

Southwark case study

June 2026

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Southwark case study

1. Local Context and Strategic Positioning

Southwark Council has a longstanding commitment to supporting care-experienced young people (CEYP), particularly those who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Historically, support for CEYP into EET has been fragmented, with individual efforts across departments but no coordinated strategy. Southwark's Full Potential initiative is being used to formalise and integrate these efforts into a cohesive, borough-wide pathway.

Southwark is leveraging its network of anchor employers and strategic partners (including the Southwark Skills Partnership, local FE providers, and the Integrated Care System) to expand opportunities for CEYP beyond council roles. The ambition is to ensure that all support systems are accessible to CEYP, recognising their need for additional support at every stage.

2. Overview of delivery model

Southwark's Full Potential delivery model is structured, multi-disciplinary and designed to be embedded across the council and its partners. Delivery is a mix of in-house and commissioned provision, including Bosco College, Southwark College, and the Adult Learning Service. It includes:

- **Intensive one-month employability programme:** One-week employability skills programme hosted by the leaving care team, followed by a two-week work experience placement within council departments, followed by a final week of progression planning with Jobcentre Plus work coaches. Managers receive training and support to prepare for hosting CEYP, including a two-hour training session delivered by children's rights officers and informal pre-placement meet-and-greets to set expectations and build confidence on both sides.
- **Functional skills support:** CEYP without functional skills qualifications are signposted to adult learning courses or bespoke provision at the care leavers hub, depending on demand and preferences.
- **Extended EET advisor:** Full Potential funding used to extend Virtual School support for CEYP up to age 21, to enhance the IAG offer and bridge the gap in 18+ support.
- **Wraparound mental health support:** Delivered by The Nest, Southwark's open-access adolescent mental health service, with tailored wellbeing support for CEYP accessing employment.
- **Cross-system oversight group:** A multi-agency group including representatives from children's services, the Local Economy team, Virtual School, HR/OD, local

employers, and Speakerbox (Children in Care Council). This group provides strategic oversight, challenge and drives cultural change across the system.

- **Co-production with young people through Speakerbox**, directly informing mentoring and careers activity suited to young people's needs.
- **Employability grants and incentives:** Support packages include free travel, leisure memberships, clothing allowances and technology access.

3. Targeting, referral and early engagement

CEYP are primarily recruited through personal advisors (PAs) and social workers from the leaving care teams. Additional promotion is done through the Children in Care Council newsletter and WhatsApp broadcast channel, but self-referrals are rare.

Delivery staff emphasised the importance of activities and support being manageable for each individual young person. This is important in sustaining their engagement, particularly for CEYP with additional needs or barriers such as mental health, housing, caring responsibilities or immigration restrictions. Short-term (5-10 day) work experience placements are a suitable first step for those with additional needs.

4. Partnership model and roles

The Full Potential initiative mostly works with internal stakeholders within Southwark Council. Internal departments are actively encouraged to offer placements, supported by preparation and ongoing advice. They also work in partnership with their clinical service to offer emotional support during the work experience. The internal employer interviewed highlighted the value of a patient, empathetic approach while maintaining clear workplace standards. Care leavers select their placement area based on interest after meeting managers from different departments, reinforcing choice and motivation.

Speakerbox plays a central role as a system partner rather than a delivery add-on. Young people were consulted at the outset and throughout the programme, directly shaping elements such as mentoring and careers events.

Southwark also draws on a strong network of existing employer and training provider partnerships to widen access to opportunities. These include Springboard Hospitality, Growing Talent and specialist organisations working with people with experience of the criminal justice system. These partnerships enable CEYP to access work experience and training without formal qualification or experience requirements, and in some cases provide a direct route into employment following placement.

5. Support during and after participation

Support for CEYP is intensive, personalised and joined-up. Delivery staff work closely with PAs, clinical practitioners and JCP work coaches to address barriers as they arise. Work experience at the Council involves an induction week and three-day workshop

that prepares young people for the realities of work including attendance, professional behaviour and communication, alongside practical support such as buying work attire.

During placements, advisors maintain close contact and adjust hours or days where necessary. Engagement continues after placements end, with progression discussions focused on training, apprenticeships or work opportunities rather than allowing young people to fall back into inactivity. Certificates and celebration events are used to recognise achievement and reinforce positive attitudes towards work.

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

Early delivery has shown promising signs, particularly in relation to confidence, self-worth and work readiness. Three CEYP have already been placed with Southwark's leisure services, leading to minimum 12-week casual contracts. Delivery staff reported that many participants had never worked before or sustained a full working day, and that understanding workplace routines was a significant achievement in itself.

Employer feedback highlighted confidence, responsibility and eagerness to work as the most visible outcomes, alongside transferrable skills such as communication, basic IT and writing. Having an empathetic, trauma-informed approach to the barriers CEYP face and making adjustments for young people on the work experience helped support them to progress. A young person reflected that they felt integrated into the team during their work experience at the Council.

