substantial experience of interviews, to bring different perspectives to the project. Most of the young people were already in contact with Drive Forward services but the team were keen to also include care leavers, identified through their outreach work, who had not used their services before. All but two young people remained engaged until the end of the project.

The project lead encouraged participants to take charge of the project for themselves, providing support if needed. Following the initial planning meeting the team worked with each young person on the project to identify their interests and who they might like to interview. Young people were provided with a list of corporate partners, employers that Drive Forward work with regularly, but were also supported to approach other employers relevant to their area of interest. Participants then used the template interview questions, from the Project in a Box materials, as the foundation from which to develop specific questions for each employer.

Project staff held practice interviews so young people would be familiar with what would happen and their role in the interview. Although some young people had planned to do the interviews in pairs, in practice all interviews were carried out individually, with the Outreach Coordinator or a colleague sitting in.

The young people interviewed nine employers, most of them at the offices of the companies. Following the interviews each young person produced a summary of what they had learned individually. On completion of the interviews, a group session was held to discuss and compare what they had found out from the different industries they had visited which included for example, construction, retail, finance and youth work. The group recorded some of this

discussion to capture their conclusions and produced a poster with key findings from the project.

Following its success, Drive Forward plan to repeat the project as part of their ongoing programme of work.

Challenges

Recruiting participants was a challenge at first, as some young people were put off by the apparent length of the project which takes place over several months. Once the project lead explained in more detail about the different stages of the project and what they would be doing at each stage, young people were less reticent to get involved. Getting participants together at one time also proved a challenge.

Approaching employers and securing their involvement was a lengthy process which prolonged the set-up stage of the project. However, the response to the project from employers was overwhelmingly positive.

Benefits – for young people, organisations and employers

Care leavers can often have low aspirations linked to low-self-esteem. Involvement in the What Employers Want project has helped to build confidence in the young people and change the way they think about getting work and achieving in industries or jobs that they may not previously have believed possible. Learning first-hand from employers that they are interested in experience and attributes beyond qualifications has been particularly motivating for participants.

“...when they actually do meet them, at first it’s intimidating, but then after a while, they start to see, ‘Hold on a minute...these are just people, and they’re giving you information about how it could work in that kind of industry.’” Project lead

Being in a position of control in an interview situation also helped the young people to grow in confidence.

Involvement in the project has had tangible employment related outcomes for some participants. One young person, who had never been in an interview before, was invited for an apprenticeship interview with the construction company he had interviewed. The young person who interviewed the youth organisation has been offered work experience on one of their projects.

Participants have also learned about and begun to develop the skills to prepare for job interviews, for example understanding the importance of doing research about a company when applying for a job.

“.. it’s helped me gain more knowledge about the working environment and I think that a lot of the answers will help myself and others when it comes to finding a job.”
Participant

Many of the employers involved in the What Employers Want project are already actively involved in and supportive of the aims of Drive Forward. Employers were happy to engage in the project as it was 'something different', they understood how it could have positive impacts for young people and it was an opportunity to talk to young people about their company.

"It allows for an honest and open conversation which you wouldn't necessarily be able to have in an interview for a role." Employer

Having seen young people benefit from the experience of leading on the What Employers Want project, Drive Forward plan to build this approach into other areas of their work.

Success factors

Making sure that each young person understood in depth what the project was about, what would happen at each stage in the process and how they would be involved helped to secure the engagement of participants and move the project on after a slow start.

Project resources

The project lead emphasised that delivery of the project would have been much more challenging without the Project in a Box materials. The toolkit provided a handy reference throughout the project from which to develop ideas or validate approaches to delivery.

Barnardos Carefree

About the organisation

Carefree is a Barnardo's project for young carers, including young adult carers up to the age of 19, in Leicester and Leicestershire.

The What Employers Want (WEW) project complements other work Carefree have been doing on ways to support young adult carers. For example, work with Leicester City Youth Service to pilot an accredited Managing Your Own Home course in which young people attend courses on subjects such as finance, living independently and cooking on a budget; research with the Learning and Work Institute on the needs of young adult carers in relation to career planning and work with the local Young Adult Carers network that brings together organisations including colleges, secondary schools, universities and DWP.

Carefree recognise that employers can be a valuable source of advice and support for young adult carers and saw the WEW project as an opportunity to explore in more detail, not only what employers want from young people but to find out what employers know about young adult carers – is there more information about young adult carers that organisations could benefit from?, what can young adult carers do to prepare themselves and how can they add to their skills, to be able to enter into the world of employment?

Delivering the project

The project lead, the lead officer for young adult carers at Carefree, wanted to involve young people with different levels of confidence and ensure engagement beyond those young adult carers who routinely put themselves forward for projects. Ten young people were engaged in the project. Half of these were recruited from the Manage Your Own Home group. The project lead approached, on an individual basis, other young adult carers who she thought might be interested or would benefit from involvement.

