

Pathways to Work Experience

Helping Care Leavers into Employment

A Review of the York Cares
Starting Blocks Project

Jo Dixon

ABOUT THE REPORT

The Starting Blocks Project was a development initiative to design and pilot a supported work placements scheme for young people leaving public care in York.

This report provides a review of the Starting Blocks Project. The key objectives of the report are to: locate the project within the leaving care context; describe the design and implementation of the pilot programme; assess the projects success in achieving its aims; review the experience of those participating in the programme; and identify key lessons for carrying forward a work experience programme for care leavers.

The report was commissioned by Norwich Union and City of York Council and was compiled by Jo Dixon on behalf of the Starting Blocks Project team.

The views contained within the report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the City of York Council or Norwich Union.

Published by: Social Work Research and Development Unit
Alcuin College
University of York
York Y010 5DD
www.york.ac.uk/swrdu

May 2006

ISBN 1-903 959-04-7

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Starting Block Project was a voluntary undertaking involving a partnership between Norwich Union (NU), City of York Council (CYC) and The University of York (UoY). On behalf of the other member of the project team, Sarah Helby, Kathryn Nolan and Tom Nall from NU, I would like to thank Barry Jones (CYC) and Kevan Baker (NU), Gayle Johnson and Robert Partridge (York Cares) and Andy Wilson (Jobcentre Plus) for their advice and support with the project. Thanks also to Sue Balf from North Yorkshire Business Enterprise Partnership for delivering the mentor training and Claire Baker (UoY) for commenting on the report. Most of all, many thanks to the young people and mentors who participated in the pilot work placement scheme, and were willing to share their views with us.

CONTENTS

	Page
1. Introduction	5
2. Overview of Existing Initiatives	11
3. The Starting Blocks Project	14
4. Reviewing the Pilot Programme – Outcomes and Participant Views	30
5. Overview & Recommendations	44
6. References	52
7. Appendices	53

This first chapter introduces the context for the Starting Blocks Project. It provides an overview of practice and research evidence on the leaving care experience. It describes the general challenges facing some young people as they move from local authority care into independent adult living, and the specific obstacles to participating in employment.

Background - The Leaving Care Context

The impetus for the Starting Blocks Project can be located in the difficulties and challenges facing young people making the transition from local authority foster or residential care into independent adult living. The specific focus was on young people's access to employment, however, this cannot be separated from the overall challenge of the leaving care experience.

Young people leaving care

Each year around 7000 young people aged 16 and over leave the care of local authorities in England. Care leavers are a diverse population with a range of different pre-care and in-care experiences. Whilst some will do well and go on to achieve positive outcomes, a significant proportion will experience disadvantage and difficulties after care.

Research and practice evidence suggests that, for many, the leaving care experience can be a complex and testing process. In comparison to other young people, care leavers typically experience an accelerated and compressed transition to independent adult living (Stein, 2004). That is to say, they tend to leave foster or residential care and move on to independent living far sooner than their non-care peers leave the family home (on average at 16 or 17 years of age compared to an average of 22 years for the general population). They are also likely to experience major life transitions and take on the responsibilities of independent adult living in a far shorter space of time. Securing and setting up a home, finding a career and, for some, early parenthood all tend to overlap in the months after leaving care. Evidence shows that some of these young people may be vulnerable to risk behaviour such as substance misuse or offending whilst others may be coping with the effects of past trauma, mental health issues or difficulties with settling in the community.

In short, care leavers are a vulnerable group who, without targeted support, may face an increased risk of social exclusion through issues such as homelessness and unemployment.

Care leavers and careers

An enduring difficulty for care experienced young people is establishing a foothold on the career ladder. Research has consistently shown that, in comparison to their non-care peers, care leavers may be disadvantaged in terms of their career opportunities (Jackson, 1994; Biehal et al 1995; Dixon et al, 2004).

One possible explanation for this, is that many care experienced young people have had disrupted school careers. This may partly be driven by frequent placement moves whilst in care, which in turn can precipitate a change in school. Research also suggests that looked after children experience higher levels of truancy and exclusion (SEU, 2003). A study of 101 young people leaving care in Scotland, found that up to 75% reported truanting and being excluded (Dixon and Stein, 2005).

In addition, many looked after young people will leave school with few or no qualifications. Recent government figures suggest that around 54% of care leavers leave school without formal qualifications. The extent to which they are disadvantaged becomes starkly apparent when we consider that only 5% of all school leavers do so (DfES, 2003a).

Educational disadvantage can have a lasting impact and in a competitive youth labour market, which puts a high premium on academic skills and achievement, it is perhaps unsurprising that many care leavers experience unemployment in the early years after leaving care. Dixon et al (2004) found that 44% of their research sample were unemployed a year on from leaving care.

There is a wider trend for young people in general to delay entry into employment. This may be influenced by the increase in further and higher educational opportunities and training options as well as the availability of financial support for transitional options, such as educational maintenance allowance or Government initiatives such as the New Deal. However, research and government data indicate that care leavers make less use of these options in the immediate post care years. Although there has been an increase in the number of care leavers accessing further education options (from 19% to 31% in the last decade, Broad, 2003) care leavers still appear more likely to be in the NEET (not in education, employment and training) group than their non care peers. (32% of care leavers compared to 10% of all young people in the 16 – 18 age group, DfES, 2003b). Furthermore, only 1% go onto University compared to around 38% of the general population.

So what can be done to assist these young people to raise their chances of entering post 16 career participation and increase their general opportunities? Before identifying strategies to support these

young people in their career trajectories, it is worth considering some of the wider obstacles to participation.

Obstacles to employment, education and training

In considering the issue of ‘worklessness’, the Work Foundation (Jones et al, 2004) has identified four key barriers to employment:

Barriers to Employment	
Personal	skills, confidence, lack of information about jobs, ethnic/racial group, circumstances, disabilities
Institutional	benefit regimes (particularly Incapacity Benefits) and programme design/delivery capacity
Local	core public services, particularly childcare and transport
Structural	lack of demand, employer hiring behaviour, the attraction of the informal economy (cash in hand jobs that seem sustainable)

It is possible to consider the specific experience of care leavers in relation to these categories.

Personal

As outlined above, school disruption and poor attainment can have a long-term impact on a young person’s career opportunities. On a practical level, missing school may mean missing out on work experience opportunities or failing to develop a sense of routine or time keeping skills. On a developmental level, school non-attendance may affect the acquisition of inter-personal skills and the opportunity to gain self-confidence and self-esteem through achievement. Such issues may mean that some young people are ill prepared for the world of work.

Further barriers to successful career outcomes are located in the practicalities of post care living. Leaving care brings with it the need for suitable post-care accommodation. Few care leavers can or do return to their families. Many move on to semi-independent or independent living - whether their own

tenancies, hostels or supported flats and lodgings. Sustaining their independent living status can be difficult on two key levels.

- First, in terms of their abilities, many move on from care before the age of 18 and past research evidence suggests that few have received adequate preparation in independent living skills. Accommodation breakdown, housing movement and periods of homelessness affect over a quarter of care leavers (Dixon and Stein, 2005). Insecure and unstable accommodation circumstances are hardly conducive to career stability. Furthermore, for these young people, finding accommodation and learning to manage and settle into a home are often higher priorities than embarking on the pathway towards a career.
- Second, young people's financial circumstances may dictate their decision to embark upon a career route. Pay scales for young adults are often structured to reflect the norm of remaining within the family home and receiving parental support until their early twenties. Youth salary levels are, therefore, often insufficient to sustain independent living. Reliance on the benefit system, meanwhile, can prove a disincentive to finding work.

Personal difficulties can also present obstacles to finding or sustaining a career. Some care leavers may be struggling to address past trauma, the reasons that brought them into care or difficulties experienced whilst living in care, such as rejection, instability and separation from family and community. As discussed earlier, care leavers may also become involved in substance misuse and offending - issues that are more common amongst the 16 – 25 age range in general and more prevalent within vulnerable youth sub-groups. Such difficulties may interfere with a young person's ability to participate in employment, education or training. Furthermore, the importance of confidence and self-esteem in finding sustained employment cannot be underestimated.

Institutional

The majority of young people leaving care enter the NEET group in the early years after care. Care leavers below the age of eighteen receive financial support for living and housing costs from their local authority (with the exception of young parents and young disabled people who are eligible for income support and housing benefit). Those aged 18 and over are entitled to job seekers allowance and housing benefit. Rising accommodation costs and low pay for young people conspire to increase the likelihood of falling into 'the benefits trap'.

Local

Lack of transport and childcare services can offer additional challenges to finding and sustaining work. Care leavers should be able to access help with employment related costs via their leaving care team.

However, finding opportunities that fit around childcare responsibilities remains an issue for all parents, but perhaps more so for those who may be estranged from their family network and are thus less likely to be able to rely on informal childcare. Recent figures show that 4% of looked after females aged 15 – 17 were young mothers (DFES, 2005).

Structural

Finally, wider labour market trends affecting the workforce in general may also present a barrier to accessing career opportunities. The demand for a more skilled labour force and changes to the availability, demand and range of options can impact upon the career trajectories of care leavers and their non-care peers alike.

Strategies to increase young people's career opportunities

Given the obstacles care leavers may encounter in making the transition into education, training and work, it is important that they receive support to help them with their career and to overcome earlier disadvantage.

The Children Leaving Care Act 2000 (CLCA) places a duty on local authorities to support young people up to the age of 21 (or in some cases, 24) as they make the transition to independent living. This includes help with accommodation, finances and careers, as well as developing positive self-esteem and the ability and resources to achieve their aspirations. In addition, the government has set employment related targets for those working with care leavers. The Performance Assessment Framework (PAF) introduces a set of targets for local authorities to meet, in terms of their work with care leavers. A key target is to maximise the number of young people participating in education, training and employment by their 19th birthday.

In terms of careers support, local authorities have introduced a range of measures to tackle the causes of non-participation and increase employability. Some leaving care teams, such as City of York, have engaged a member of staff with a specific remit for working on employment issues. Others have seconded ConneXions advisors to work with young people in and leaving care. Local authorities also offer a range of initiatives to provide young people with skills for work, including basic literacy and numeracy workshops and IT training. Further examples of targeted careers support include: employability schemes, which involve ring fencing work experience placements within the council for care leavers and other vulnerable groups; guaranteed interviews for care leavers who apply for council jobs; and linking care leavers with training providers.

Mainstream initiatives, such as ConneXions and the New Deal, also aim to support vulnerable young people in finding a career. The ConneXions service currently offers advice on careers and wider issues which impact upon young people's career choices and opportunities. The New Deal for Young People (NDYP) meanwhile was set up as a direct response from Government to the high number of 16 – 24 year olds outside of education, training and employment. The scheme is compulsory for those who have been unemployed for at least six months, and provides a Gateway phase offering a tailored package of support for finding a career. A second phase, for those still out of work four months on, involves taking up one of four options, each lasting at least six months. Young people can choose between: a subsidised work based placement; a placement within the voluntary sector; a work placement with an environmental task force or a full-time education or training course. A third and final phase involves further support to find and sustain work.

In addition, wider work experience and work placement schemes have been developed through initiative such as Business in the Community and the Princes Trust. Such schemes, as discussed in the following section, often focus on specific groups considered vulnerable to 'worklessness' and wider social exclusion.

2. OVERVIEW OF EXISTING INITIATIVES

This chapter considers the wider context of developing initiatives to support vulnerable groups in society. It considers the principle of Corporate Social Responsibility and explores an example of a business-led initiative.

