

P-04-577 Reinstate Funding to the Real Opportunities Project: Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Chair. 20.11.15

Dear Mr Powell

Many thanks for forwarding the response to our Petition from Damien O'Brien, Chief Executive Officer at the Welsh Funding Office. As young petitioners we very much appreciate the thoroughness with which the Committee is treating our concerns.

Mr O'Brien provides a very useful explanation of the roles & responsibilities of the various parties involved with WEFO and the decision making processes. Our concern as petitioners is with the apparent demarcation between what are described as the "soft outcomes" of the Real Opportunities project; which specifically addressed the needs of learning disabled young people, and the "stronger focus on qualifications and job outcomes" of the new proposal, which is focussing on a much broader range of young people classified as "NEET".

The Real Opportunities Project set out to address specific gaps in the support for young people with a learning disability, severe and complex needs and/or an Autistic Spectrum Disorder going through transition. You can view the 2014 Real Opportunities Impact Report here

<https://www.realopportunities.org.uk/news/launch-of-the-real-opportunities-impact-report-2014.aspx>

The Report states quite clearly that **"getting paid jobs was not a target of the project."** A holistic approach was required to address a broad range of long term issues. This was not a plan to deliver sustainable paid employment in the short term. The intention was to provide transition support for learning disabled young people and their families who were otherwise becoming socially isolated and disconnected from education and ultimately the workplace. Improved support meant young learning disabled people and their families could aspire to an inclusive and increasingly independent future through better life and social skills, education and employment opportunities rather than a future of long term dependence and exclusion. The Impact Report identifies Real Opportunities targets as being:

- Individualised transition planning that includes employment as an option
- Support for families in the transition planning process
- Providing summer or part-time jobs while at school for work-experience
- Community-based experiences, including social/leisure activities and work experience
- Age appropriate integration with non-disabled people, including Peer Mentoring in activities

- Availability of job finding and employment support, including job coaching
- Provision of vocational training through specially designed social enterprises
- Assistance with behaviour, independent living and social skills that may restrict future employment
- Provision of early, clear advice on post-school placement and support options to carers.

The outcomes of the project were neither “soft” nor lacking a “**focus on qualifications and job outcomes**”. By the end of the project

- 56 people found paid jobs and 67 had on-going volunteer placements.
- 879 young people were involved in work experience by May 2014.
- 1210 work experience placements were arranged and supported by employment agencies engaged in the Project.
- Placements required the engagement of 751 employers.
- Employment support agencies involved in the project and Hubs delivered training around work
- accredited through Agored Cymru, National Open College Network and Asdan.
- 727 young people gained a vocational accreditation.
- Work experience was most frequently mentioned as the most important service families had received through Real Opportunities.
- The number of families believing that a paid job was a realistic option in the future increased from 27% to 51%
- 50% of the young learning disabled people said they wanted to go to college and 33% wanted to get a paid job after leaving school, with most young people having a clear idea of what they would like to do.
- Travel training had a significant impact on the views of many families of their young people’s independence and potential. The Real Opportunities Hubs provided aspects of training to use public transport to over 400 young people. The employment agencies involved provided additional travel training to enable young people to get to work experience placements independently.
- The Project identified an approximate net saving to the local authority of travel training a person in the first year as £12,314, taking into account reduced LA transport costs, free bus passes and the staff cost of training independent travel.

The reactions of **employers** have been equally impressive, validating that young people with learning

disabilities make good workers, and that they would be hired if funding allowed.

- Employers reported that they were now likely to employ another person with similar disabilities to the person placed (96.2%) and that they would continue to employ the young person if adequate support was provided (82.5%).
- Employers reported that the placements had been beneficial to their company in terms of better productivity of other staff, the attitudes of other staff to work, the public image of the company and customer reaction.

Aside from work and educational outcomes **Independence development** was a crucial aspect of the Real Opportunities project. Families reported that they had seen benefits in the behaviour and confidence of their young relative.

- 1098 young people had received the services of a Transition Key Worker (TKW). They had held 1402 transition meetings and completed 738 transition plans. They were a trusted source of advice for families and contributed to the co-ordination of the input from other services.
- 872 “One-page Profiles” were produced, alongside Essential Lifestyle Plans and PATH formats. There was a significant increase in attendance of young people at their own reviews from 14% to 54%. The average number of people attending reviews rose over time from an average of 4 to 7 suggesting wider involvement.
- Young people and families reported that involvement in inclusion activities had improved the young person’s confidence and fitness, had helped them to learn new skills, to become more independent and outgoing, and improve their communication.
- Independent Living Skills Workers provided services to 939 young people during the project. The comprehensive range of focussed courses offered through the project include
 - Use of Public Transport
 - Introduction to Road Safety
 - Personal Care & Hygiene
 - Sex & Relationships
 - Confidence Building
 - Tackling Bullying
 - Safety with Strangers
 - Internet Safety
 - Anger Management
 - Emotional well-being

- Friends
- Introduction to Community Leisure
- Introduction to Countryside Awareness
- Introduction to Personal Shopping
- Cooking Skills
- Basic Nutrition, Hygiene & Food Skills
- Introduction to Carpentry
- Participating in Leisure Activities
- Outdoor Safety
- Knowing your Local Area
- Working as a team
- Self Advocacy
- Practical Gardening/Allotment
- Taking Part in Sport
- Substance Misuse
- Duke of Edinburgh Award
- Developing Effective Social Skills
- Disability Awareness
- National Navigation Bronze Award
- Preparing a Meal
- Household Expenses
- Law & Order
- Completing Forms
- Pre-interview Skills
- Person Centred Planning
- Peer Mentoring
- Beauty Therapy
- Developing a Group Performance

As petitioners we should also draw attention to how young people were also given the opportunity, training and confidence to get involved with their learning disabled friends through **Peer Mentoring**.

