

Westminster case study

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Westminster case study

1. Local Context and strategic positioning

Westminster has approximately 300–400 care leavers, with around 100 identified as NEET. Many do not live in the borough due to high accommodation costs. The borough has recently recognised care experience as a protected characteristic, with guaranteed interviews for internal roles if minimum criteria are met. This policy is still in early implementation. Strategic priorities for Westminster's initiative included:

- Supporting care leavers into London Living Wage jobs or above.
- Linking the Trailblazer to borough-wide growth sectors (such as life sciences, construction, technology).
- Exploring trauma-informed approaches.
- Commissioning external providers to test new delivery models.

2. Overview of delivery model

The focus of Westminster's Full Potential initiative has been on delivering intensive, tailored one-to-one support to care experienced young people. The borough recruited a dedicated Employability Officer for the programme. They met fortnightly with young people to offer support such as tailored advice around career options and aspirations; creating CVs and adapting these for different jobs; job search and applications; interview preparation and practice; and coaching on presenting professionally and confidently.

Alongside the support from the Employability Officer, **the borough used the programme funding to remove financial barriers** to employment and learning for young people. This included paying for laptops or iPads for those at college and covering travel costs for those who had just started work.

3. Targeting, referral and early engagement

Most referrals came through the leaving care and social work teams at the council.

At first, referrals were slow and, to address this, the Employability Officer based themselves at the social care offices so that young people who were coming in to meet with their Personal Advisors could be referred straight to her.

"So if they have any young people that they're meeting, tell them to come chat to me after, and then we'll speak about the programme, how I can support them, and that really boosted in our numbers."

(Borough delivery staff)

Young people were motivated to engage as they wanted support to find good quality work. They had an initial phone call with the Employability Officer and then

met in person to go through their career goals and challenges in more detail. Young people reflected that the Employability Officer's straightforward and responsive approach made them want to sign up. Participants particularly appreciated the regular, consistent meetings and staff's responsiveness to their evolving needs.

4. Partnership model and roles

As well as the relationship with social care teams to secure referrals, **borough staff built a strong partnership with the employer who delivered the micro-insight days.** They were a contractor for the council so wanted to deliver this as part of their social value commitment. Borough staff reflected that they were a good match for young people because they were flexible and understood the challenges they faced.

"When it comes to this cohort, care leavers and young people in general, they're really flexible. They understand the struggles that they have." *(Borough delivery staff)*

For example, one of the young people who they offered a job to had their start times staggered for their first few weeks, so they could get used to getting up and travelling to work in the morning. They also gave them extra chances after misconduct, which borough staff felt other employers would likely have let them go for.

5. Support during and after participation

Young people were extremely positive about the support from the Employability Officer. They appreciated their honesty and pragmatism, discussing their goals and helping them understand if they were realistic. They also found them to be very flexible in meeting in-person or by phone; one had to bring their younger sister to an appointment and they appreciated that this was not an issue for staff.

As well as support to get into work, borough staff provided ongoing help through the transition into employment. One young person received money to cover their travel costs for their first month of work; another had regular check-ins and help with initial teething issues. One young person secured a job with an insurance company but unfortunately lost it. This knocked their confidence, but they were continuing to engage with the Employability Officer to secure another job.

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

The borough has had some early successes. Two young people were offered jobs by the employer who hosted the micro-insight day; one has now been there for several months. One secured the job at an insurance company although subsequently lost it. Other outcomes included a full-time construction job, part-time roles at John Lewis and a dog groomers', a Level 3 apprenticeship, and a Level 2 carpentry course.

The partnership with the local employer hosting the micro-insight days has been a real success, providing informal opportunities to engage with a business with a

potential job offer at the end. The employer's attitude towards and understanding of care experienced young people was key to this success.

The flexible, pragmatic approach taken by the Employability Officer was highlighted by young people as a key element of the programme that kept them engaged and motivated to progress towards work, even after knockbacks.

7. Challenges and barriers

A key challenge faced by Westminster was the delays in the start of the programme, combined with a serious cyberattack a few months into delivery. These events created significant setbacks for their plans to deliver group activities.

Borough staff also reflected that it was a challenge to help care experienced young people see the value of working, over claiming benefits. They found that many worried they would struggle to afford their rent, as they were not in a position to have a full-time job. Overcoming this mindset was difficult for staff.

"...it's like they're entrenched in, 'this is what I deserve, this is what I'm entitled to, this is what I'm going to get'. And that's what they want. Instead of a focus on actually, you could have a career, you could get a job." *(Borough delivery staff)*

The team was hoping to deliver more micro-insight days with other employers, but were struggling to find businesses willing to do this activity with their target group.

8. Innovations and promising practice

The micro-insight day model was a new approach delivered for this programme which was effective in giving young people an understanding of the world and informal routes into employment. Co-locating delivery staff in social care offices was also effective in boosting referrals to the programme.