The Development of Business-led Initiatives

Professionals working to support vulnerable young people and adults have long recognised the difficulties such groups face in developing the skills and confidence to look for, obtain and sustain employment. This concern has increasingly featured on the political agenda, with Government introducing measures to raise participation and provide support for groups at risk of non-participation and worklessness (New Deal, Jobcentre Plus, and links with voluntary organisations). There is also an increased awareness amongst employers that the causes and symptoms of worklessness can have an impact on business and industry.

Unemployment carries a high social cost. It is associated with social exclusion, poverty, poor health, homelessness, crime, isolation and loss of skills and motivation. The results for businesses and the economy include a less skilled, healthy and available workforce, which in turn, impacts upon productivity and competitiveness.

The need for employers to understand and engage with these issues is a key component of developments, such as Business in the Community and Corporate Social Responsibility.

Business in the Community

Business in the Community (BiTC) is an independent business led charity which engages and supports UK and international companies, to improve the impact they have on their local community and society in general. In addition to promoting responsible business practice, BiTC has a commitment to ensuring its member companies have an impact on social issues by engaging in ‘*collaborative action to tackle key social issues*’ (BiTC website) such as unemployment and homelessness.

Corporate Social Responsibility

Similarly, the principle of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) recognises that '*organisations of whatever type are fundamentally connected to the communities and localities in which they operate*' (Jones et al, 2004) and as such have a responsibility to operate in a way that benefits its employees and the wider local community. CSR is about connecting with local issues and identifying ways in which business can help to address problems. The New Deal itself is an example of how local businesses and employers can engage with the welfare to work strategy – offering short-term subsidised placements to long-term unemployed.

The Marks & Start Programme

A leading example of CSR and BiTC in practice is Marks & Spencer's *Marks & Start Programme*. Marks & Spencer (M&S) has long been committed to a community strategy, which involves working with local agencies to enable vulnerable groups to gain skills and experience and increase their chances of employment. The Marks & Start Programme is the largest company-led programme in the UK and builds on earlier M&S employability schemes targeted at excluded groups. It includes a wide range of initiatives: 'The Ready for Work Programme' for homeless individuals; 'The Young Unemployed and People with Disabilities Scheme'; 'The School Work Experience Scheme', which includes pupils from disadvantaged areas and those with special needs; the 'Student Support and Work Experience Programme', aimed at students who are the first in their family to go to University' and the 'Parents Returning to Work Initiative' (see Jones et al, 2004).

The programme aims to offer over 2,500 work experience placements each year to those who face barriers to finding and sustaining work. Participants are referred to the programme through a variety of routes (e.g. the Prince's Trust, schools and colleges and organisations campaigning on behalf of excluded groups). The placements, lasting two to four weeks, offer paid work experience alongside a programme of training in M&S stores and offices. Trainees receive lunch, travel expenses and the opportunity to develop or update their CV. An additional and important benefit of the programme includes skills development and managerial experience for M&S's own employees, who are trained to act as allocated work mentors or 'buddies' to those participating in the work experience programme.

The success of the Marks and Start Programme is evidenced through its first year review, which found that 90% of programme participants felt that their short-term work placement with M&S had a significant impact upon their lives, and had given them increased confidence and self-esteem to get back into work. Furthermore, over 30% of participants had secured permanent employment within and outside of the company, during the first year of the programme being operational (see M&S website 'Helping others to help themselves. Lives changed through access to work').

The Work Foundation's evaluation of the Marks & Start programme for homeless individuals (Jones et al, 2004) praised M&S for its groundbreaking achievements. Amongst its key findings the report highlighted the need for more companies to provide work placements for those who experience difficulties in finding sustained employment. It noted that there are *'over 3.5 million people in the UK who want to work but do not have a job'*.

The report identified some internal and managerial challenges, such as the need for programmes to be better connected to the company's human resources process and more deeply rooted within business e.g. establishing a 'built in' rather than a 'bolt on' approach. Further recommendations included closer connection and integration with existing frameworks such as the New Deal, Jobcentre Plus and relevant government and voluntary agencies that work with unemployed and excluded groups. The report also acknowledged the impact of the 'benefits trap' (being unable to achieve a salary that will sustain living and accommodation costs), which carried implications for the overall programme as well as participants. Overall, the report concluded that the programme was a success and was meeting, if not exceeding, its objectives.

The Marks and Start programme demonstrates that business-led initiatives are a valuable resource in the drive to overcome barriers to work and increase participation amongst excluded and vulnerable groups. As M&S's chairman, commented *'this (Marks and Start) has shown us that enabling people to experience work through practical hands on placementscan make a world of difference to their self-esteem and ability to find a job'* (Jones et al, 2004).

The Marks & Start Programme provides a tried and tested blueprint on which the wider business community can base their own social and community programmes. As described in the following chapter, the structure of the programme and over-riding ethos behind it – helping people to help themselves - offered a logical model for our own Starting Blocks Project.

3. THE STARTING BLOCKS PROJECT ---

In this chapter, we look in detail at the Starting Blocks Project. We describe how and why it came about; the intended aims and design of the work experience programme; and the implementation of the pilot programme.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Starting Block Project was set up as part of the York Cares 'Business in the Community' initiative and represented a collaboration between City of York Council (CYC), Norwich Union (NU) and The University of York (UoY). It was developed in response to the growing awareness that young people leaving local authority care in the city of York face considerable challenges in making the transition into the world of work. Alongside this, was the recognition that local employers, in addition to the statutory support agencies, could play a crucial role in helping young people overcome some of the obstacles to entering employment.

Leaving care in York

Around 145 children and young people are currently looked after by the City of York Council. Approximately 20 young people leave care each year in the city. Recent figures indicate that 69% of the current group of care leavers are in education (16%) training or employment (54%), whilst just under a third are unemployed (information from Pathways Team).

As corporate parents, the council has a responsibility to ensure that care leavers have the same opportunities and abilities as other young people. The Children Leaving Care Act 2000 (CLCA) provides a specific duty to support care leavers with accommodation, career and overall emotional and general well-being.

In York, the Pathways Team, which was set up in 2001, is currently responsible for supporting around 100 young people aged 16 to 24 who are making the transition from local authority care. The team consists of a service manager, an accommodation officer, two social workers, four support workers and an Education, Training and Employment (ETE) officer. The specific aim of the team is to '*encourage the young people to live successfully as young independent adults... to look at things such as housing, education, training, mental health, isolation...the holistic package*' (ETE officer).

In response to increased duties under the CLCA and a series of national performance indicators for working with care leavers, the ETE officer post was created, with the specific remit to help young people towards participation in education, training and employment. The ETE officer post was funded from local public service agreement money through the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. A key objective of the post was to look at improving CYC performance indicators on the number of former looked after children in employment by the age of 19.

Support with career options

City of York Council

An initial focus of the ETE officer was to consult with young people to identify issues that they felt were important in gaining employment. A common theme arising from this was the desire to gain work experience; something many had missed out on during their formal education. In developing strategies to support this, the ETE officer sought advice and support from CYC and a number of local training and work placement providers, including NU.

Norwich Union

As the largest private sector employer in York, NU was already a major provider of work experience for school pupils, with an established programme of supported placements. The NU Community and Education Manager (CE manager) holds responsibility for promoting links with local community and education establishments and currently co-ordinates around 20 projects involving young people; with a particular focus on the 14 to 19 age group. This extensive work experience programme runs four times a year and offers up to 70 places per intake.

NU's considerable experience and track record in providing supported work experience placements, offered a potentially valuable resource to the Pathways Team and to care leavers in York. It was acknowledged, however, that providing work placements for care leavers might not be as straightforward as integrating them into NU's existing work experience programme. *'In our naivety in the early days [we thought] it would be simple to merge the students, but thinking about this and speaking with human resources colleagues it became apparent that it wasn't as easy...these young people...are from the whole spectrum of society, at one end some may have offended...others may go off to college'* (CE manager). It was evident that a programme, which had the capacity to cope with the specific needs and circumstances of young people leaving care, was required. Both NU and CYC were keen to take this further and approached York Cares, an umbrella organisation that arranges voluntary projects across the city, to facilitate this.

York Cares

York Cares is a volunteering programme within York, which connects employees with communities through a range of projects. The York Cares programme is supported by BiTC, City of York Council, York Council for Voluntary Service and the University of York. It involves volunteers from a range of businesses.

Both NU and CYC were already involved with the York Cares initiative, and were able to draw on its support to guide the development of a scheme for providing work experience to care leavers.

DESCRIBING THE STARTING BLOCKS PROJECT

Starting Blocks was one of the first waves of Development Projects offered by York Cares during 2005. The Development Projects were designed to draw on the skills of expert teams of employee volunteers to work alongside a community organisation to develop an idea or solve an existing problem. The projects required around twenty-five hours time commitment from volunteers, over a period of three months. The Starting Blocks team was recruited from Norwich Union Human Resources Department and the University of York Social Work Research & Development Unit (SWRDU). Members of staff from CYC Children's Services department and NU provided consultancy whilst representatives from York Cares supervised the project.

Aims of the Starting Blocks Project

The specific remit of the Starting Blocks Project, as outlined by the *York Cares Briefing Paper* (see Appendices) was '*to produce recommendations for setting up a supported work placement scheme for care leavers in York*'.

The core objectives for the project team were to:

1. Consult with children's services and care leavers about the needs of young people leaving care
2. Talk to providers of similar programmes (e.g. Marks and Spencer)
3. Assess barriers to setting up a scheme
4. Investigate the support and resources needed to set up a successful scheme
5. Make recommendations about the next step to City of York Council and the York Cares Management Team.

In addition, the project team agreed to adopt the more extensive aim of developing a pilot programme of supported work experience placements for care leavers and running it within NU.

Their objectives included:

- Enabling young people to increase their awareness of the ‘world of work’
- Producing a transferable programme, which could be rolled out across other business partners within York Cares
- Recording the process of setting up and managing the supported work experience programme
- Review the success of the programme in meeting its key aims.

Developing and Implementing the Programme

The Starting Blocks Project had three key phases: the development stage, which involved designing a work experience programme; the implementation stage which involved piloting the programme; and the review stage.

The development stage

During the first phase, which took place between April and June 2005, the Starting Blocks Team focused on addressing the core objectives of the project. This involved exploring the contextual basis for the programme and designing a model for delivering the work experience placements.

Identifying the issues

The first task was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the key issues to be addressed, namely, the challenges facing young people leaving care. This was achieved through consultation with CYC children’s services and the Pathways Team’s ETE officer. The project team was also able to draw upon a number of research studies on young people leaving care, carried out by researchers at the UoY. Importantly, the team was given access to a video on the leaving care experience, compiled by local care leavers. From this, the team was able to identify some of the barriers to employment faced by care leavers in York. A lack of work experience and skills, low self-confidence and the challenges of early independent living were highlighted.

Designing the work experience programme

Having identified the key issues, the next step involved developing a strategy to address these difficulties. The Marks & Start programme provided the team with an established and successful blueprint for developing an initiative for assisting vulnerable groups to experience work. Using the Marks & Start model and NU’s established supported work placements scheme, the team was able to adapt the work experience programme and tailor it to the needs of care leavers within an NU work environment.

As described below, the Starting Blocks programme involved offering young people a work experience placement within NU. The team considered the provision of work- based support essential to the success of the programme. A work mentor or ‘buddy’ system had been important to the Marks & Start Programme and had been established within NU mainstream work experience programmes. A key component of the programme, therefore, involved matching trainees with an existing member of NU staff who would work as a mentor or ‘buddy’, to support them in their work placement.

The main aims of the proposed model were to provide hands-on experience of a work environment, develop ability and awareness of working procedures such as time keeping, health and safety, and specific task related skills. Importantly, it was hoped that the placements would enhance the young person’s sense of achievement and facilitate increased self-confidence and self-esteem. Like the M&S programme, the Starting Blocks model had the dual advantage of offering NU staff, through their role as mentors, the opportunity to develop skills in supervising and managing staff.

