

Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities):

Impact of the Real Opportunities Project



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Overview of the project

The Regional SEN Transition to Employment Initiative (Real Opportunities project) set out to address the lack of support for employment for people with learning disabilities and/or Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), and implement a number of the approaches identified through research that can assist transition to adulthood, especially in employment. The project was a European Social Fund (ESF) convergence funded initiative designed to fill a gap in existing provision and to establish what could be delivered through a comprehensive, well-staffed approach to transition support. In many respects it seeks to address some of the problems in transition planning highlighted in research and in policy review documents. The project operated in 9 local authority areas in Wales from 2011 until 2014 and was evaluated throughout by the Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities at Cardiff University. The project was significant in scale and engaged with 1,766 young people over its lifetime.

Problems in transition

Research and reviews of policy and practice have identified a number of factors that will influence how successful the transition from school to adult life will be for young people with special needs.

1. Lack of effective co-ordination between (and within) relevant agencies in transition:

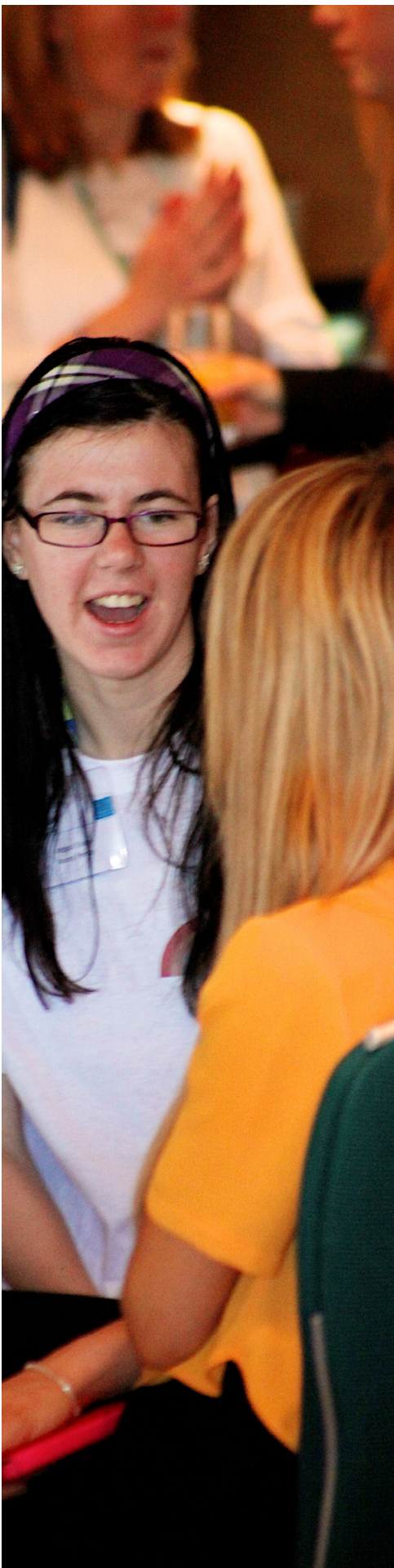
There remain problems with the co-ordination of statutory services across the age divide at transition that impact on the experiences of young people and families during the transition planning process and impact on the quality of outcomes.

2. A focus on educational rather than “whole life” goals for the young person:

Research on statutory transition planning has highlighted that schools favour goals on education outcomes and on school-based actions rather than on community-based activity and learning. Commentators also suggest that there is an emphasis on allocating defined services or resources in transition planning rather than whole life planning, increasing the need for more individualised person centred planning in transition for people in this cohort.

3. Lack of an effective voice for young people and families in the transition process:

Many professionals and disciplines can be involved in a young person's life and to have them work in an integrated way from the families perspective can be a challenge. There can also be many demands on the family for information and time, and sometimes the same information is required repeatedly causing wasted time and frustration. The success of



transition will be influenced by how informed carers are about the opportunities available, the extent of their involvement in the transition process, and how assistance is delivered to them.

4. Lack of information on post-school options for young people and families: Young people and families can generate significant ideas for new activities, roles, and life changes for themselves, but problems arise in finding resources to support individual options. Often this is because of a lack of flexible support options, underlining the need for more flexible and responsive services to match more individualised and person centred planning.

5. Poor social inclusion and small friendship networks: People with learning disabilities and/or ASD are commonly less well-developed than non-disabled age peers. Smaller social networks and poor social skills can reduce the opportunities people have to mix and to develop wider interests and friendships, and can leave people socially isolated as they grow into adulthood. This in turn leads to families retaining a significant role in all aspects of the young person's social life.

6. Over-emphasis on further education (particularly out-of-area residential college places) and day services as a next step: For those young people who are able, a place in a college of further education is a common next step after attending school. A place at a residential college is commonly favoured by families for those with higher support needs.