- By August 2014, 1096 young people had participated in Peer mentoring training, of which 858 young people (78.3%) had gained one or more accredited units relating to the course. The courses were accredited by agencies such as OCN/Agored Cymru as a Level 2 award, & AQA validation.
- A large majority of peer mentors reported that they had gained knowledge through the course about: confidentiality; the needs of people with disabilities; how to include people with disabilities; and building confidence in being with people with disabilities. Most had used the course in some way, usually working in some form of mentoring role in their mainstream school.
- A large majority of mentors agreed that they were more confident with people, had a better CV, more skills, and had a better idea of a career after the course and any mentoring experiences. Smaller majorities said that they were more likely to get a job or to get into college as a

- result of attending the course.
- By the end of the project 105 young people with learning disabilities and/or ASD had taken the peer mentoring course at Entry Level.2

In summary the Real Opportunities Project was holistically focussed on addressing the shortfalls in support for young learning disabled people and their families. The success of the project was achieved through **a specific and integrated focus on the support needs of learning disabled young people and their families. It was not a generic Project to support a broader range of NEET's.** The Project had a simple and inclusive referral process and involved 1766 young people across the 9 participating local authorities. This very bespoke Project demonstrated young learning disabled people are capable of transitioning through education into the world of work where their performance is valued by employers and their social impact appreciated by other workers. The many young Peer Mentors involved also reported positive personal, social and career benefits from being able to support their learning disabled friends. The benefit of Peer Mentors extended across their schools, local communities and into workplaces.

Our petition called for the re-instatement of a similar Project. Can Mr O'Brien re-assure us that the new project will be

- Fully inclusive for age appropriate young learning disabled people with a simple referral process? Support should be available to every young person diagnosed with a learning disability &/or autism. Any new programme must not be about cherry picking from a wider range of NEET's to try and show quick fix outcomes for the few, whilst others are excluded.
- Provide the essential social opportunities needed to help isolated young learning disabled people transition through education into the workplace and wider communities?
- Include a similar comprehensive Peer Mentor programme which has been a clear win win for Mentors, young disabled people and the wider social, educational and workplace communities.

The HM Government Report "Valuing Employment Now" from the Department of Health identifies "the need for a **dedicated employment strategy for people with a learning difficulty**" noting "they have not benefited from the progress made for disabled people generally." The Report says that 65% of learning disabled people would like a paid job. Mr O'Brien is clear that the new project is designed to address young people who are most at risk of becoming long term NEET's. In 2010/11 only 6.6% of adults with a learning disability were reported to be in some form of paid employment. The majority work part time. The number of men working 30+ hours per week is just 1.3%. This figure is even lower for women, at 0.4% (Source: [People with](#)

[Learning Disabilities in England 2011](#)) The Valuing Employment Now Report believes this to be **“a waste of talent and opportunity for people with learning difficulties, employers, and our wider economy and society.”**

Not surprisingly the Impact Report provides evidence from the final family follow-up study that the end of the time-limited project represents a significant loss to families and young people. Real Opportunities demonstrates through creating independence, raising aspiration and awareness of work, and promoting social inclusion, a potential for less dependence on costly services. Projects need a greater emphasis on calculating the cost and benefits of early independence work compared to later support costs. As our petition notes, with no clear follow on plan for disabled young people the Return on Investment for the £9M European funding is already unravelling. The financial costs of failing to support disabled young people are as unacceptable as the social failure.

Once again as Petitioners can we thank the Assembly and the Petitioners Committee in particular for providing a platform to allow us to support our learning disabled friends and their families. We are not prepared to see our learning disabled young friends become socially and politically disenfranchised when there is clear evidence that projects like Real Opportunities can prevent it. A poll of 100 MPs undertaken for not-for-profit support provider Dimensions released in April 2015 shows that more than 60% do not believe that people with learning disabilities can be supported into paid and productive employment, an attitude which contrasts sharply with the views of experts. Over half (58%) of the MPs polled feel that more emphasis should be placed on family support for people with learning disabilities to reduce reliance on paid care. Encamp noted earlier this year that at the last election almost 1 in 5 learning disabled people who attempted to cast their vote were turned away from the polling station. When my co-petitioner and fellow Peer Mentor Tyler Payne and her learning disabled brother Bradley presented at the Senedd as part of the Impact Report launch only a single AM attended. We really need the help of the Petitions Committee to help change these attitudes.

I look forward to receiving a response to our concerns and once again repeat our willingness to meet with any members of the Petitions Committee, the broader Assembly or Mr O'Brien himself if it can be of help in securing the return of these essential support services.

Regards,

Aled Davies

Petitioner.