The intended design of the programme as detailed below, involved a three-tiered approach, incorporating pre-placement preparation, the supported work placement and post placement support.

Pre-placement preparation

Pre-placement preparation was considered an essential element of the Starting Blocks model and crucial to the success of the programme. A planned and structured approach would ensure that both young people and mentors were properly prepared for the supported work placement.

The team was aware that the target group of young people was likely to have limited experience of participating in education, training or work. These young people were also less likely to have formal qualifications, may have fewer work related skills and lack self-confidence in their ability to find or succeed in employment. Some preparatory work would be important to make sure that the young people were fully aware of what the programme entailed and had received some work-related training. A suggested approach included a short ‘ready for work’ course, which would incorporate an introductory or refresher workshop in IT skills or basic literacy and numeracy. The preparation stage would also provide an opportunity to consider the young person’s existing skills and identify any specific needs (whether practical, financial or personal) and any goals in respect of the work experience placement. The ETE officer and the Pathways Team agreed to carry out a planned programme of preparation.

Young people accepted on to the programme, would be offered further preparation immediately prior to beginning the placement. This would help to identify and address any concerns or needs. They would

be assessed at the end of this stage to make sure that they were suitable and ready for the work experience placement.

Preparation for mentors would ensure that they were fully informed as to the aims of the programme. Importantly, mentoring requires certain personal qualities such as patience, effective communication skills and the ability to be encouraging, supportive and non-judgmental. In terms of work mentoring, the ability to oversee other members of staff, problem solve and manage the workload of others alongside their own, would be useful. A process of selection, as well as specific training, would be necessary. In addition, it was considered important that mentors on the Starting Blocks programme were made aware of the needs of care leavers and any potential issues that could arise. Mentors would be assessed at the end of the preparation stage to check that they were ready to proceed.

The supported work placements

The overall Starting Blocks programme of work experience placements was aimed at young people working with the Pathways Team in York. The particular focus was on those aged 18 and over who were most at risk of social exclusion and non-participation. In this sense, the target group would be those care leavers experiencing greater difficulties in finding and sustaining work.

It was anticipated that the work placements would operate on a full-time basis and last between two to four weeks. Placements would be based across a range of departments within the NU organisation.

Young people entering the programme would be introduced to their mentor prior to taking up the work placement. The mentor would take responsibility for assisting the young person to settle into the work environment, oversee their work and act as first point of contact for addressing any issues. Young people would be asked to keep a daily diary to record their activities and progress. A weekly review, to be completed by young people and their mentor, should help identify achievements and challenges and agree targets and solutions. Young people would receive a £10.00 weekly lunch allowance.

Post-placement support

The Starting Blocks team were keen to make sure that young people had access to some follow-up support after their placement ended. It was considered important that they did not simply 'fall off the end'. Post-placement support would offer an opportunity to build upon the momentum created by the work experience placement – whether in terms of skills, confidence or motivation. Post-placement support would take the forms of help with creating or updating a CV, careers advice, help with completing application forms or revisiting the placement and/or mentor to reflect on the placement.

Potential obstacles to the success of the Starting Blocks model

The project team identified a number of potential obstacles to the successful running of the work experience programme. These included:

- Reservations on behalf of the young people and preparedness for entering a placement - it was hoped the preparation stage would address any anxiety or concerns and ensure that all participants were ready to proceed with the programme;
- Resources within NU - it was acknowledged that NU staff would be required to undertake additional tasks to progress the specific work experience programme, arranging additional training for mentors, identifying appropriate placements for young people and overseeing and monitoring the pilot programme. Additional support would also be required of the ETE officer; and
- Financial support - ensuring that young people did not suffer financially as a consequence of participating in the work placement scheme. The likelihood for falling into the benefits trap or experiencing disruption to their benefits entitlement was highlighted.

Presenting the programme to York Care's management team

The Starting Blocks Project team presented their proposed model for the supported work experience programme to the York Care's end of project meeting in June 2005. The original issues to be addressed, project aims, intended programme design and challenges were outlined. There was considerable support for continuing to work towards operating a pilot programme within NU in time for the Autumn 2005 work experience intake.

Implementing the pilot programme

Having agreed the basic model of the supported work experience placements, it was important to test out the programme to identify any obstacles and iron out any flaws. A pilot, conducted with care leavers within the NU environment, would help us establish whether such a programme would be viable, useful and work as intended.

A small-scale pilot programme was conducted in October 2005, offering three work placements. Whilst a fully developed programme would target more vulnerable or disadvantaged young people, it was felt that for the purpose of the pilot, placements should be offered to more capable young people working with the Pathways Team. It was hoped that this would allow us to test the actual structure of the programme on a less challenging group of trainees.

The design of the pilot programme is illustrated in the following flow charts. Chart 1 shows progress within each of the key stages for all relevant parties and Chart 2 outlines the key stages, including indicators of success.

Chart 1

Starting Blocks Programme

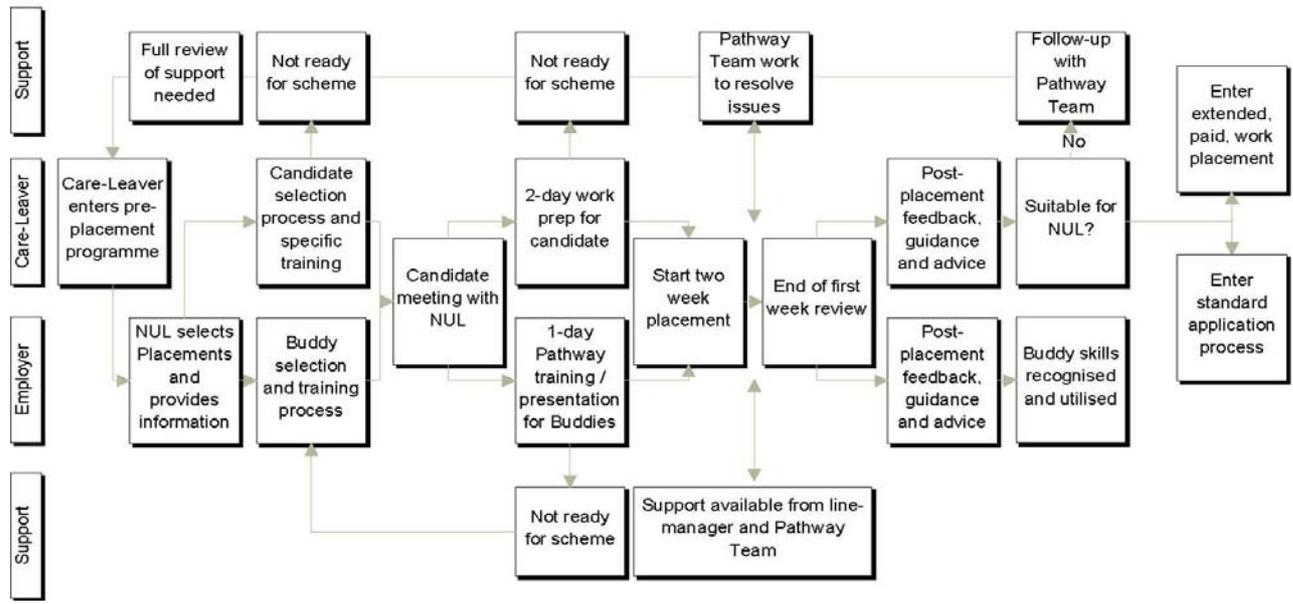
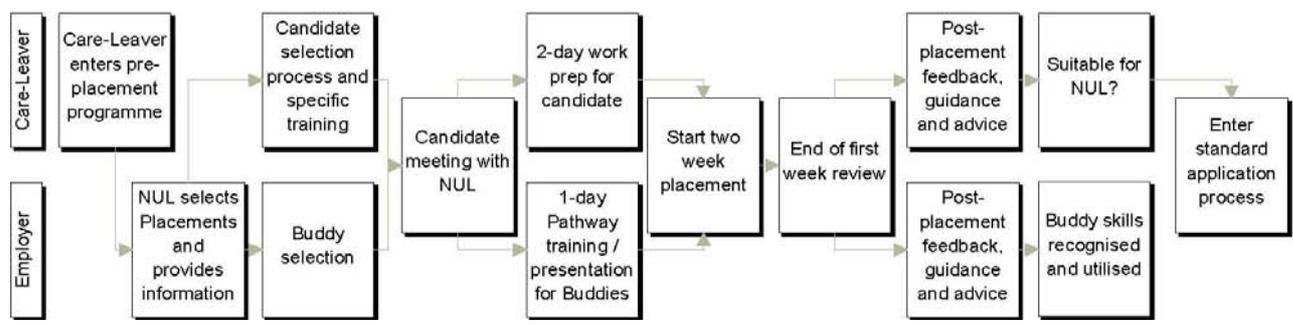


Chart 2

Starting Blocks Programme



Process



Outcome

Care-Leaver	Provided with placement details to choose from and introduction to NU Basic office skills training and skills assessment - produce CV	Department Head and Care-Leaver have chance to meet for Q&A	Confidence and preparation for workplace	Introduction to workplace Two week placement Two reviews to highlight skills and development	Updated CV, guidance and help Open and honest feedback Ongoing support arranged	Confidence Experience Development
	Provided with support pack outlining role and responsibilities		Prepared for mentoring and how to support Care-Leaver	Practical mentoring experience, developing new skills	Recognition letter for Buddy New skills captured in PDP Buddy profile in newsletter Intranet information site	Confidence Experience Development

Financial support

The first task in preparing the ground for the pilot programme was to tackle the issue of financial support for young people entering work placements. Most care leavers are financially supported by their local authority until they reach the age of 18. This involves a personal allowance and housing costs. Those aged 18 and over who are unemployed are eligible to receive jobseekers allowance (JSA) or income support (IS) and for those living independently, housing benefit (HB). The majority of young people in our target group were in receipt of these benefits.

The eligibility rules for JSA state that a person must be 'actively seeking work' and available to take up employment 'immediately or at very short notice'. Young people entering a time-limited work placement programme are technically no longer available for work and could, therefore, be in breach of their JSA agreement. Furthermore, losing the entitlement to JSA could have the knock on effect of losing entitlement to HB.

This posed a serious challenge to the Starting Blocks programme. In effect, by taking part in a two to four week work experience programme, young people could lose their main source of income and fall behind with their rent and other costs. This could have an immense impact upon a young person's life and undermines the intentions and the viability of the Starting Blocks programme.

The Starting Blocks team had not been sufficiently aware of this pit-fall. Representatives of the team and York Cares arranged a series of meetings with managers at Jobcentre Plus, to explore whether or not the problem could be resolved. In addition, the team put together a contingency plan. This involved offering the three planned work placements to care leavers below the age of 18, i.e. those financially support by the local authority and not on benefits. This would enable the pilot programme to go ahead at the intended time, whilst discussions for agreeing a way forward for future programmes, were conducted.

The meetings with Jobcentre Plus proved extremely useful. Senior Jobcentre Plus managers were supportive and enthusiastic about the overall aim of the Starting Blocks programme. Furthermore, there was some commonality with their own targets to engage vulnerable groups in employment and training. Managers suggested two options for operating the Starting Blocks programme (for those aged 18 and over) within the boundaries of the benefits system:

1. Work-based Learning

The first option was to run the Starting Blocks pilot programme as a Work based Learning scheme. The objective of such schemes is to enhance participants' basic skills and work readiness through a

combination of training and work experience. Work based learning schemes operate in the following way:

- Jobcentre Plus funds third party training providers (e.g. York Training Centre, YMCA, etc) to develop tailored training packages for participants, which might run for between 2 to 15 weeks;
- For the period of the work-based learning scheme, participants receive a training allowance equivalent to their current benefit support package, together with a modest top-up (approx £10-15 per week);
- Participants' JSA benefits are not be suspended during the scheme timeframe so it presents no consequences for related benefits such as HB;
- NU would be viewed as the placement provider but the third party training provider is nominally responsible for developing and delivering the training programme.