7. A belief among professionals that continuing education and skill development is the way forward in the face of evidence that young people with SEN get few qualifications and few jobs from college: The subsequent transition to employment from FE college, or higher education for people with ASD, remains problematic and employment rates on graduation are low, particularly for people with learning disabilities.

8. People with learning disabilities and/or ASD are under-represented in government work-based training schemes: Despite significant national investment in skills programmes to get young people back to work, and the availability of traineeships and apprenticeships, people with learning disabilities and/or ASD hardly ever find places in these schemes and appropriate work-based learning opportunities are difficult to find for these groups.

9. Lack of employment experience, post-education employment pathways and little effective support, with low aspirations that people can work: People with

learning disabilities and/or ASD are groups at high risk of separation from the labour market and unemployment rates are high. While they are represented in national schemes such as Work Choice, access to good practice models such as job coach supported employment is poor.

10. There is a lack of availability of skilled job coaching offered through central government schemes to support people with SEN seeking employment: A number of government reports have pointed to the desirability of supported employment and job coaching as a preferred route into employment for people with learning disabilities and/or ASD. In England, Supported Internships have promoted this model for young people with learning disabilities. Without programmes that offer skilled job coaching, it is difficult to provide supported work experience in the community for people with SEN. On-the-job support is crucial to the delivery of work experience as well as jobs for this group.

11. Families lack information about learning disability, difficult behaviour and other aspects of disability: Families are sometimes under-informed in many aspects of learning disability, particularly the causes of difficult behaviour and how to respond to it. They are therefore sometimes ill-equipped to assist with professional programmes and can have low aspirations for people's independence.



Relevance to policy in Wales

The outcomes for the Real Opportunities project are relevant to a number of Welsh Government policy areas.

Legislative change in Special Educational Needs

The changes to the law for young people with Special Educational Needs proposed in the 2014 White Paper propose changes that are reflected in aspects of the Real Opportunities project provision. The proposals will introduce Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and a “One Page Profile” to replace Statements of Special Educational Need. Plans are to be developed for young people using a person centred approach. The legislation extends to those aged up to 25. Local authorities will retain responsibility for the IDP, but there will be a need to agree provision underpinning the plan between social services, health, education and other relevant services. Action Plans derived from the IDP are to provide clarity over who funds which support elements. The legislation will seek greater integration of provision and collaborative assessment alongside plans helping to deliver timely and effective interventions.

Real Opportunities delivered extensive training in person centred planning to key staff and many young people became engaged in this form of planning. The project used One-page Profiles and provided Transition Key Working to help families and young people engage in this interactive form of transition planning. Its services were linked to school action and were intended to link with statutory transition planning across agencies. In some cases, the Real Opportunities project hubs worked across usual age boundaries to support young people in the early stages of their transition to college.

Independence and well-being

The Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 creates a duty to promote “well-being” that is defined in broad terms and includes: education, training and recreation; relationships; contribution to society; social and economic well-being; and participation in work. There is also a concern for prevention of the need for more intensive care and support and enabling people to live their lives as independently as possible. Further, the Act has a concern for providing information on care and support and how to access it.

The Real Opportunities project has a focus on promoting the independence of young people. It provided courses to extend the skills of young people and psychology services to help people overcome barriers to greater independence, relationships and community inclusion. The focus on social inclusion and providing travel training also promoted independence and sought to make it less likely that people would need more segregated and costly services in the future. The resources allocated to preparation for employment in the project also relates directly to the Act’s challenge to deliver economic well-being.

The skills and jobs agenda

The Policy Statement on Skills creates a new agenda for the post-19 skills and employment agenda in Wales. Published in 2014, it focuses in general on higher level skills such as literacy and numeracy. However, within this there is a strong commitment to vocational qualifications and work-based training. The work-based learning programme sought to develop flexible learning, sharing delivery costs of apprenticeship between employers and government. Within skills for employment, lack of work experience has been recognised as a barrier to young people generally in entering employment. The skills system seeks to provide targeted support for groups of individuals restricted in their ability to improve the value of their skills, utilising a youth engagement and progression framework and Jobs Growth Wales to support young people to access jobs and to provide the work experience. The policy's vision is for the Skills Gateway to provide learning and skills information to all using a single point of access. However, individuals with disabilities or special educational needs are to be supported through working with the voluntary sector and other specialist organisations to ensure that they are supported in accessing employment opportunities.

The Real Opportunities project recognised that there is a lack of effective support for people with learning disabilities and/or ASD to take part in work experience and to enter employment. As a result, the dominant post-school route remains a college of further education. Real Opportunities provided a job coach for work experience, operating through a supported employment model. This aimed to deliver vocational profiling to assess strengths, matching opportunities to people to find individually tailored placements. Multiple placements offered scope for development and choice.