The initial training was delivered in two sessions in the evening to allow for different young people's availability and to fit in with their normal routine of attending young carer's sessions in the evening. At these sessions, participants were encouraged to think about what they wanted to get out of the research and to take the lead in shaping and developing the project. The group were happy to use the example interview questions, provided as part of the Project in a Box materials, but wanted to ask the questions in their own language as this would allow them to feel more confident in the discussion.

The young people carried out 5 employer interviews. These were conducted in pairs, with those who were less confident paired up with someone who was initially more comfortable to lead the interview. The project lead stepped in to take notes on one occasion when a young person was unavailable on the day.

Carefree approached large employers with whom Barnardo's have established relationships, such as financial organisations, but were also keen to engage smaller businesses to explore

the flexibility that different types of employer could potentially offer in response to employees with caring responsibilities. Small businesses included a café and a clothing shop. Some of the employer contacts were provided by the City's Youth Service which had developed links with small businesses offering work experience opportunities.

The project lead made the initial approach to employers to discuss when they would be available for interview, after which the young people made contact to agree a specific time. Interviews were conducted with employers in the city centre over three weekends. The project lead made themselves available in a café nearby so the participants could check in with her how things were going and get support if needed and to ensure safeguarding arrangements.

Following the interviews, the young people met to share and compare their experiences and then had a final session to write up their findings into a report. The project lead plans to explore with the group, the possibility of using the findings as part of a young adult carers' training programme.

Challenges

One of the challenges for Carefree in delivering the project was that initially, not all participants were confident to take the lead in the interviews. However, once they had observed an interview, and better understood what was involved, these young people felt more confident to take on the 'talking role'.

The biggest challenge was arranging times for interviews that fitted in with the young peoples' caring responsibilities and for example college work, whilst also offering flexibility to fit in with employers' availability. In particular, the project lead was mindful that young adult carers should not be asked to extend their day more than necessary.

Benefits - for young people, organisations and employers

Participation in the project has enabled young adult carers to become more confident in talking about themselves and has helped them to believe that they can repeat this successfully in a job interview.

"It was good being the person asking the questions – I don't feel as scared of the idea of interviews as much." Participant

The experience has also helped the young people to recognise what transferable skills they bring as carers, to the interview process and to potential employers, and their ability to progress in the future.

"So, feeling more confident about actually saying, 'Yes, this is me and this is part of my life, but that doesn't mean to say that I have to hide it ...I can talk about it, and transfer some of those qualities that I've got in my caring role to, and relate it to... job interviews in the future.' Project lead

Feedback from the interviews suggested that smaller employers in particular had gained awareness and a wider understanding of young adult carers and the skills they offer.

For the organisation, the project has linked in well with Carefree's wider work on careers including the development of a set of resources around developing young adult carers' career aspirations and skills.

Success factors

Taking a flexible approach to how the project was delivered and encouraging young adults to take ownership of the project ensured that participants got the most benefit from their involvement.

Project resources

Both project staff and participants found the Project in a Box toolkit resources, particularly the sample questions, a useful resource to support delivery of the project.

Communities First

About the organisation

First Connections works to connect with local businesses on behalf of the five geographical Communities First (CF) clusters, ACE, Barry, BRG, ECLP and STAR across Cardiff South and the Vale of Glamorgan, five distinct projects that all come under the banner of Communities First, a Welsh government funded anti-poverty programme. The CF project aims to make people more prosperous through reducing inequalities in income and opportunity, support people to get back into learning and improve health and wellbeing.

What Employers Want (WEW) appealed to the STAR cluster as it fits well with what they are trying to achieve for communities through their prosperity objectives. It also coincides closely with the remit of the First Connections Employer Engagement Officer and the STAR CF prosperity team, who undertake similar work with employers, to identify what they need and to support people to develop the relevant skills to match that need. Empowerment is at the heart of STAR's work so staff welcomed the WEW model which gives young people the freedom to shape the project as they choose and provides opportunity to engage directly with employers.

Delivering the project

The WEW project was led by the First Connections Employer Engagement Officer and the Deputy Cluster Manager for the STAR cluster.

Each cluster was asked to identify two young people who they felt would benefit from the project. This could include new recruits as well as young people already involved with CF employment support services. Ten young people were engaged on the project, including two young people with autism who were interested in getting involved and wanted to explore employer perspectives on disabilities.

Before meeting with the young people, each of the mentors involved in the project came together for initial training and an extra session with project leads to discuss how the project would work in their area.

Following the initial training session, project staff organised a team day where the young people went bowling in the morning and had lunch to get to know each other without any of the advisers or mentors present, before taking part in a project planning session in the afternoon. This activity helped the young people to bond and support each other through the project.

After the first meeting, two of the young people decided, in discussion with their one-to-one mentors, that the project was not right for them as they were too far away from what the support mentors refer to as 'job ready'. They continued to engage with other Communities First work. Another participant left half way through the project for a really positive reason which was that he was offered a job.