The advantages of this option, was that it was a discrete time limited scheme, with no impact upon existing benefit support. Furthermore, it offered a modest training allowance and a programme of training. The key disadvantages were that it was potentially complex to set up and run (involving additional criteria, which must be met within the training programme) and involved a third party training provider which ran the risk of loss of control and had the potential to confuse young people.

2. Work Trial Scheme

The second option was the Work Trial scheme. The objective here is to provide participants with a short trial period in a work environment and the employer with an opportunity to assess the suitability of the participant in the context of their organisation. The scheme operates as follows:

- Business can take someone on for up to 3 weeks on a work trial;
- The employer (in this case NU) first needs to register as a provider and confirm that it has vacancies for which the work trial participants could be considered at the end of the period, subject to normal selection procedures. (This does not involve a guaranteed offer of work);
- Work trials are typically offered to people aged over 25. However, care leavers are eligible under the vulnerable group criteria. This allows 16 – 25 years olds to enter the scheme as part of the 16-week New Deal For Young People programme;
- A pre-placement induction is carried out by Jobcentre Plus. This can take place on-site at NU or elsewhere and on an individual or group basis;
- Young people would not need to visit the Job Centre before the placement. However, they will have to do so following the placement as part of the New Deal programme.

The main advantages of this scheme are that it is simple to set up, includes meal and travel allowances provided by Jobcentre Plus and involves no loss of benefits. The main disadvantages were that, as a result of taking part, young people would be tied into the 16-week New Deal programme; this would involve attending interviews, training and gaining further work experience on an 'up to full-time' basis.

Although both options offered an effective way forward, the team initially felt that the first option (the work based learning scheme) would be more appropriate for the Starting Blocks programme, as discussed below. Unfortunately, the team were unable to pursue this route as the scheme was subsequently suspended by Jobcentre Plus due to wider funding difficulties

The second and now only, option was the work trial scheme. The main concern with this option was the criteria that young people should be tied into the New Deal programme in order to participate. The team was concerned that this would jeopardise the independent nature of the Starting Blocks programme and may deter young people from taking part.

The team felt strongly that, as young people would be obliged to register for the New Deal after six months of unemployment in any case, the Starting Blocks programme should remain separate. Furthermore, they suggested that the target group of young people might be more disadvantaged in terms of work related skills, abilities and confidence than those generally eligible for the New Deal. The Starting Blocks programme could, therefore, be seen as preparation for mainstream employment and training schemes such as those offered by the New Deal programme. Young people who had benefited from the Starting Blocks programme would in theory be more prepared and motivated and subsequently more likely to make the most of such statutory schemes. In this sense, the Starting Blocks programme could be considered a stepping-stone to the New Deal.

Jobcentre Plus agreed to run the supported work placement as a Work Trial, independent of the New Deal, for the purpose of the pilot programme. NU was registered as a placement provider with Jobcentre Plus and the Pathways Team was advised to make Jobcentre Plus aware of the three young people chosen to participate on the programme so that arrangement could be made to register them as participants on the NU work Trial and to protect their benefit entitlements.

The timing and duration of the programme

The pilot programme suffered some delays in start up, primarily as a consequence of the time taken to negotiate the benefits issues. This has some impact upon the timing of the selection process for young people and mentors and the pre-placement preparation. In addition, it guided the decision to run the

pilot programme as a two-week, rather than a four-week, work placements scheme, which was to begin after NU's mainstream work experience programme intake in October.

Identifying and training young people.

Once the work trial agreement had been signed off by NU and Jobcentre Plus, the team was able to begin the process of identifying young people to take part in the pilot programme. The ETE officer had been working with a number of suitable young people and put forward three candidates to apply for a work placement. The young people submitted a brief CV outlining previous experience, skills and what they hoped to achieve from the programme. One young person withdrew from the programme due to unforeseen personal circumstances and a replacement was found. All three candidates were extremely positive about participating in the programme. They had a range of existing abilities and work experience and were able to identify key areas in which they hoped to further their skills. This assisted the process of matching young people to suitable placements.

A best practice protocol was developed for care leavers participating in the scheme:

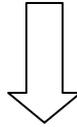
- Care leavers should be motivated to take the placement and do so on a voluntary basis
- Care leavers' expectations should be identified at the pre-placement preparation stage
- Important to treat care leavers as other work experience trainees but need to recognise and make some allowance for individual circumstances and needs – for example the awareness of necessary absences (e.g. to sign on, to attend counselling sessions or other pre-arranged appointments with professionals), be aware and realistic about travel arrangements etc.
- Success should be measured relatively, for example a young person may realise, through the programme, that they are not ready for work
- Benefits for the care leaver include: increased confidence; work experience; encountering new people and perspectives; an up to date CV and reference; possibility of employment.

Once accepted onto the programme, all three trainees took part in the pre-placement preparation stage as outlined in Chart 3. This involved support to identify needs, assistance to attend the placement and ongoing support throughout the programme.

Chart 3

Referral of Young person to ETE
Officer from:

- Pathway Team (leaving care)
- 11+ Teams East & West
- Residential Social Workers



Young Person and ETE Officer meet to undergo preparation and support prior to approaching / referring to partners in York Cares.

Appointment one:

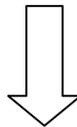
- Introductions to ETE Off / York Cares / work experience
- Watch and discuss the Employability video / CD-Rom

Appointment Two:

- Discuss and identify young persons skills and qualities, refer to appropriate support agency if require further preparatory support.
- Discuss / identify type of work placement young person would like to undergo. Visit Connexions and use their software packages.
- Discuss young persons / placement providers expectations
- Look through resources / materials: diary, skills and qualities checklist, information sheet, H&S sheet and evaluation sheets.

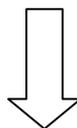
Appointment Three:

- Interview skills and techniques
- Revisit expectations of young person and placement provider.
- Arrange an interview at work placement provider (NU)
- Support / buy interview and work clothes.



ETE Officer and young person attend interview at work experience provider. If successful complete:

- Young person's personal information sheet.
- Complete health and safety sheet
- Arrange a start date and provider of placement begins to identify mentors.



ETE Officer to accompany young person to first day at placement.

- Introductions Young person / mentors / ETE Officer
- ETE Officer could stay for ½ a day if young person and placement provider feel it is appropriate.
- ETE Officer / young person / mentor to meet on the last day of each week (1,2,3,) to look at evaluation sheets and discuss success to date and areas for improvement.
- Exit strategy – ETE Officer / young person / Mentor to meet on the first and last day of the final week (4) to discuss placement and explore next steps (which may include a position at placement provider if appropriate)
- ETE Off and Young person to meet up and follow up support, job searches, Job centre, explore options and future aspirations, training and education....Support available from the pathway team until young person turns 21 or 24 if young person is in FE.

Identifying and training mentors

Suitable work placements had been identified within the NU organisation and relevant section heads were asked to suggest an appropriate member of their team to act as a mentor. It was explained that the pilot programme involved trying out a new type of work experience placement aimed at care leavers. The Starting Blocks team was keen that the care leaver status of trainees was not widely known within the NU organisation. The pilot scheme was therefore presented as part of the wider work experience programme. Whilst it was important that the mentors were aware of the young person's status, it was left up to the individual young person as to whether other members of staff were told.

A best practice protocol for mentors stated that:

- Placements should be designed to ensure that care leavers and mentors learn specific skills;
- The mentoring or 'buddy' scheme should be robust, not informal, and involve specific training;
- The mentoring scheme should have central support from the employer, including clear skills development commitments and recognition, a centrally managed system for debrief and guidance and feedback from human resources on career opportunities;
- Structured and accessible support for mentors during the placement – to be provided through NU managers and the Pathways Team ETE officer;
- Provision of a 'dos and don'ts' pack to support mentors, help manage their expectations and brief them on possible issues or scenarios and how to manage or cope with them.

Department managers identified three members of staff as suitable on the basis of their existing skills and experience. All agreed to take on the role of mentor. Mentors were asked to apply for a Criminal Records Bureau clearance, which is standard procedure for people working closely with children, adolescents and vulnerable adults. In addition, NU operates a policy for same gender mentoring which was applied to the Starting Blocks programme.

The mentors were invited to attend a training session on mentoring young people. The training was delivered by Pathways Team and North Yorkshire Business and Education Partnership. The key purpose of the day was to define the mentoring role and discuss the specific needs of the care leaver group. Arrangements were made to invite young people along to the end of the session to introduce them to their mentors. Two young people were able to make this meeting.

The pilot work experience programme

The young people and mentors

The three trainees, two young women and a young man began their two-week placement with NU. The Pathways ETE officer accompanied them on the first day and offered on going drop-in support throughout the two-week placement. The trainees were introduced to their mentors, also two women and one man, and received an induction session on their respective work placement departments. The induction included information on the individual departmental procedures, general Health and Safety information, information on start time, lunchtime, facilities for lunch and breaks and general task related details. Information packs, which had been compiled for the wider work placement scheme, were provided.

Overview of the work experience placements

The work experience pilot offered a placement in the mailroom, a clerical position in internal communications and customer services.

In all, only one young person was able to continue throughout the two-week placement. This young woman missed two days due to personal circumstances, but overall adapted well to the work environment, developed a good working relationship with her mentor and settled into the team quickly and easily. Two of the trainees were unable to attend some or all of the work placement days due to sickness. Although one was able to return to work, they subsequently experienced some difficulties in attending full-time due to travel arrangements. The remaining trainee had to withdraw from the programme due to a longer-term illness. In addition, two of the mentors were also unable to attend work on some days due to sickness.

Each of the young people continued to receive targeted employment related support from the ETE officer after finishing the work placement. They were presented with a certificate from York Cares and NU to acknowledge their participation in the work experience programme.

At first glance, it may seem that the pilot fell short of expectations. The incidence of sickness amongst participants certainly presented a set-back to the programme and to the expectations of young people and mentors. However, in some respects, it provided a realistic reflection of a working environment. Furthermore, the key objective of the pilot was to test the viability of the programme. As discussed in the next chapter, the overall structure of the programme worked well despite these difficulties, and the young people and mentors who took part in the programme, found it a useful and rewarding experience.

4. REVIEWING THE PILOT PROGRAMME

OUTCOMES & PARTICIPANT VIEWS _____

The previous chapter outlined the proposed design of the Starting Blocks work experience model and described the implementation of the pilot programme to test the model. This chapter provides a review of the overall Starting Blocks programme. It also includes a more detailed look at the pilot programme, taking into account the views and experiences of those who participated, to identify what worked and consider the main challenges encountered.

Reviewing the Starting Blocks Programme

The final stage of the Starting Blocks Project involved a review of the work experience programme. This was undertaken by researchers at the UoY. The review involved exploring the views and experiences of the three trainees and their respective mentors and reviewing documents used to record progress during the placements. It also involved interviews with key staff from NU and CYC to explore their views on the success of the programme.

Objectives:

The main objectives of the review were to assess whether:

- The programme worked as intended from the point of view of both the provider (NU) and the community partner (CYC children's services);
- The programme influenced outcomes for care leavers (in terms of 'hard' outcomes such as career plans, skills and participation and 'soft' outcomes such as increased self-esteem and confidence);
- The mentoring role worked and mentors benefited from the experience;
- Lessons can be carried forward in terms of implementing the programme long term and rolling it out to other employers.

Methodology

Information from young people and mentors was gathered at two points in time; baseline, at the start of the work placement and follow-up after the placement had ended. Information from key staff was gathered at the end of the programme.

