

Lewisham case study

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Learning and Work Institute

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Lewisham case study

1. Local Context and Strategic Positioning

Lewisham Council has a long-standing commitment to supporting care-experienced young people (CEYP) into education, employment, and training (EET). Previous initiatives, including the DfE-funded I-Aspire programme and a three-year programme with Drive Forward Foundation (DFF) that began in March 2020, informed the current approach. A strong Virtual School underpins Full Potential delivery, supporting CEYP transitions from Year 13.

2. Overview of delivery model

Lewisham's Full Potential delivery model is designed to be innovative, inclusive and sustainable, with a strong emphasis on test-and-learn. Key components include:

- **Trauma-informed career coaching**, delivered by DFF, offering personalised, case-loaded support for CEYP not yet ready for formal EET pathways.
- **Six-month Intermediary Labour Market (ILM) placements** with local employers, designed as a supported bridge into the competitive labour market.
- **Six-month Paid Council internships**, ring-fenced for CEYP and supported throughout by DFF advisors.
- **Mentoring provision**, deliberately commissioned across three providers with different engagement strengths, including grassroots youth engagement and a specialist digital mentoring platform.
- **Functional skills and foundation learning**, with plans to integrate English and maths provision and move towards the Skills Builder framework.
- **Training for Personal Advisors**, aimed at embedding careers knowledge and improving pathway planning beyond the life of the pilot.

3. Targeting, referral and early engagement

Young people were primarily referred through the Leaving Care service, with co-location at the Leaving Care hub supporting warm referrals and relationship-based engagement. DFF advisors attended the hub regularly and worked closely with Personal Advisors (PAs) to identify suitable participants. Additional efforts were made to generate referrals through Jobcentre Plus, although this route proved more limited.

Ring-fenced opportunities for care leavers and the voluntary relationship with advisors differentiated the Full Potential initiative from other forms of support, which helped to engage young people with the programme.

4. Partnership model and roles

Lewisham's model relies on close partnership between the borough, DFF, and commissioned mentoring and training providers. The borough retained a strong commissioning and coordination role, while DFF led frontline delivery and employer engagement, drawing on established partnerships.

Employer engagement was supported through close working between the Jobs and Skills team, the Business Support team and Social Value colleagues. This enabled the borough to use economic development tools to create placement opportunities for CEYP, including supporting small local businesses to host ILM placements.

5. Support during and after participation

Support for young people was intensive and relationship-based. DFF advisors provided regular one-to-one contact, often weekly, and acted as a consistent point of support alongside PAs. The voluntary nature of the relationship was important to build trust with young people who were managing multiple professionals in other areas of their lives. Advisors supported young people through CV development, applications, interview preparation, insight days and placements, and maintained contact during and after placements to reduce anxiety about next steps. DFF advisors also accompanied young people to initial work experience where needed and offered training to employers on supporting CEYP.

“From my experience, young people, particularly care leavers, they don't get these opportunities in terms of being in front of big companies, corporate companies, in that environment, it might be a bit scary for them. That's why I go along and make sure to support, because it can be quite frightening.” *(DFF delivery staff)*

6. What's working: early successes and emerging strengths

Early outcomes for young people included increased confidence, improved mental health and progression towards EET. Delivery staff reported visible gains in motivation and essential skills, particularly among those moving into ILM placements.

DFF reported successful placement outcomes, including nine ILMs or internships, progression into apprenticeships and training, and one young person being offered a permanent role following a Council internship. These outcomes were more common among young people who entered the programme closer to job-readiness.

From the young person perspective, access to ring-fenced opportunities, networking events and consistent advisor support made a significant difference in developing their skills and providing valuable experience to put on their CV.

7. Challenges and barriers

Challenges and barriers in Lewisham's Full Potential programme have included:

- **Delays in finalising contracts and compliance guidance** reduced the available delivery window and required delivery staff to retrospectively complete paperwork with young people who were already engaged.
- **Engagement** was lower than anticipated in the early stages due to slow mobilisation and a prolonged period with only one DFF career advisor in post, which constrained outreach capacity and contributed to delays in building caseloads.
- **Referral flow has been inconsistent**, requiring sustained effort to generate sufficient starts, particularly given the high attrition typical when working with CEYP.
- **Employer experience highlighted risks associated with rushed placement matching and insufficient early preparation, guidance and check-ins.** This was a particular challenge for small business start-ups with limited capacity to absorb additional demands when adjusting to the needs and barriers of CEYP.

8. Innovations and promising practice

Innovative and successful practices have included:

- **Use of ILMs as a structured bridge** between employability support and the competitive labour market.
- **Commissioning multiple mentoring providers** with distinct engagement approaches to reach young people furthest from employment.
- **Leveraging economic development funding** to support small businesses to host CEYP placements.
- **Co-location of advisors** within the Leaving Care hub and giving presentations at the Jobcentre to support trust-based engagement.

9. Learning and implications for broader rollout

Lewisham's experience highlights several lessons for future Youth Guarantee delivery:

- **Longer lead-in and delivery periods** are essential to build trust, mobilise partners and support CEYP into sustained outcomes.
- **Clarity and consistency on compliance from the outset** is critical to avoid undermining frontline delivery.
- **ILMs and transitional pathways** are valuable for CEYP but require strong employer preparation and ongoing support.
- **Local labour market conditions and transport access** must be factored into delivery design.

