

Tower Hamlets case study

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Tower Hamlets case study

1. Local Context and Strategic Positioning

Tower Hamlets' Full Potential initiative aimed to mobilise the council's resources and build links between support for care experienced young people (CEYP) and other youth initiatives, creating a comprehensive package of support for the target group.

The council's Throughcare Service has a cohort of around 50 NEET care experienced young people aged between 17-21. The borough expanded the age range of Full Potential to include those aged 21-25, as they recognised that this is a key age in which CEYP are still making transitions and need support.

2. Overview of delivery model

The plan for Tower Hamlets' Full Potential initiative was developed by the leaving care and employment and skills teams. It involved a structured programme for those closer to work, alongside activities for those facing more significant barriers. All participants had one-to-one support from an IAG Officer. The structured programme involved:

- A **four-week employability course**, which covered topics such as managing risk-taking behaviours, emotional resilience, workplace expectations, employability skills, and short, accredited courses such as customer service and IT skills.
- A **three-month mentored work placement**. Young people were matched to internal placements based on their interests and approaches to work.
- The opportunity to **apply for a council apprenticeship**. Of the 11 young people who had completed a placement, six were shortlisted for an apprenticeship and four were offered roles. Others were kept on a talent pool list.

Activities and support offered to those further away from work included:

- **Level 2 digital inclusion and customer service** courses. The digital course was remote, developed for young people who struggled to access in-person courses.
- **CSCS card and SIA badge** courses with private training providers.
- **Job fairs and open days** to promote opportunities to young people.

Borough staff also provided financial support to those at risk of becoming NEET; for example, they purchased tools, PPE, laptops and English and maths tuition.

3. Targeting, referral and early engagement

Referrals to the programme were mainly received from social workers and leaving care workers. Some young people self-referred; the team put up posters in the hubs in which they worked, and others heard about the programme from friends.

During the onboarding process, staff met young people in person or over the phone if they did not feel comfortable to travel, and discussed their short- and long-term goals and barriers in relation to work, using this to create a tailored action plan.

4. Partnership model and roles

The key partnerships were across internal council teams. The employment and skills team and the leaving care team worked closely together for referrals and delivery. IAG Officers drew on the Workpath team's employability offer for residents to engage young people in workshops on interview skills, job applications and CVs. The employer engagement team were key in sourcing internal and external work placements.

Some external partnerships were also strengthened. One of the dedicated IAG Officers was based at Poplar HARCA, a housing association that houses CEYP, and a familiar space for them to engage. Staff also utilised local training providers to offer Functional Skills and other short courses. One provider was commissioned to deliver the digital inclusion course.

5. Support during and after participation

The structured programme offered a clear progression pathway for young people on this route, through employability skills training, through to a three-month work placement and—for a small number—onto apprenticeships at the council. Throughout, all young people had support from their PA or social worker, as well as a dedicated IAG Officer who met with them regularly to review their progress and provide support around employability skills. While on placement, young people also had a mentor who they could go to with any issues.

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

Reflections from borough staff highlighted the strong commitment from all teams as a key strength of delivery. This has enabled staff to source a range of opportunities which matched young people's interests, which in turn has been crucial in boosting motivation and maintaining engagement throughout.

Removing financial barriers to engagement has also been important. This included paying young people for their time on training and on placement, as well as funding travel costs, laptops and other materials and equipment for courses.

The borough has had some early successful outcomes. This included the four young people who secured council apprenticeships after their placement. Anecdotal evidence from staff also suggested young people had improved their confidence and motivation to engage in employment; feel more positive about long-term aspirations and a clearer idea of how to achieve them; and gained experience and skills.

"It gives them a reference. It gives them insight into the real world of work. It's given them the opportunity to experience work for three months, get up in the morning, have something being able to look forward to and get paid." (*Borough staff*)

7. Challenges and barriers

Staff experienced some challenges with the initial engagement of young people due to their experiences of trauma and being let down by services. All staff received trauma-informed training prior to delivery, which they found useful in understanding young people's situations and working with them in an empathetic way.

Some staff also struggled to get ID for many young people. To overcome this, they contacted leaving care workers who tended to have these documents on file, avoiding the need to ask young people and risk them disengaging. The compliance requirements also created a barrier for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People to participate, as they did not have the right to remain or work.

"The fact that central government is funding for them to be in care and be entitled to a leaving care service, it made no sense to me that I'm excluding them from a central government fund." (*Borough staff*)

Communication between teams and internal staff hosting work placements was also a challenge at times. Borough staff felt they would have benefitted from more information about young people's support needs at referral, so they could tailor support more effectively. Similarly, staff hosting work placements felt the initial information they received about the needs of their young person was lacking.

"I don't think I had enough time to prepare. I made it work. But I think if I was involved earlier, it would have been different." (*Internal employer*)

8. Innovations and promising practice

The main innovation of Tower Hamlets' initiative was the structured programme offered to young people with the tangible opportunity to interview for an apprenticeship at the end. The remote digital inclusion course was also identified as a key innovation by staff, enabled by the flexibility that the Trailblazer allowed.

9. Learning and implications for broader rollout

Key learnings and practice that could be replicated elsewhere included:

- Delivering **trauma-informed training to staff** prior to delivery
- Offering **paid, ring-fenced training and work placement** opportunities
- Having **mentors during placements**, for young people to go to on informal issues

- **Council departments working together** to boost engagement and source a range of opportunities which match young people's interests
- Consideration of **adjustments to compliance requirements for Asylum Seeking Young People**, so they can also benefit from the programme
- The **importance of clear information about young people's support needs** at the start of placements and other activities, to inform effective support approaches

Young Person: Yusuf

1. Background and referral pathway

Yusuf, 25, joined Tower Hamlets' Full Potential initiative through an employability project he was already involved in with the council. Prior to this, he had been out of work due to his physical and mental health and had only had short-term jobs in retail and warehousing. Yusuf explained how he wanted to start building a career. This was inspired by his Personal Advisor who gave him excellent support, and wanting to make his family and community proud.