Baseline

Young people and mentors were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on the first day of their work placement. Two young people and two mentors returned their completed questionnaires. The 'Pathways to Work Experience' questionnaire for young people explored motivation, expectations and aspirations for the work placement. It also asked about existing skills, abilities and perceived self-confidence and explored their views on preparation. A similar questionnaire was given to mentors to explore motivation, expectations and training.

Follow – up

Young people and mentors were interviewed about their experience soon after completion of the work placement programme. This involved either a telephone interview or face-to-face interview, lasting around 30 minutes.

Interviews were carried out with each of the three young people to examine reflections on the placement and seek their views on whether their expectations and aspirations had been met. The interviews also explored any perceived change in skills, abilities and overall confidence. Young people were also asked to identify any obstacles and any factors that had helped them during the placement.

Telephone interviews were carried out with the three mentors at the end of the mentoring relationship, to explore views on the experience and whether expectations had been met. Mentors were asked to identify positive and negative aspects of the programme and to comment on any impact upon skills and career development. Mentors were also asked to comment on the progress of the young people they had supported.

The participants

As discussed in the previous chapter, two young women and one young man took part in the pilot programme. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, we have referred to the young people as YP1, YP2 and YP3 and the respective mentors as M1, M2 and M3. It was encouraging to find that the young people and mentors were extremely well motivated and positive about participating in the programme.

The young people were aged between 19 and 21 and had been looked after by the City of York Council. All were receiving support from the Pathways Team and were not engaged in employment, education or training. As part of the application process for participating in the programme, each young person submitted a Curriculum Vitae.

YP1 was a young woman who had previously worked in the service industry. She outlined her key skills as *'excellent customer service skills'*, communication and computer skills and good time management. Her goals for the work placement were to achieve an insight into a different working environment and to widen her career options and experience.

YP2, a young man, had experience of manual work. His skills included computing, working well as part of a team and interpersonal skills. YP2 had applied to join the programme in order to gain experience in a different industry, and *'learn new skills in an office environment and ...prove myself and show that I can do it'*.

The final young person, YP3, was a young woman who had some experience of working in the service industry. She described herself as having good communication skills and hoped to gain some work experience and *'get an idea of what type of jobs are available'*. This young woman was particularly keen to develop confidence, meet new people and experience working as part of a team.

The mentors were drawn from a range of departments within NU, including customer service, internal communications and service support. Two of the mentors had previous experience of mentoring young people on NU's mainstream work experience programme. The mentors had agreed to take on the role for a variety of reasons. For example, one felt that it was an extension of their existing role, managing and supervising staff, *'my manager asked me and I said yes. I don't mind training young people; I do it as my job anyway'* (M3). Another had experience of working with trainees on the mainstream work experience programme and had been through some training for the role, whilst M2 considered it an interesting opportunity *'I'm always willing to take on new and interesting roles in my employment'*. Although none of the mentors explicitly identified the role as a means of developing their own career opportunities there was a general sense that it was a worthwhile thing to do and each commented on the need to give young people a chance to experience work, *'it's a good thing to do, it gives people a start, regardless of their backgrounds, it makes no difference, you've got to give everybody a chance'* (M3).

The pilot programme - achievements and challenges

The Preparation Stage

The preparation stage was considered integral to the overall Starting Blocks model. Preparation for young people was undertaken by the Pathways Team and involved updating computing skills and addressing general employment needs. Preparation for mentors involved a two-hour workshop on mentoring skills, provided by North Yorkshire Business and Education Partnership (NYBEP) and an introduction to working with care leavers, given by the Pathways Team.

What worked?

Generally the young people felt that they had received enough preparation prior to beginning the placement. Furthermore, it had been holistic, encompassing practical, emotional and skills-related support. For example, young people identified a range of assistance which had enabled them to prepare for and attend their work placement, including help with the application process and putting a CV together, transport, childcare and clothing; *'He [ETE officer] used to make sure I understood everything and I got some clothes provided, cos, in an office it's kind of smart, but I didn't have smart clothes, so I got help with buying those'* (YP2). In addition, YP3 valued the opportunity to meet her mentor prior to starting the work placement *'it's a bit daunting going and meeting someone for the first time on your first day at work so its good to meet her first and know what to expect'*.

The mentors were also generally positive about the preparation and felt that the training session had been useful and informative. M3 outlined the preparation session; *'we had some info about the young people and, someone from NYBEP who trains mentors came to discuss the role, as we didn't really know what to expect and [ETE officer] came in as well and explained the issues for care leavers and ...confidentiality, that it was up to the young person to disclose whether they were a care leaver. The young person came to the last 10 minutes of the session'*.

NU's existing experience of running a mentoring scheme proved useful to the pilot programme as NU staff explained – *'the company has internally, a very successful mentoring scheme anyway. In one of our divisions we've used more experienced staff to mentor more junior staff so there was an element of experience and expertise to do mentoring anyway and we had training programmes in place for mentors that were working with students. We actually tapped into that in terms of training, so didn't reinvent the wheel'*.

Challenges

The main obstacle for the preparation stage was timescale. Whilst overall, participants felt reasonably well prepared, two of the young people said that they were unsure about what to expect from their work

placement and had been given little specific information about what they would be doing. YP3 for example, only found out which department she was working in two days before starting the programme. This lack of 'placement-specific' information resulted from delays in matching young people to work placements.

This was echoed in the views of the mentors, who commented on the programme and preparation being 'rushed through'. *'I must admit that I was told probably a couple of days before, you know, that I'd been chosen to be a mentor... but I'd had previous experience...been on lots of different courses...so it wasn't anything new'*. Another mentor commented *'I was confronted I think, a couple of days before the induction whether I wanted to do it. But it went ahead quickly, much more quickly than I expected so it was straight off and running basically'*. The 'last minute' nature of the preparation workshop was also highlighted by one of the mentors who noted that the session had taken place only two days before the work placement week actually began.

The difficulties in the timing of the preparation stage did raise concerns for the programme and were largely attributed to delays in resolving the benefits issue. The impact of these delays meant that: a) there was uncertainty about the pilot programme going ahead at all or with the intended young people; b) work placements in NU could not be identified until the selection of young people had been finalised and c) the programme could not begin until NU's Work Trial status had been authorised by Jobcentre Plus.

These difficulties were acknowledged by the ETE officer; *'we had to put it [the programme] back for a two week period. We wanted to do a lot more preparatory work with the young people but due to an issue with Jobcentre Plus about benefits and where the scheme fitted in, we weren't sure we could run the programme without affecting their benefits until about two weeks before ... so we didn't actively promote the opportunity for young people because we didn't want to set them up to fail. We would have liked to have done at least a four to six week preparatory training, you know, identifying the needs, getting them in, getting them used to setting appointments, doing computer work and that type of thing. Similar with the mentors, we wanted to deliver more training than we did, to do two lots of training but in the end we did one lot, because of the timescale. We'll learn from it for the next time.'*

The work placement

Expectations and motivation for the work experience programme were high for all those involved. One young person commented *'I was given the opportunity to do this work placement and I felt grateful to just get asked to do it.'* As outlined in the previous chapter, it involved a full-time, two-week supported placement.

What worked?

▪ *Young people*

In some respects it is difficult to assess the overall impact of the work experience programme for the young people and work mentors, as only one young person was able to complete the programme (80% attendance). The attendance rate for YP2 and YP3 was 50% and 10% respectively. However, outcomes and impact can be measured relatively and using 'soft' indicators of success as well as 'hard' outcomes. In this sense, whilst we may not be able to see any clear increase in placement-specific skills or witness movement into employment across the trainee group, as discussed below, we may be able to find evidence of increased confidence and general work experience.

All three young people attended their first day, which in itself can be seen as an accomplishment for the individuals and the programme. Making the first step should not be underestimated for individuals who might have limited experience of the workplace. This may be particularly so in this instance, where, as some of the young people noted, the physical presence of the NU building can appear daunting, *'I just walked by before and realised how big it is, imagined that a place like that had so much going on inside'* (YP3). YP2, who was only able to attend one day, because of illness, told us *'it [attending the placement] helped my confidence. I never thought I could go into a building like that, but I did - I did go to work there'*.

It was apparent that the young people and mentors had benefited in several ways from the experience. The young people talked very positively about the programme. Some of the key themes included:

Gaining an insight into a new and different working environment

The trainees' work placements were significantly different from their previous involvement with work (i.e. waitressing, working in a hairdressers and working on a building site). When asked to sum up the work placement YP2 told us *'It was an office environment, something totally, completely different to what I've usually done, cos I've done labouring, construction kind of thing. But I got a good kind of knowledge, you know, what [NU] is all about and stuff...sort of realised more about NU ...that it's split up into different things. But it's a good experience'*. Similarly YP1 commented that *'I learnt a lot.. I'm a hairdresser so kind of, what the work is; it was totally different to what I'm used to... I attended four meetings, just to let me know how each individual business [department] worked'*.

This suggests that one of the main outcomes of the work placement was enabling the trainees to increase their understanding and knowledge of how a large company operates and to gain experience in a new working environment. This brought with it the following, related, benefits.

Acquiring new and different skills

The work experience programme was designed to increase trainee skills in a number of areas; task related skills; communication skills; and work participation skills. Feedback from the young people and mentors suggested that the placements had gone somewhat towards enhancing skills in each area. In terms of the practical task-related skills, YP1, whose placement in the internal communication department involved data entry, Internet searches and compiling documents, told us *'I'm a whiz on computers now'*. YP3 felt that her one day placement had offered an introduction to administrative work *'it was quite hands-on, ... sorting out different documents entering it to the computer'* and YP2 described in his daily work record, how he had learnt about *'booking in carrier deliveries, delivering mail to individuals, franking and entering information onto data base'*.

Responses to the follow-up questionnaire indicated that all three young people *agreed* that the placement had increased their confidence, work skills and communication skills. YP1 noted that her communication skills had increased through being encouraged to seek help and by *'working as a team.... asking for help at least every half hour and writing, though it was quite difficult putting words together although I know what I wanted to say'*. This young person had gone on to write an article about her work placement, which was subsequently published in the NU magazine. Her mentor felt that she had improved significantly during the placement, *'I think the only thing that [YP1] struggled on was asking for help and she didn't want to ask cos it looked like she couldn't do something. But it's something, I really encouraged in her and after that she got much better'*.

Developing ideas about future careers

An important outcome of participating in the programme was challenging or confirming the trainees' existing career aspirations. For example YP1 realised that although she had enjoyed her work placement, it had confirmed to her that she preferred working directly with people, not computers, *'I know some people would love it wouldn't they? Just sat in front of a computer day in day out, but just hairdressing's just different every day, even though you're cutting hair it's still different people and I was just thinking - is hairdressing all I'll be in? This has helped me decide and well, I love hairdressing'*. The experience had helped YP1 to realise that she wanted to follow her initial career choice. YP2 also found that his work placement had offered some perspective on his career goals. His previous experience at college had demonstrated that he was not academically minded and his work placement, which involved both computer work and manual work, had helped him to realise that he preferred manual work to theoretical and desk-based work. Again, this young person was keen to emphasise how much he valued the experience, *'I can't knock it, I'd love to do something like that again.... but I don't really like theory, I weren't too keen on the small part of it that was in the office, not written workI quite like the hands-on stuff like moving stuff, pallets on to trolleysI feel as if*

[its] practical trades that I'd have to be going for'. For both of these young people, the work placement had provided an opportunity to challenge their existing ideas about careers and had enabled them to identify a career route, which suited their interests and skills. Finally, for YP3, the brief experience at NU had encouraged her to reassess her approach to work 'it didn't really help me to decide on future [jobs]. I wasn't there long enough to see if it was useful [but] it definitely made me think twice about work and getting help to start looking at courses, maybe Btecs'.