Young Person: Amy

1. Background and referral pathway

Amy is a 22-year-old care-experienced young person (CEYP) who recently completed a three-month internship at the City of London Corporation through Lewisham's Full Potential initiative. Prior to joining the programme, she had experienced a prolonged period of unemployment. She completed her GCSEs and began A-levels but did not finish them, and later started an apprenticeship in Business Administration which she had to leave due to personal circumstances. Amy described having limited awareness of career options and available support, alongside challenges navigating housing and health transitions after leaving care.

"I wasn't very aware of, like the career paths or options that I had or was eligible for. (...) I didn't have that much support around me, and I didn't really know what support was available." *(Amy)*

Amy was referred to Drive Forward Foundation (DFF) after her Personal Advisor left and an apprentice social worker encouraged her to seek specialist employment support. After several attempts to engage her via phone call over a month, a DFF career specialist emailed Amy with information about DFF and invited her to an informal barbecue to meet other young people before deciding whether to join. Amy decided to attend for the food, but this event proved to be a key turning point:

"I've never had this support offered to me before; I've never known of anything like this to exist. I just thought, what would be the point? But because that day I was so hungry, I went literally, basically for the food, and then through that, more opportunities came from that." *(Amy)*

Seeing the supportive environment and meeting other care leavers, including one about to start a civil service role, encouraged Amy to sign up.

"She just thought that we were just like any other provider or the Jobcentre. But it was quite relaxed. There was no pressure. You're not getting sanctioned if you don't attend your job search activities. It's just a case of in your own time when you're ready. So she met a few people, she made a few friends, and that's when the ball started rolling, and she started." *(DFF career specialist)*

2. Goals and expectations

At the point of referral, Amy was feeling discouraged after a long period out of work. She was motivated to engage because Full Potential opportunities were ring fenced for care leavers, which felt distinct from other services she had encountered.

"I just felt hopeless, and just thought like it's worth a shot, because I literally have been struggling for so long, and I think all the suggestions that were made to me, none of them were actually ring-fenced to only care leavers, so I thought that this might be a bit different." (Amy)

She was hoping to get employment advice and support to progress into a career, as well as gain confidence, be able to communicate better and learn networking skills.

3. Experience of support

Amy began one-to-one support with a DFF career specialist, which included CV development, internship applications, mock interviews and regular wellbeing check-ins. She was able to secure an internship at City of London Corporation through the Full Potential programme, which provided her with valuable skills and experience to add to her CV to be able to progress in her career field of interest. Amy also attended networking events and employability workshops with DFF's corporate partners. She found the networking events particularly useful as they provided exposure to senior professionals that she wouldn't have otherwise had the opportunity to meet, and it helped build her communication skills.

She described having a supportive relationship with her DFF career specialist, who shared their own lived experience of being a care leaver and having ADHD. This gave Amy confidence and reassurance that it was still possible to progress in a career.

"I told her that I had ADHD, and I said to her that I didn't really have much hope in interviews and getting into employment, because a lot of the time when I attend an interview I kind of have, like, brain fog. She assured me that she also had ADHD and how she progressed into her career, and that really resonated with me. (...) That gave me a bit of confidence and encouragement." (Amy)

4. Types of support received

- **Practical support:** One-to-one support with a DFF career specialist, including CV writing, internship applications, mock interviews, and job-search activity. Amy's DFF specialist got her to attend networking events and set up a LinkedIn profile to build her professional brand and connect with sector professionals.
- **Social/emotional support:** Amy's DFF career specialist provided confidence-building and motivational support, alongside regular wellbeing check-ins. By offering relaxed, voluntary support and maintaining flexible, open communication and support, she helped rebuild Amy's trust in employment services after more pressurised experiences elsewhere, including from JCP.

- **Specialist support:** Amy was provided with financial support for interview clothing and travel to and from interviews or workshops. She was also given better-off calculations for work and benefits.
- **Delivery methods:** Primarily one-to-one support, alongside group networking events, workshops with corporate partners, and social events with other CEYP.

5. What worked well and why

A key factor in Amy's journey was the one-to-one relationship with her career specialist, who provided encouragement and reassurance throughout Amy's journey. The relaxed, voluntary nature of the support, combined with regular check-ins and practical help, such as travel costs, helped Amy stay engaged over time. Networking opportunities also played a central role, including events and creating a LinkedIn profile, which supported Amy to develop a professional personal brand and learn how to make connections.

6. Outcomes and changes

Through Full Potential, Amy completed a three-month Admin internship at the City of London Corporation, which she found highly valuable for her CV and for progressing towards a career in government and the civil service. She reported significant improvements in confidence and communication, particularly when speaking to professionals.

She also developed strong networking skills and now uses LinkedIn independently to seek out opportunities. Her DFF career specialist also noted her rapid growth in professionalism after participating in the programme. From her DFF career specialist's perspective, Amy showed clear growth in self-belief after securing her internship. She also had the opportunity to meet an MP at an event and got the chance to speak and ask questions, which built her confidence.

"She was so 'gassed', in her terminology, that she had been given the opportunity to speak up. She's been to a lot of events where she's spoken, and she would never have dreamed of doing that." *(DFF career specialist)*

7. Suggestions for improvement

Amy suggested having more government internships ring-fenced for CEYP and longer internships to provide more financial stability and time to secure a next role.

8. Future ambitions and next steps

Amy is now focused on pursuing a career in politics, government or the civil service and is seeking entry-level roles with opportunities for progression. She has also expressed a desire to work with CEYP in the future. She feels that the support she received from DFF made it possible to achieve her goals.