9. Learning and implications for broader rollout

Key learnings and practice that could be replicated elsewhere included:

- **Co-location to strengthen referral pathways** was an effective and replicable approach to engaging young people
- The **micro-insight day model** works well with employers empathetic to the experiences and challenges of care experienced young people
- Borough staff highlighted the importance of **continuing relationships with young people** once they have been built; they were concerned about having to cut off those they had engaged in the first year of the programme due to funding rules

Young Person: Tara

1. Background and referral pathway

At the point when she was referred to Westminster's Full Potential initiative, Tara, 23, was unemployed and looking for work. She had recently left a job as there were lots of issues with her employer and the way she was treated. She was about to start a college course so was looking for a part time role to fit around this.

Tara's social worker referred her to the programme so she could get specialist support with searching for work and improving her employability skills.

2. Goals and expectations

As well as looking for a part-time job to fit around her college course, Tara was keen to start thinking about her long-term plans to go to university. She wanted support to think through which universities and courses might suit her and her needs.

3. Experience of support

Tara found the support from the Employability Officer on the programme extremely useful. She met with them every week to work on her employability skills and work readiness. This included reviewing and updating her CV, searching for jobs and tailoring applications to jobs. In-between their meetings, the Employability Officer regularly sent her suitable jobs to apply for.

One aspect Tara found particularly useful was the interview tips that the Employability Officer shared with her. She said that she has always struggled with structuring answers and managing her nerves, so having this resource to go back to will be helpful when applying for work in the future.

Tara felt the support she received from the Employability Officer was tailored to her goals and interests. She felt genuinely listened to and appreciated how responsive they were to her needs.

"[Employability Officer]'s always really attentive and she's genuinely great. I'm not just saying that because I like her, you know, she's really good at her job." *(Tara)*

4. Types of support received

The main support Tara received was the intensive one-to-one support from the Employability Officer. As well as helping her find a suitable part-time job, the Employability Officer talked Tara through her university options and looked over her personal statement for her application, which she found very useful. Tara also received an iPad for college so she could complete her coursework.

5. What worked well and why

For Tara, a key element of the support received was the consistency of meetings and contact with the Employability Officer. This helped her prioritise job searching and keep her on track.

"I think what was most helpful was meeting with her every week because it's just staying on top of it. It's just the consistency really helps." *(Tara)*

The responsiveness and thoroughness of the support she received was also a positive. Tara commented that the support offered on the programme went above and beyond her expectations.

"I was quite impressed because they did support me a lot. I've been in social services for a long time and I think out of all the services I've had, they've been the ones that have helped me the most for sure." *(Tara)*

6. Outcomes and changes

Tara was successful in securing a part-time job at a dog groomers' salon. The role is one day a week on Saturdays, so fits perfectly with her college commitments. It also builds on her previous experience of dog grooming.

In a broader sense, Tara explained that the support she received on the programme rebuilt her self-esteem after being unemployed and struggling to find work.

"It was just nice to have the team supporting me and giving me that confidence and saying, 'hey, look, you're very capable. Like, of course you can do this'." *(Young person)*

7. Suggestions for improvement

Although Tara achieved her main goal of finding a part-time job, she would have preferred to move into a different sector to that which she had worked in before.

"...the jobs that I've had have always been grooming related...So I wanted to transition into something different... just because I just wanted a change and I wanted to learn new skills. I think in terms of that, they could have helped me more." *(Tara)*

However, she did reflect that she was not clear about this with the Employability Officer, so it was learning for her to be more forthcoming with her goals in the future.

Tara also felt that the support she had received since finding work had tapered off, despite being promised ongoing support with further courses and financial help. She was also surprised to find out that support for young people who joined in the first year of the programme was going to stop in year two.

"I think sometimes things have been over promised and not been delivered in terms of the financial side of things... They promised that they would support me more and they would do more things... and then I just didn't really hear back. So kind of towards the end, the help has decreased, I would say." *(Tara)*

However, overall Tara was very positive about the support she received and was keen to see other young people benefit from the Trailblazer.

"I do think that programme is really good for other kids like me who have been in care. I think a lot of these kids... they don't really have support from their families a lot of the time. So that team, they do provide a lot of help, especially for kids who don't really have anyone. So I think they should keep it up and it's really good. It's really helpful." *(Tara)*

8. Future ambitions and next steps

Tara was aiming to progress to university and work in the charity sector to support human trafficking victims. In the long term, she wanted to run her own organisation tackling this international issue.

"I would love to be able to be a frontline worker for that. And then in the future, hopefully, run my own NGO and combat human trafficking across South America and the US. So that's kind of the ultimate big, big, big dream." *(Tara)*