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7. Challenges and barriers

Some challenges and barriers in Southwark's Full Potential programme have included:

- **Delayed funding mobilisation** constrained early recruitment and shortened the delivery window.
- **Engagement** remains challenging for some CEYP facing mental health issues, childcare responsibilities, housing instability, immigration restrictions or safety concerns linked to postcode territories. Employers also highlighted that **many CEYP lacked basic skills** due to not finishing school, which was a barrier to quick progression into job outcomes. Staff emphasised the need to balance targets with a realistic understanding of the time needed for CEYP progression:

"It takes more than two weeks to totally change several years of not feeling good enough. But it's the process. It's part of the process."
(Delivery staff)

- **Not all internal departments that pledged placements have followed through**, although a sufficient pool remains to sustain monthly cycles.

8. Innovations and promising practice

Innovative and successful practices have included:

- **Facilitated careers clinics** with Virtual School advisors actively supporting young people to engage with professionals.
- **Southwark's clinical team offers emotional support and training to managers hosting placements**, so they are better able to understand and support CEYP.
- **Flexible Functional skills programme open to 16+** as an alternative for those who don't want to go to college, with the option of one-to-one and online support.

9. Learning and implications for broader rollout

Southwark's experience highlights several lessons for wider Youth Guarantee delivery:

- **Time and flexibility are essential:** building confidence and readiness for CEYP often precedes employment outcomes.
- **Preparation of both young people and employers** is critical to placement quality.
- **Youth voice must shape delivery in practice**, not just design.
- **Structured progression pathways and ring-fenced opportunities for care leavers** help CEYP understand what comes next after their work experience.

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Young Person: Imani

1. Background and referral pathway

Imani is an 18-year-old care-experienced young person (CEYP) who is about to begin a 12-month civil service internship through Southwark Council's care leavers offer. Prior to joining Southwark's Full Potential programme, she had completed her GCSEs but did not go on to college and was unemployed.

Imani was supported by a Personal Advisor (PA) and key worker. She first heard about Full Potential when a Southwark Council advisor sent her information about work experience opportunities and asked whether she would like to take part. She agreed, as she wanted to gain work experience to help her find a job.

2. Goals and expectations

Imani's expectations of Full Potential were limited and very practical. Her main goal was to gain work experience to improve her chances of finding a job. She did not initially frame Full Potential as a support programme and did not expect broader forms of assistance or outcomes beyond gaining experience to add to her CV.

"I don't see work experience as support; I just see it as an extra (...) It's given me experience for jobs." (*Imani*)

3. Experience of support

Imani's engagement with the Full Potential programme focused on work experience placements within Southwark Council. She completed multiple placements across different departments, including the electoral department, governance, insurance, the Mayor's office and the housing department.

Her first work experience placement lasted for one month, followed by a further two-week placement in the housing department. In the electoral department, her role included managing mail, sending out canvassing communications and sorting returned correspondence. In housing, she supported triage activity and interviews.

Imani noted that she is not particularly social and took part in the programme primarily for the work itself rather than to build relationships. Despite this, she highlighted that staff were positive, helpful and welcoming.

"They're positive people. If you don't understand something, they will help you. They're helpful (...) They make you feel welcome." (*Imani*)

4. Types of support received

- **Practical support:** Multiple work experience placements across council departments, providing exposure to office-based work, administrative tasks and

professional environments and, importantly, translating into experience that could be included on her CV.

- **Social/emotional support:** A supportive and welcoming workplace environment and staff who were available to explain tasks and offer help when needed.
- **Delivery methods:** In-person work experience within multiple council departments and day-to-day support from staff in hosting teams.

5. What worked well and why

The most important aspect of the Full Potential programme for Imani was gaining work experience. While she acknowledged that she is not a social person, she found colleagues welcoming and appreciated being treated as a legitimate member of staff rather than as a peripheral work-experience participant.

"The good thing about the programme is when you're doing work experience, they don't treat you like we're just there for work experience. They treat you like you're actually a member of staff, which is nice." *(Imani)*

6. Outcomes and changes

Through the Full Potential programme, Imani gained multiple examples of work experience that she could include on her CV. This directly contributed to her securing an interview with Barnet Council, which she attributed to her experience in the electoral department at Southwark Council. She mentioned that she also feels she gained confidence through taking part in the Full Potential programme.

Imani is now about to begin a 12-month civil service internship through Southwark's care leavers team. She applied for this internship prior to joining Full Potential and was unsure whether it was formally part of Full Potential support, but viewed her work experience as helpful preparation.

"I wasn't expecting anything out of it. I just wanted to gain experience and I gained experience. (...) It was just helpful as I got work experience and it's on my CV." *(Imani)*

7. Suggestions for improvement

Imani did not suggest any ways the support could have been improved and was satisfied that Full Potential delivered the work experience she was looking for.

8. Future ambitions and next steps

Imani is about to start her 12-month civil service internship and plans to use this opportunity to explore different career paths. She has not committed to a specific long-term role and is open to seeing where the internship leads.

"I'm going to start my internship and see where that takes me. I might stay in the civil service department, or I might swap to another job role."
(Imani)