Support

Support, from mentors, wider NU staff and from the Pathways Team, was another important aspect to emerge from young people's reflections on their work placement.

Each of the young people provided positive feedback on the mentoring relationship and the wider support they had received during their placement. It was evident that mentors had supported young people in a number of ways including making them feel at ease, providing general and task-specific information, and by providing a reliable point of contact. YP3 felt that she had been made to feel welcome on her first day '*[mentor] was showing me the work and the boss gave me information on health and safety, she was really helpful showing me what to do*'. YP2 also felt well supported by NU staff, '*if it weren't the mentor, I was always with someone doing work, my mentor went through all kinds of procedures and had to tell me about fire and safety and everything that was needed to be done, basically, showed me where everything was, where to go. It was useful because I didn't want to get too big headed and just try and do things myself...I can't fault any of the workers..... I think they were just excellent to deal with and talk to*'.

YP1 was able to develop a good working relationship with her mentor during her eight days in placement. Her comments highlight some of the main attributes of the mentoring role. Personality was important '*she was brilliant, her personality, she's bubbly...just fantastic... the one person that you could go to for help...we got on really well*'. Matching, in terms of the mentoring relationship and the actual placement, was also highlighted. YP1 told us that her placement had been a success largely because '*I got placed with the right mentor and I got placed on the right floor*'. She also commented on feeling part of the team '*they talked me through things, took me for coffee, let me go to dinner with [them]*'. Furthermore, she valued the way in which the team had worked with her, showing respect, confidence and trust in her '*I weren't tret like a work experience, I was tret like a member of staff, just like everyone else, they didn't treat me like a young kid, you know, they didn't tell me I couldn't do anything...they told me what needed doing and left me to get on with it. They weren't over me shoulder every five minutes*'.

In addition to help from mentors and other members of staff, the young people commented on the consistent support offered by the ETE officer during their placement. This support encompassed emotional support and encouragement, as highlighted by YP1 *'throughout, he was there, three time a week he come to see me, I think its more support for us, him just turning up seeing how we're getting on'*. It also included practical support, particularly for YP2 *'Pathways, well [ETE officer], would help, give me a lift on the first day and stuff and rang me basically to start work a few times, cos he knows that's what I'm like in the morning, getting out of bed, so they were a great help to me'*.

- **Mentors**

Only one of the mentors (M1) was able work alongside their trainee (YP1) throughout the whole programme. As explained earlier, YP3 only attended one day and although YP2 was able to attend half the programme, his mentor was off sick for two days with the same illness. Nevertheless, the mentors described a broad role covering work supervision and personal support *'it was just really support. If he came across any difficulties with the work and somebody to really talk to'*. Another told us *'it just really involved making sure that she was OK, being her first point of contact, making sure the team all knew that she was coming, making sure there was work, that sort of thing'*.

For mentors, the benefits of participating in the programme were not readily apparent. A key aim of the mentoring element of the programme was to assist existing staff to gain skills (e.g. managerial or supervisory skills) and career development opportunities from their role. This was not identified as a motivating factor, a goal nor an outcome for mentors participating in the programme. M3 noted *'it was a chance to use my existing skills rather than develop new ones'*.

Responses from the follow-up interview showed that all three enjoyed the experience and would be willing to take on the role again. Furthermore, each of the mentors emphasised the personal satisfaction they achieved through helping their trainee to settle into the work environment. M1 felt a sense of pride in seeing the increased confidence and abilities shown by her trainee as she became more familiar with the work *'you got satisfaction that [YP1] enjoyed herself and you kind of feel proud of it, that she enjoyed herself and you know, that she felt supported enough to do things. It was quite rewarding, especially when she was able to do things and she did them really well and you know, to the best of her ability and so it did really feel like she was listening to what I was saying'*. Another welcome aspect of the mentoring relationship was working with someone who appeared eager to learn. Although M2 commented that he had limited opportunity to get to know his trainee he noted that *'when he was here, the type of questions that he asked and things like that. It was good to see someone interested in the job and asking questions about it'*.

Feedback from mentors suggested that the induction pack, given to young people, had proved a useful tool, providing clearly defined goals and achievements to work towards. The pack (see Appendices) included a checklist for essential information (means of getting to work, whether the health and safety checks were in place etc) and daily work records to summarise the key tasks and skills carried out by the trainee during the placement. It also contained a weekly assessment checklist, which was completed by the young person and mentor, and used to record areas of progress. M1 commented '*I think the pack that the trainees got was very good...they had to write a diary and we had a mentor form that we did together. It was skills-based and there was loads of things on there, that was brilliant and it meant that....at the end of week it meant we had something structured to go through, it meant you reviewed the first week and then you....could plan ... what you do in your second week and what skills you need to improve on*'.

Challenges

The pilot programme highlighted a number of areas which presented potential obstacles to successful implementation.

Attendance

A significant obstacle to the programme was illness amongst the trainees and the mentors, which severely impacted upon attendance. In addition, one of the trainees was unable to attend part of the programme through personal difficulties. Both YP2 and YP3 expressed considerable regret at being unable to fully complete the programme. YP2 felt that he had let himself down '*I did ultimately want to do the full time...but I was pretty ill, really at my worse...I tried my hardest to get in for as many days as I could but unfortunately I couldn't make it the two weeks... I felt as if I let myself down a bit, not sticking it out...I need to achieve to get a job...but I didn't really stay long enough to impress them*'.

Because of low attendance, and thereby limited participation in the programme, we have not been able to gain as full a picture of the supported work placement programme as anticipated. Nevertheless, as indicated above, those taking part generally viewed the programme positively, although some difficulties were noted.

Workload

One of the challenges outlined by the mentors, was incorporating the mentoring role into normal work activities. Although this had not been a major obstacle during the pilot scheme, partly due to low attendance, the mentors did make reference to the need to have this additional role recognised in terms of work allocation. '*I tried to give as much support as I could but we're a very busy team...the workload, that was a barrier. You do have to make more time to do it and when [YP] was ill you*

literally came in and [thought] oh I've got so much time, I've not got to worry about anybody.... cos I do have to juggle making sure that [YP] was OK, in with your own daily job'. Another mentor described the first day of his mentoring relationship 'YP2 arrived, I think it was nine o'clock, and I was on my own that day and I had a lot of things to do, so I was rushing around. At that time in the morning we're really busy, so there was a lot of running around and I didn't really have a chance to talk.' The mentor felt that things improved after he received support to carry out his role 'my manager gave me time to talk to [YP] and show him around and stuff like that and my manager got involved and took more control over the general running while I was doing that'.

Planning

Having sufficient time to carry out the mentoring role is important for the mentors and trainees. Achieving this requires careful planning so that young people have clearly defined tasks during the programme and mentors have adequate space within their working day to supervise the placement. This can be facilitated by a well-planned lead-in stage to the programme. As discussed earlier, delays to the Starting Blocks programme meant that it was subsequently hurried through in order to meet the work experience in-take deadline. Mentors did not, therefore, have time to fully prepare for the placement. Fortunately, some mentors felt that they were able to rely on their experience of the wider work placement programme, as M1 explained *'I think it did come fairly quickly, the pilot, but I suppose come next year there'll be a lot more time to do that preparation. I think it was easier for us because we had had a work experience person in the summer so, you know, we didn't have to do that much preparation becausewe already had a pack ready and a kind of schedule. But as I say for other people, I think it'd need more time'.*

Length of placement

A further issue for consideration was the length of the work experience placement. Young people and mentors were asked whether they thought that a two-week placement was sufficient time to adapt to the placement and develop skills and knowledge. There was consensus that two weeks provided a good introduction or *'taster'* to working in NU, however, it was felt that a placement of three to four weeks would provide greater benefit. M1 told us *'two-weeks doesn't really seem long enoughthey'd benefit from doing four cos then you could actually...take a project and ...you'd be able to see it from start to finish'*. Similarly, M2 noted *'a longer period would be nice ..in this job, cos it's more to do with knowledge really, then you can assign work, cos you can't say "go and do that" you have to go with him every time'*. The young people also favoured a longer placement, YP1 commented *'three or four weeks maybe, just for learning things and having an understanding of everything...I mean at the end of the second week I was just starting to get sorted. The first week you're settling in and the second week you're going.'*

Personal circumstances

Finally, young people identified some of the wider challenges of early independent living, which affected their personal circumstances and could impact upon their ability to participate in or sustain work.

One issue to emerge was accommodation difficulties. Feeling settled and safe at home is one of the foundation stones for stability in other life areas, such as employment. Practice and research evidence suggest that, for some care leavers, living in independent accommodation at an early age can leave them vulnerable and at risk of loneliness and isolation or being unable to maintain the accommodation and thereby facing movement or homelessness. Young people, who live independently can also become a magnet for other young adults who may over-run or misuse the property. As YP2 noted *'it's quite hard living in a four bed-roomed house at eighteen I feel as if things get spoiled for me and people of my age. I mean people [the] wrong type of people coming round or knocking on me door and I'm getting hassled and trouble'*. The ETE officer noted that this young person *'had a lot of accommodation issues whilst the pilot was running.'*

A second issue to emerge related to financial circumstances. As discussed in Chapter 1, young people who leave care for independent living require a level of income that will allow them to sustain their accommodation and related living costs. This can be a disincentive to work, particularly for young parents who also face the cost of childcare. YP1 told us *'finding a job's really hard. I mean finding childcare and me being able to manage, pay full rent and money for childcare....food bills, I don't have a social life so that don't bother me. I'd love to go out to work now...but I just can't afford to... financially at the moment it's hard'*.

Post placement support

The review also considered the effectiveness of post-placement support. The aim of post-placement support was to reflect and build upon the experience that young people gained in the work placement and provide on going encouragement and careers advice. One option was for young people to revisit their NU placement to review their progress, identify the skills they acquired and develop a CV. The young person who completed the full programme received support to compile a CV on her final day. Her mentors explained *' we finished the week by one of the team working with [YP] doing a CV, so even though she was finishing here and didn't necessarily want to have a career in an office, we did a CV cos she wanted to get back into hairdressing so we did a CV to help her'*.

Although none of the trainees revisited NU after their work placement ended, all three continued to receive careers support and advice from the ETE officer and Pathways Team. Such support forms part

of the council's statutory duty to support care leavers by providing help to engage in work, training or education courses. Importantly, leaving care support is most effective when tailored to meet individual need. It was certainly the case that the three young people valued the level of support provided by the Pathways Team during and after their placement. The importance and value of personal as well as practical support is highlighted by YP2 '*[ETE officer]..helped me arrange an interview and I brought in Jobcentre papers cos I find it easier to talk to [him] than someone from the Jobcentre and ...I see him as a friend cos he rings me and asks me to come down to appointments...he won't give up on me and he knows I will turn up but he knows I'm quite bad at dates and times and stuff [so] he takes time to write stuff in the diary ...its very useful to me*'. The fact that this young person's specific needs were identified and addressed; highlights the importance of consistent and reliable adult support.

YP1 and YP3 were also offered targeted careers support after the work placement. For YP1, this included support to take up employment, as the ETE officer explained, '*I accompanied [YP1] to a JSA appointment and [she] applied for a couple of jobs and is now a part time hairdresser [we] also applied for money through JSA for interview clothes, travel etc*'

Outcomes – was the pilot programme a success?

In assessing whether the programme was successful we have considered the overall experience, of the participants, as described in details above, together with the views of those representing the key stakeholders; NU's CE manager and the Pathways Team's ETE officer.

