



Evaluation of Online Mentoring Project

supporting young people who are
NEET or at risk of becoming NEET
in Reading and Wokingham

Coordinated by the Digital Inclusion Team
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Executive Summary

Over recent years, there has been greater recognition of the complexity of need among NEET young people and those at risk of becoming NEET. This added understanding has resulted in alternative forms of educational involvement being offered in schools and other support situations. Some of these alternatives have used technology. This project sought to extend the provision of information, advice and guidance on work and study by offering NEET young people an online platform to be mentored by a business person willing to share their work experiences and guide them through relevant exercises and online resources.

This report considers the processes a group of interested stakeholders undertook to set up an online mentoring project for NEET young people and those at risk of becoming NEET. It illustrates the key delivery challenges through qualitative data from interviews with key stakeholders and survey data from business mentors who applied and completed training. It further explores ways in which the key factors and difficulties could be overcome in future online mentoring involving multiple agencies or organisations.

Propelled by the success of other public-third sector partnerships in mentoring between local council's and Brightside Trust for children

leaving care, this project was seen as a viable, innovative and tailored approach to connecting with NEET young people who may be daunted by face-to-face support programmes. The online mentoring project was seen as potentially being able to support the objectives of increasing the likelihood of a young person being motivated to get into work (or training for work) by helping them to better imagine a future; continuing to tackle digital inclusion issues; providing a '24/7' facility for young people to develop on-screen rapport and communication with a mentor keen to assist them set some education, employment or training goals.

Reading Borough Council identified a need for a range of alternative services for NEET young people to access career, study and training information. After considerable discussions with the Digital Inclusion Team, Reading Borough Council coordinated a project on online mentoring involving Connexions, educational charity organisations working with NEET young people and local businesses on a range of projects and another local authority, Wokingham Council.

This summative evaluation occurs at the end of six months implementation. Importantly, the key outcomes of the first six months of this project were:

- Reading Borough Council decided to restructure the team and refocus the energies of some stakeholders into other NEET young people projects and targets. This led to greater leadership by the remaining stakeholder organisation.
- A strengthened resolve and determination by the project coordinator to fulfil the length of the contract with Brightside Trust (until January 2011) and maximise the benefit to young people and interested volunteer mentors. The reconfigured project group plan to seek funding from the private sector to continue and Brightside Trust have indicated willingness to continue to provide technical support and be a participant in the projects further development.
- Five mentors were matched in July with 5 young people at risk of becoming NEET.
- Lessons were learned about the timeframe required to recruit business mentors and young people including the need to factor in constraints like the school year. It was first thought that safeguarding issues, marketing and recruitment could all be achieved within one to two months. But the process over the past six months has indicated:
 - The amount of time needed by the project manager would have had to be greater than half a day a week.
 - Commitment by the project stakeholders and greater task delegation and task follow-up would have needed to occur in a strategic, well-planned way.
 - The importance in knowing the capacity of the project group – what experience they have in the area and in working across organisations.

Local authorities need to maximise partnership working to give NEET young people the best chance of accessing the services they need. Joint working is particularly important in ensuring that young people get the quality and level of support they need at points of transition and when barriers are beginning to become entrenched. Transition points can be



when young people move between different services as their needs change over time; or when responsibility for providing support changes to a different service when a young person reaches age or leaves school.

Additionally, it is important for Local Authorities to build networks to support young people who are NEET with high needs that cross service boundaries. This means partnership working needs to actively discuss and plan how best to serve the needs of young people more effectively when they 'cross-over' and fit into more than one disadvantaged group and service.

Opening up decision-making by developing a shared process of negotiation, exchange and top-down vertical approaches leading to wider circles of inclusivity are admirable goals in service provision for young people. However, as our findings reveal, 'crowded' NEET interventions do not necessarily mean that all participants feel valued or respond with the same intentions and 'faith' in the process.

Project stakeholders talked of tensions in March 2010 which were based on their expectations, past interactions, imperatives to participate and the imagined (but yet unrealised) opportunities of the project. Difficulties prevented a strong focus on the purpose – that is to run an intervention that can make a difference despite some of the

incredibly complex problems, including digital exclusion, some young people face trying to get a career started.

Other challenges in this project relate to the need for clearer Information sharing. At key times, some stakeholders seemed to be avoiding questions, withholding information or their views about the next stages and their level of commitment to the project. Failure to be clear about how a program or policy's causal sequence is expected to work usually results in well intentioned programs being unable to achieve their outcomes or, alternatively, they produce outcomes that are contrary to those that were originally anticipated.

It is recommended that projects of this nature require strong information sharing protocols, particularly about initial concerns related to safeguarding, young people's access to the internet or levels of literacy. Greater accountability to complete tasks on time and to prepare for monthly project team meetings

may have been achieved by greater ownership, clearer task guidelines and links to progressing the overall project.

The expertise of business mentors will also need to be considered. Sometimes the learning and employment opportunities open to NEET young people are limited by their low levels of education, skills and personal attributes. Effective mentoring would require genuine advice and strategies to overcome barriers to looking for jobs and courses and barriers to being selected for them. Other NEET young people may be disadvantaged because they are a young parent, pregnant, have a history of offending or living in care. Business mentors will need support to effectively mentor NEET young people facing multiple challenges.

**The full document is available on
www.esd-toolkit.org.uk**

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