Meeting up regularly was sometimes difficult as the participants were spread over a wide area. To overcome this, mentors in each geographical area worked with individual participants to identify the questions they wanted to ask employers. Two of the young people for example, wanted to ask specific questions about disabilities. Over a period of several weeks the group compiled a shared list of about fifteen questions.

The host organisations in each cluster provided a ready-made pool of potential employers to approach for interview although project staff also supported young people to choose and access employers they had a particular interest in. Employers engaged with included an energy company, JEHU construction company, Cardiff City FC Foundation- a charity that works in partnership with Cardiff FC and Cardiff Community Housing Association.

The Employer Engagement Officer also approached the Wales Millennium Centre, an arts Centre in Cardiff with whom she had already made initial links. As a result of their involvement with WEW, the Millennium Centre offered places for some of the young people to get involved in a project to develop their career walk programme creation. Five of the participants worked one day a week with the Centre in addition to their work on WEW.

To support the young people to take part, but also to encourage independence and develop self-confidence, Communities First funded bus and train travel to and from the project.

Most of the young people interviewed employers alone, with a member of the project team sitting in for support. In each case, the young person was introduced to the employer and had a chat before conducting the interview.

Some of the later interviews took place at a job fair event to which Communities First had specifically invited employers who had job opportunities available. This meant that as well as interviewing employers for the What Employers Want research, young people were able to talk to them about actual job opportunities on the same day.

“...they were able to show that development in confidence, which wasn't there at the start of the project. That development of being able to ask valid and really good questions to an employer, sit there and have a two-way conversation.” Project lead

Project staff

Feedback was collected in a variety of formats including both video, if employers were happy to be filmed, and written notes. The young people had a number of creative ideas on how to share their findings including a blog page and a YouTube video, about their involvement in the project, that they could show to potential future employers.

The participants also asked for the Project in a Box end of Learning questionnaires to be reproduced as a simple online survey from which they can produce tables and graphs to illustrate their findings.

Challenges

The project was delivered during a time of significant upheaval. Soon after WEW began, it was announced that the Communities First project would finish at the end of the financial year due to a change in funding. Inevitably this caused some disruption both to WEW and other projects.

One of the strengths of the project, but also one of the challenges, was the different geographical and organisational areas working together. This, combined with changes to staff in some locations, created problems in getting people together which delayed the start of the project.

Being flexible with the young people, for example ensuring that they could maintain involvement in other projects and activities at the same time, meant project staff accepting that they wouldn't have all of the participants on board all of the time and resulted in the project taking longer than planned.

The project lead acknowledged however, that the time taken enabled them to observe lasting change in the young peoples' development. As the project progressed the young people took more control of the project and were happy to get on with it with minimal support from the project team.

Benefits - for young people, organisations and employers

Project staff noted that young people have become more independent, and grown in confidence, through their involvement in What Employers Want.

"..the confidence that young people have shown as part of this is amazing. One girl ...she really would hardly say anything at the beginning. When she came to the [job fair] event ... she was the one leading and walking around going, 'I want to do this and want to do that.'" Project staff

The gains in confidence for the two participants with autism have been significant and participation in the project has opened up other opportunities. One of these young people has gone on to successfully complete a confidence building course and the other young person was part of a group selected to meet a government minister on a visit to Communities First.

"..he was absolutely brilliant with the minister...when he first started working with our mentor, he wouldn't even look him in the eye...The fact that he was able to do that, to me, was massive." Project lead

This young man has since gained employment with an IT company.

The project has also helped to allay some of the concerns and alter the preconceptions of some participants about what employers are looking for when they recruit a young person.

The response to interview questions on disability issues for example, has reassured the young people involved that disability need not be a barrier to getting a job.

Project staff found that most employers were very positive when approached, particularly when their involvement in the project was presented as an opportunity to build links with the community. Engagement with local people helps businesses to fulfil their corporate responsibility role and supports them to create a sustainable business.

Employers welcomed the opportunity to speak to young people about what they are looking for and fed back that the project had helped them to think from a different point of view. More than one employer offered opportunities to help the young person who had interviewed them to make progress towards employment, for example through offering a work placement or volunteering opportunity.

“..there is such a difference as well, in different companies and what they look for in an individual, so there isn't one answer. The young people really saw that... that there's not one answer and one person and one way to be.” Project lead

Project staff

From an organisational perspective, staff reported that the WEW project has helped to pull staff together from across the clusters to work as a team for the benefit of young people. Involvement in and learning from the project has also helped STAR to take forward its work on employer engagement.

Success factors

Project staff identified flexibility about how the project was delivered as key to its success. Staff also felt that whilst it was important to stick to the tasks and get the work done this should not restrict participants from getting involved in other activities which may benefit them and bring something extra to the project.

The support provided by individual mentors for young people, alongside their general employability mentoring, was also felt to have benefitted the participants.

Project resources

STAR Communities First were confident that their staff could deliver the initial training, provided as part of the Project in a Box toolkit, with participants but found it beneficial to have the training delivered by L&W so that mentors on the project team received the training and learned alongside the young people.