The outcomes and success of the pilot programme can be understood on two levels: the structural and the individual. In terms of the structural outcomes, the pilot programme was successful in producing a tested model of supported work placements for young people leaving care. It enabled the design of the Starting Blocks programme to be implemented and assessed, and allowed the identification of potential obstacles. As NU's CE manager explained, '*we got a model, showing you how the different scenarios worked and the...methods you can go through to solve the problems and issues. So the works been done and that can be plugged in to any business*'. The ETE officer agreed that the pilot had successfully developed a blueprint for future schemes '*[it] has achieved setting up the work experience opportunity ... quicker than we could have done it ...[and] the mentoring role, I think that's one of the crucial parts to ..success of any project like this [and] it worked well, ...we've learned from the experience and now ...we think we can do a lot better planning...we can actively work with Jobcentre Plus..to make sure benefits and the young people... are ready*'.

In terms of personal outcomes, the pilot generally succeeded in providing young people and mentors with a positive experience of participating in a supported work placement scheme. Furthermore, the CE

manager noted that *'a spin off from this is that we end up with trained mentors...once you've got skill...some expertise under your belt, then it can be tapped into whenever'*.

One of the principal aims of the programme was to see whether employment outcomes for young people could be improved. In assessing the extent to which this was successfully achieved, it is important to remember that our 'indicators of success' incorporated 'soft' outcomes, such as increased experience, confidence and self esteem and 'hard' outcomes, such as work skills. In reflecting on whether the pilot project successfully achieved its aims, the ETE officer commented *'if you're looking at ... the softer aspects I think [it] did, but if you're looking at the harder aspects and how many people turned up on how many days .. then I think at first sight it might look like it wasn't overly successful, because ... one of the young women only turned up for one day and went home poorly... so initially that looks like.. that's not been a success but she actually got her foot through the doorso in my eyes that is a success'*. The CE manager agreed that set-backs had occurred but overall the pilot had achieved its aims *'the first week [trainees] were poorly, things which were really out of anybody's control, which caused a glitch in the early part of the pilot. But we expected things, we didn't think it was all going to go smoothly, that's not the way life is. But having said that, the pilot was enormously successful from our point of view, in fact, one of the heads of division was so pleased with [a trainee's] performance that if they'd had a [vacant] post, they would have given it to her'*.

Further indications of success, as described earlier, are evidenced in young people's reports that the experience had increased their confidence and knowledge of different working environments. Furthermore, one of the participants found work within weeks of completing the programme.

Finally, the success of the pilot programme is reflected in the commitment of NU to continue the work placement scheme and the intentions of York Cares to explore the possibility of rolling out the programme across partner businesses. There is also potential for widening the programme to include other vulnerable groups, such as young homeless and young offenders.

As discussed in the concluding chapter, the Starting Blocks pilot programme offers important lessons for the development of future work placement schemes, for care leavers, as well as other vulnerable groups. It also presents a tried and tested model; a map of the possible pit-falls; and suggests ways of overcoming obstacles and challenges.

5. OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS ---

This final chapter provides an overview of the Starting Blocks Project. It reflects on the initial aims of the work experience programme and the extent to which these aims were met. In considering the experiences of young people, mentors and the views of representatives from NU and the Pathways Team, who were directly involved in progressing the pilot programme, we have been able to identify some of the key lessons and challenges in developing and operating a work experience programme.

Introduction

The principal aim of the Starting Blocks Project, to design and operate a programme of supported work placements for care leavers, was realised through the successful implementation of the pilot programme. Further objectives: to gain an understanding of the employment needs of the target group; explore the resources and support necessary for operating the programme; and identify potential barriers to success, were met during both the design and implementation phases of the programme. Furthermore, the pilot programme succeeded in producing a tested model on which to base future work placement programmes.

The main objectives of this report were to describe the impetus for setting up the Starting Blocks Project, the development of the pilot scheme, the views of young people and mentors participating in the scheme and to provide recommendations for future initiatives.

Background

The contextual motivation for the Starting Blocks Project were the challenges to finding and sustaining employment, faced by young people leaving care. In reviewing existing literature on leaving care and consulting with professionals and young people involved with Pathways, the City of York's leaving care service, the review has documented some of the career specific and wider challenges facing some young people as they make the transition from foster or residential care to independent adult living.

As discussed in Chapter 1, young people leaving care face a number of challenges to successfully embarking upon the career ladder. Many have experienced disrupted education (through high rates of truancy, exclusion and care-placement movement), which in turn can result in poor education attainment. Care leavers may be, therefore, significantly disadvantaged when entering an increasingly competitive youth labour market which puts a high premium on academic attainment.

Care leavers may be further disadvantaged through their personal circumstances. Managing the wider challenges of early independent living and for some, coping with personal difficulties such as past trauma and estrangement from family and community support, can present considerable obstacles to finding and sustaining a career. Additionally, care leavers may experience a lack of confidence in their abilities, their potential and their employability.

More generally, the causes and consequences of worklessness, have become an increasing focus of business-led initiatives such as Business in The Community (BiTC) and the wider principle of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Both recognise that the barriers to work encountered by vulnerable groups, such as care leavers, can have an adverse impact upon wider business practice, the economy and the community, as well as personal consequences for the individual. A leading example of such business-led initiatives to help vulnerable groups increase their employability, is Marks and Spencer's Marks & Start programme, which offers over 2,500 work experience placements each year to those who face barriers to finding and sustaining work. A review of the programme highlighted the need for more companies to provide work placements for those who experience difficulties in finding employment. It noted that there are *'over 3.5 million people in the UK who want to work but do not have a job'*.

The Marks & Start programme provided a blueprint for the Starting Blocks Project.

The Starting Blocks Project

As described in Chapter 3, the Starting Blocks Project aimed to develop and test a programme of supported work placements for young people leaving the City of York's Care. The key objectives of the programme were to boost confidence and to help increase the work readiness of the young people.

The project was co-ordinated by York Cares and led by a group of employee volunteers from Norwich Union and The University of York. Key staff from City of York Council (CYC) Pathways Team and Norwich Union (NU) acted as advisors to the project.

The work placement programme incorporated three stages.

- *The Preparation Stage:* This involved providing information and training to both young people and mentors.
- *The Supported Work Placement:* A two week work placement in NU departments. Trainees were allocated a work mentor, received a £10.00 lunch allowance and had the opportunity to apply for work with NU following the placement, should they wish to do so and should a vacancy arise.
- *Post placement support:* Access to follow-up careers support after their placement ended, provided by NU and the Pathways Team.

Review of the Pilot Programme - *Outcomes, Obstacles & Recommendations*

The pilot programme

The pilot programme took place during Autumn 2005. Some delays in start-up were experienced due to lengthy negotiations with Jobcentre Plus to protect young people's state benefits during the period in which they were participating in the work experience programme. Three young people took up work placements with NU. The young people were each paired with a mentor whose role was to meet with them before the placement, as well as supporting them during their time at NU.

The programme experienced some set-backs as a result of low attendance caused by illness amongst young people and mentors. Participation rates for the programme ranged from 10% for one young person who was only able to attend one day, to 80% for another. The remaining young person attended half the overall programme.

Lessons & recommendations

In assessing the outcomes of the pilot programme, as discussed in Chapter 4, we have considered what worked and identified potential obstacles to effective implementation. We have also taken into account the views of those who commissioned the review, the placement provider (NU) and the community client (the Pathways Team).

As indicated in Chapter 4, each of the three phases of the programme: the preparation stage; the supported work placement; and the post placement support, were successfully carried out. Feedback from both young people and mentors suggest that each stage was generally successful in meeting its aims although some difficulties were highlighted.

So, what lessons can we take from the Starting Blocks programme of supported work placements?

Support

First, **the provision of support was considered an essential component of a programme aimed at working with vulnerable groups**. An integral and distinctive element of the Starting Blocks programme was the provision of *supported* work experience placements. Support for trainees existed on several levels; tailored support during the preparation stage, individual support from mentors and members of NU staff during the placement and both career-specific and individual support from the ETE officer after the placement ended. Furthermore, trainees were assisted on a practical, financial and emotional level. Support was a crucial factor in the success of the pilot programme which was fortunate to have both an existing culture of supported work placements within NU and targeted careers support from the Pathways Team ETE officer. As we have seen, young people participating in the programme valued the help they had received throughout each stage of the programme. The inclusion of a support element, whether through the provision of a preparation stage or a work mentor can offer a much-needed source of encouragement, particularly for individuals who may have little or no prior experience of the workplace.

In terms of support from mentors, the pilot programme highlighted some of the key elements of a successful mentoring relationship. These included, matching – making sure that the mentor and trainee were well suited to working with each other. One mentor noted, *‘I think its really important to match people up...make sure they go into the right department [and] that they can actually cope with the skills and they’re the right [person] to join the team’*. Related to this were personality and qualities such as patience, understanding and being non-judgemental. The ability to help the trainee to settle into the environment and make them feel at ease and part of the team was also important. Of equal importance, however, is support for mentors, so that they are able to carry out their role without detriment to their own work. This is discussed further in point six below.

Understanding the needs of the trainees

Second, and related to the previous issue, is **the importance of identifying and addressing the specific needs of the target group**. It is important to gain an understanding of the barriers to employment, faced by the trainees, whether resulting from financial, educational or personal circumstances. It is also important to make some allowance, within the design, implementation and on-going management and evaluation of the work placement programme, for any existing personal circumstances, that might impact upon the trainee’s participation. These will of course vary according to the target group. For example, on a practical level, trainees in receipt of JSA may need time off to sign on, whilst those who are homeless or have a history of difficulties may be required to attend appointments with accommodation providers or other professionals. Emotional difficulties such as self-

esteem, learning difficulties, a lack of confidence or weak communication skills should also be taken into consideration when developing a programme of support for vulnerable groups. Additionally, it is important to set realistic targets and indicators of success. As the Starting Blocks programme found, simply getting trainees through the door can be a significant achievement.

Financial considerations

Third, **it is important to consider the financial implications of participation in a work experience programme**, particularly for young people and adults who are in receipt of state benefits (JSA, housing benefit, incapacity benefits etc). A judicious approach would involve enquiring with Jobcentre Plus or the benefits agencies for advice. Trainees, engaged in education, training or work related activities above a certain number of hours, may run the risk of losing their benefits entitlement. A loss of benefits, as with any form of income, can have a detrimental effect on the trainees' wider living circumstances, something the programme was keen to avoid. Furthermore, as the Starting Blocks Project discovered, interruptions to claiming benefits can have wider consequences than the purely financial. Disruptions to claiming benefits can result in the loss of eligibility to other schemes, which are available for those who have been on benefits for a specific period of time. Additionally, the process of re-applying for benefits can be time-consuming particularly for more complex claims. This latter point is particularly important, as one solution to the financial implications of participation is to provide a 'paid work placement programme'. As NU's CE manager explained *'there were a lot of issues around [benefits,] like housing benefit and things like that..... Even if we'd have paid the students, which was not beyond our capability truthfully..... because of the size of Norwich Union, it's only a few hundred quid, you know, pay them, but it's not that easy once they left [or], if they were ultimately unsuccessful in gaining a place, they can take a while to get back on the housing benefit ladder' .*

For Starting Blocks, a solution to the issue was successfully negotiated with Jobcentre Plus for the purpose of the pilot (i.e. the three participants were registered with Jobcentre Plus as participating in a Work Trial at NU, thereby protecting their benefits). However, the project team's initial lack of awareness of the benefits issue and the time taken to resolve it, had an impact on the timing and duration of the placements. For example, placements were limited to two weeks duration and the selection of participants and the process of training and matching trainees and mentors were postponed until after the work trial agreement had been agreed and signed by Jobcentre Plus and NU. Furthermore, future programmes will be required to seek a more permanent resolution to the benefits issue.