"A lot of people, bear in mind, didn't have much faith in me growing up. And I thought, as long as I got faith in myself, I know I could do what I want to do in life. And that's when I just ended up changing my life around." (*Yusuf*)

At this point, Yusuf joined a three-month work placement at the council as a community researcher where he created magazines and articles for care leavers. His work on the project secured him a six-month internship producing more articles and blogs and using his lived experience to provide advice to other young people. Alongside this, he completed courses in his own time to start gaining qualifications.

Yusuf was on his internship when he was offered a place on Full Potential by Tower Hamlets' Employment Support team. He attended a meeting with his internship manager who asked him to email her with the answers to a few questions about why he wanted to join Full Potential, what he wanted to get out of it and how it would help him in the future. Yusuf felt that this was to check that he was committed to the programme. He sent the email and was accepted.

2. Goals and expectations

Yusuf was keen to engage in Full Potential as he wanted to secure a long-term role once his internship came to an end. His manager explained that the programme would involve employability skills training and a three-month work placement, at the end of which he would have the chance to interview for an apprenticeship role at the council. This was very appealing to Yusuf as a progression route.

3. Experience of support

The initial seven-week employability programme at took place at Poplar HARCA, a local housing association hub. It covered topics such as customer service, digital skills, building a CV, and first aid. Some of the topics were accredited, which Yusuf appreciated as he had no qualifications from school.

After completing his training, Yusuf moved onto his work placement. He was initially placed in Tower Hamlets' education team; completing administrative tasks such as supporting enrolment at different sites, reception duties and booking learners onto

courses. However, after the initial enrolment period, his workload dropped considerably. He spoke to his manager and asked if he could move to a busier department to gain more experience.

Yusuf's manager took this on board and moved him to the Work Path team, who support local residents into employment. Yusuf appreciated that his manager took action and responded quickly to his feedback. In his second role, Yusuf helped the tracking and monitoring team with paperwork for compliance, as well as uploading live vacancies for programme participants to apply for.

4. Types of support received

Most of the support Yusuf received was focused on employability. As well as his initial training, Yusuf had a one-to-one Work Path Advisor while on placement to help with job applications, CVs and other employability support. She also helped him prepare for his apprenticeship interview towards the end of his placement. Yusuf found this useful and although his advisor was very busy, she always gave him excellent support with his CV and job applications.

Social and emotional support mainly came from his manager on placement, who Yusuf found it easy to speak to about issues in and outside of work. He appreciated that she treated him as an adult and employee, not a young person on work experience.

"She was with me talking and being nice and stuff like that. It was a way to open our relationship and talk about a bit more, not just in work, but in a personal perspective as well... which kind of helps in this environment." *(Yusuf)*

5. What worked well and why

Yusuf felt that the structure of the programme worked well; especially for young people who had not previously worked, starting with the employability training was useful. He highlighted that the work placement was initially going to be for three months but was extended to six months after he started. He felt this was important to avoid a time out of work between the placement ending and his apprenticeship starting, and that this should be considered for any programme where there is a planned next step for participants.

Yusuf also highlighted the support he received while on his placement, from both his manager as Work Path Advisor, as key elements of the programme that helped him to make the most of the opportunity.

6. Outcomes and changes

The main outcome Yusuf achieved through Full Potential was his Level 2 customer service apprenticeship in the council's residential hub. He was one of only four of the 11 young people on the programme to be successful in applying for an apprenticeship.

Yusuf also felt that he had improved a range of skills and capabilities through his placement. He mentioned that his confidence had grown greatly; he has since been asked to give presentations at young care leaver open days held by the council and felt that he would not have had the confidence to do this before his placement.

Yusuf gained experience in administrative work and workflow systems and said he would now feel confident using these in future roles. He also gained skills in handling customer enquiries and communicating with the public. He highlighted teamwork and his professionalism as areas he felt had particularly improved. He built good relationships with his colleagues and felt part of the team.

Working at the council also gave Yusuf a good understanding of the different services and support he can access, and he would be confident to use these if needed.

"I feel like there's a lot of people that I know... from across different departments that I've managed to network with. So I feel like there's always someone that I can go to if I need some kind of advice or point of direction." *(Yusuf)*

7. Suggestions for improvement

The main suggestion Yusuf had for improving the programme was to ensure that all staff involved had a good understanding of care leavers and the fact that they may need more time and support to transition into work. Specifically, Yusuf highlighted the importance of staff getting to know individual young people and understanding how they work, as that makes a big difference to the support they receive.

"I think an improvement is understanding the young people's situation... to understand how to work with them a bit better. Not everyone can understand the professional placement in work, so they need to have a bit of time to adjust, know how the work system works inside, especially for those who might have learning needs." *(Yusuf)*

8. Future ambitions and next steps

Yusuf's long-term ambition was to become a Personal Advisor (PA) so he can help other young people and inspire them in the way his PA did for him.

"...she was one of the reasons why I want to now give back to the community and help out and make sure other young people in the borough don't go through what I went through growing up." *(Yusuf)*

He felt that Full Potential and his subsequent apprenticeship have given him valuable experience and skills to help him towards this long-term goal.