A further point to consider, is that trainees should not be left out of pocket as a consequence of participating in a work placements programme. Travel expenses and lunch allowances should be met, where possible. However, this too may need to be approved by the benefits agency or Jobcentre Plus.

Links with mainstream provision

Fourth, and in line with the recommendations above, **it is worth establishing links with existing structures** such as Jobcentre Plus and the benefits agency, and mainstream initiatives such as the New Deal and training providers. The Starting Blocks pilot programme was able to maintain some independence whilst operating under the existing umbrella of a work trial programme (however, as noted earlier, this will need to be re-negotiated for any continued operation of the programme). It was also able to draw on the North Yorkshire Business Enterprise Partnership (NYBEP) to provide specialist training for mentors. It is worth, therefore, exploring the range of available options, which can be drawn into the programme, or conversely that the programme can be drawn into, to maximise the efficiency and the effectiveness of a work placement programme.

In addition, whilst the main aim of such work training programmes is to assist the trainee to find work, it is important to recognise that such initiatives might well provide a ‘stepping stone’ into similar ‘skills for work’ schemes or mainstream provision such as the New Deal. This may be particularly true for vulnerable or disadvantaged groups who feel unable or reluctant to engage in wider mainstream provision. A supported, time-limited and focused programme, such as Starting Blocks, can increase motivation, confidence and readiness for further support.

Sufficient time for planning and preparation

Fifth, one of the key messages from the Starting Blocks pilot programme was the need to **build in sufficient time for the overall development of the programme and the implementation of each stage**. Allowing adequate time for planning the programme, and allowing for delays due to unforeseen or unanticipated difficulties can assist in producing a well planned and structured programme. It is also important to have a sufficient lead-in phase, which encompasses time for assessing and preparing participants and the appropriate matching of trainees with mentors and with work placements.

In addition, providing a comprehensive programme of preparation for the work placements can help reduce anxiety or reluctance to participate - the trainees feel well-informed and know what to expect. It can also maximise the overall effects of the programme. For example, trainees may receive pre-placement instruction in computer or other employment related skills which they can build upon during the work placement. Furthermore, the preparation stage offers an opportunity to identify and address any work related or wider needs and goals, thus trainees may feel more confident, motivated and encouraged.

Adequate time for a preparation programme for mentors is equally important. One of the difficulties highlighted by the Starting Blocks pilot programme, was the lack of time between the mentors being

asked to participate in the programme, receiving training and beginning their mentoring role. *'I was confronted I think, a couple of days before the induction whether I wanted to do it.... it was straight off and running basically'* (mentor). Avoiding a 'last minute' approach can increase the opportunity for training and for planning the mentoring role, in particular allocating time to organise the role to fit in with existing duties. It can also assist in the structuring of the work placement, for example, having time to identify and plan tasks for the trainee, organise a training schedule and develop induction and information packs.

Recognising the Mentoring role

Sixth, it is necessary to properly **recognise the value of the mentoring role**. Most often, in and outside of the workplace, mentoring is a voluntary activity which involves offering time to support and advise others. The Starting Blocks programme was fortunate in that NU had a well established mentoring scheme, which it was able to channel into. However, one of the findings from the review, suggested that mentors participating in the pilot programme, did not feel that they had improved their existing skills or career opportunities. It is important, therefore, that there is scope to acknowledge the contribution of mentors within the internal structures of the organisation. This includes acknowledging the specific skills necessary to carry out the role and the acquisition of further skills, such as managerial or supervisory experience. This may require the identification of specific routes to recognising achievements either through the staff appraisal system or through an accreditation scheme. As noted earlier, it is also important that staff have sufficient training and time set aside during their working day to carry out the role.

Helping people into work

Finally, the Starting Blocks Project demonstrated a perceptible **need for initiatives aimed at supporting vulnerable groups** to develop skills, work experience and find employment. This was clearly evident in the leaving care literature and in the increasing influence of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and business-led initiatives. It was also acknowledged through the commitment of the Pathways Team, NU and York Cares to progress such a programme and by the young people and mentors who welcomed the opportunity to participate.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Starting Blocks Project provided a valuable opportunity to explore innovative ways of offering careers support. The programme was successful on a number of levels. It designed and developed a supported work placement model tailored to the needs of its target group – young people leaving care in York. Importantly, it had an impact upon those who participated in the programme, offering an insight into work, facilitating the development of new skills and providing work experience

for young people, as well as boosting their confidence and work readiness. Overall, young people and mentors found it a useful and rewarding experience and provided positive feedback on the overall programme. A final measure of its success, and also the need for such a programme, is the willingness on behalf of the project team, NU and the Pathways Team to build upon the Starting Blocks scheme and develop a wider and longer-term programme of support to assist vulnerable young people to enter work.

6. REFERENCES

Biehal, N., Clayden, J., Stein, M. and Wade, J. (1995) *Moving On: Young People and Leaving Care Schemes*, London: HMSO.

Business in The Community (BiTC) website: <http://www.bitc.org.uk/index.html>

DfES (2003a) *statistics of Education: Care Leavers, 2002-2003, England*: London, Department for Education and Skills.

DfES (2003b) *Participation in Education, Training and Employment by 16-18 year olds in England: 2001 and 2002*. London: Department for Education and Skills.

DfES (2005) *Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers): 2004-2005*. London: Department of Education and Skills.

Dixon, J. and Stein, M. (2005) *Leaving Care: Throughcare and Aftercare in Scotland*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Dixon, J., Wade, J., and Weatherly, H. with Byford, S. and Lee, J. (2004) *Young people leaving care: A study of outcomes and costs*. Research Summary, York: University of York.

Jackson, S. (1994) 'Educating children in residential and foster care', *Oxford Review of Education*, 20, 3: 267-279.

Jones, A., Nathan, M. and Westwood, A. (2004) *Marks and Start: Opening the door to Employment?* London: The Work Foundation.

M&S website: 'Helping others to help themselves. Lives changed through access to work'.
www2.marksandspencer.com/the_company/ourcommitmenttosociety

Social Exclusion Unit, (2003) *A Better Education for Children in care*, London: Social Exclusion Unit.

Stein, M. (2004) *Overcoming the Odds: resilience and young people leaving care*, London: JRF.

York Cares Briefing Paper *i*

Induction Pack *ii*

Development Project: Starting Blocks - York Cares

Aim	<p>To produce recommendations for setting up a supported work placement scheme for care leavers in York.</p> <p>City of York Council supports a number of young people in residential and foster care. Around 15 - 20 people aged between 16 and 24 years old leave care each year. Many of these young people leave without a clear idea of what to do next and may face a number of difficulties in adjusting to independent living. There is great potential for York's employers to support these young people through a holistic work-placement scheme, incorporating employee mentoring.</p>
Project activities	<p>A team is required to work together to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• consult with Children's Services and care-leavers about the needs of young people leaving care• talk to providers of similar programmes, e.g. Marks & Spencer and Business in the Community• assess the barriers to setting up a scheme: what has proved problematic in other cases?• investigate the support and resources needed to set up a successful scheme• make recommendations about next steps to City of York Council and the York Cares Leadership Team.
Community partner	<p>The Pathways Team at Children's Services support young people leaving care by working with them to produce an individualised plan based on their needs and skills. They also co-ordinate a newsletter and social activities. A work placement scheme tailored to the needs of young people adjusting to independent living would greatly enhance the support they are able to provide to care leavers.</p>
Commitment	<p>A flexible commitment from each volunteer of around twenty-five hours over 12 weeks is required. This will involve regular meetings with the community partner, liaising with other team members and producing a final report.</p>
Team members	<p>We are looking for 3-5 enthusiastic people who can contribute one or more of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• HR expertise• time and project management skills• ability to work in a team and liaise with an number of organisations• an ability to work with a wide range of clients• an enthusiasm for working with young people with a wide range of needs
Benefits	<p>This Development Project will provide opportunities for employees to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• work in collaboration with other businesses across the city and region• develop project, time management and inter-personal skills• provide the groundwork for a city-wide scheme in collaboration with City of York Council

Personal information

I shall be working at (organisation's name in full)

Address

Telephone Number

Mentors name

Dates of my work experience From To

My working hours From To

Dress code

Uniform Shirt / Tie Smart Casual

Overalls boots other

These will be provided by:

Me the company Children's Services

I should not wear _____

Travel arrangements

In order to get to work on time, I will need to leave home at: _____

I will travel by _____

(Travel costs we be provided by Children's services)

Tea / coffee breaks

Time _____ How Long are they? _____

Lunch arrangements

My lunch break is between _____ and _____

packed lunch canteen lunch provided

other

Young person's health and safety information

Your employer is responsible for your health and safety at work, and they should explain the main risks involved in your place of work. If necessary, you may be provided with safety equipment or protective clothing.

However, you also have a responsibility for you own health and safety and for the safety of those who work with you. You are expected to take care and to safeguard yourself and others.

You will need to:

- Learn the health and safety rules in your place of work and obey them
- Use all safety equipment and protective clothing provided (if applicable)
- Ask your mentor if you don't understand any instructions
- Report anything that seems dangerous, damaged or faulty
- Make sure you know how to report an accident or injury at work
- Know what to do if there is a fire or a fire practice where you are working
- Know what equipment you are allowed to use/should not use

Complete the following checklist:

I have received information about health and safety rules

I know what equipment I can use

I know what equipment I cannot use

I have been shown how to operate all equipment safely

I know the fire procedures

I know the first aid and accident procedures

I know where the toilets are located

I know when I can have a break

I know when and where I can eat my lunch

Work experience diary

Please complete this diary each day, it will help you complete the evaluation sheets and act as a discussion point with your mentor and the ETE officer.

Date:

Describe the activities you were involved in today

What tasks were you given?

What do you think you did well?

What do you think you could have done better?

What did you learn?

What skills did you use? (give brief details)

Communication

Personal and social

Literacy and numeracy

Problem solving

Practical skills

Other

Young person's self evaluation report: Week One

It will be useful to refer to your work experience diary to complete this report. This report will be useful, as it will show how much progress you have made during your placement.

Name:

Name of Mentor:

Name of Organisation:

	<i>Excellent</i>	Good	Fair	Needs improvement
Communication skills				
Talking & listening				
Expressing own ideas				
Recording clear messages				
Using telephone, e-mail, IT				
Communicating confidently				
Personal qualities & social skills				
Respecting equal opportunities				
Dealing with the public				
Developing good relationships with colleagues / mentor				
Being responsible and reliable				
Time keeping & punctuality				
Dressing appropriately				
Ability to accept praise				
Ability to accept criticism				
Hard working and willing to learn				
Motivation and enthusiasm				
Ability to understand & follow instructions				
Honesty				
Numeracy & Literacy Skill				
Using numbers				
Reading				
Writing				
Problem Solving				
Overcoming problems				
Using own initiative				
Being able to ask for help				

Please add any other comments you may wish to make about your work experience on the back of this sheet.

Signature

Date

Mentor's evaluation report

Name:

Name of Mentor:

Name of Organisation:

	<i>Excellent</i>	Good	Fair	Needs improvement
Communication skills				
Talking & listening				
Expressing own ideas				
Recording clear messages				
Using telephone, e-mail, IT				
Communicating confidently				
Personal qualities & social skills				
Respecting equal opportunities				
Dealing with the public				
Developing good relationships with colleagues / mentor				
Being responsible and reliable				
Time keeping & punctuality				
Dressing appropriately				
Ability to accept praise				
Ability to accept criticism				
Hard working and willing to learn				
Motivation and enthusiasm				
Ability to understand & follow instructions				
Honesty				
Numeracy & Literacy Skill				
Using numbers				
Reading				
Writing				
Problem Solving				
Overcoming problems				
Using own initiative				
Being able to ask for help				

Please add any other comments you may wish to make about your work experience on the back of this sheet.

Signature

Date