Autism Strategy

The Real Opportunities project provided services to people with ASD. Welsh Government's Autistic Spectrum Disorder Action Plan was launched in 2008 and provided a platform for the development of service delivery across Wales. The Action Plan looked to develop child to adult transition processes that were responsive. It looked for well-supported education and training for people with ASD, including availability of 1:1 support. It underlined the need for appropriate opportunities and experiences for young people with ASD to develop the core life and vocational skills, and the need for effective personal and learning coach support to achieve this. Employment was definitely an aim. Work experience while at school was seen as a stepping stone for people with ASD as it was for others, but it was recognised that placements need to be carefully planned and choices of work placements realistic, with good support for employers. As people move into work, a range of options for lifelong learning, vocational work, sheltered options and supported employment should be made available, along with access to adult disability employment options (e.g. through the Department of Work and Pensions or Jobcentre Plus).

The Real Opportunities project is relevant to the Autistic Spectrum Disorder Action Plan. It provided staff resources to help young people and families engage in transition planning and promoted person centred approaches to transition planning. It provided options for independence training and the development of inclusive activities that themselves promoted independence skills. Practical support was directly available to young people. Furthermore, Real Opportunities provided job coach driven supported work experience that met the action plan's goal of being carefully planned, with a choice of realistic work placements and with on-the-job support for young people and employers together. Through this model, young people with ASD and their families were able to experience a "supported employment" approach.

The research

This research paper builds on previous short-term research studies on particular elements of the Real Opportunities project:

1. Long-term monitoring of work placements and employment outcomes
2. Interview studies with staff and young people engaged in work placements
3. Interview studies with staff and consumers of Transition Key Worker services
4. Interview studies with staff and consumers of Inclusion Teams' work
5. Review of the quality of Person Centred Plans
6. Follow-up studies of families of young people in school and two school leaver cohorts from the project on its outcomes
7. Study of peer mentors receiving training and engaging in the project
8. Staff surveys and interviews with stakeholders on the work of hub teams.



The Real Opportunities Project

What the project offered

The Real Opportunities project built on research evidence and a model piloted at Trinity Fields Special School in Caerphilly. The project model takes an holistic view that experiences in a number of areas of young people's lives need to be supported if they are to be successful in gaining employment post-school:

- 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 Real Opportunities initiative was centrally managed and administered. Activity was delivered by staff in 9 regional "Hubs" introduced in a phased way during the project in each of the following areas: Caerphilly, Torfaen, Carmarthenshire, Merthyr, Pembrokeshire, Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Swansea, and Neath Port Talbot. In addition, three selected employment services (ELITE Supported Employment Agency; Mencap Cymru; and Remploy with the National Autistic Society) were contracted to provide work preparation and employment. The project operated a referral and person centred assessment and planning process. Young people who were part of the Real Opportunities project accessed the different elements of the services provided according to individual need and choice.



The project delivered the following intervention packages:

- Social activities were supported in each Hub through a network of Youth Inclusion Workers who mapped local activities available, identified activities young people might wish to participate in, supported them to take part, and supported their social inclusion, sometimes through the use of peer mentors.
- Mentoring was supported through the Hubs. Young people were recruited and offered accredited training. Peer mentors became engaged in supporting young people with learning disabilities or ASD by participating in activities provided by the project. However, this was not a prerequisite for attending the training, the aim also being to change the perceptions of non-disabled young people in local communities, schools, colleges and youth provision thereby promoting inclusion, integration and providing natural support.
- Independence teams in each hub included a Person Centred Planning Co-ordinator who helped to plan the future with the young person and their family; a Psychology Support Worker who worked on social/behavioural issues; an Independent Living Skills Worker who taught independence skills; and a Transition Key Worker who liaised with families, provided advice and information on future options, and connected with all relevant professionals and agencies to fulfil the person's plan. Family Liaison staff assisted in supporting families. Hub teams also delivered a range of accredited training courses for young people, peer mentors and parents/carers to participate in.
- Work Preparation and Employment was approached by small job coaching teams working in partnership with each regional Hub. The teams facilitated accredited work preparation courses, completed vocational profiles, sourced appropriate work experience placements during which they offered a level of support to the young person according to individual need. In 4 areas, other young people were trained as peer mentors who took over from job coach support by working alongside the participant in the employment setting. Job coaches also aimed to find the young people paid employment and voluntary work.

Central training was also delivered across Hubs by Learning Disability Wales, and one further aim of the project was to develop a "toolkit" of good practice and procedural guidance in the design and operation of all the elements, linked to researched outcomes, that could be replicated elsewhere.

Match of the Real Opportunities programme to known problems

The Real Opportunities project was designed with the evidence of what works in transition very much to the fore. The elements of service provided by the project were matched to the problems in the transition process for young people with special educational needs identified in the past (Beyer and Kaehne 2013c) (Table 1).

Table 1: Match of Real Opportunities programme to known problems

Problem	Real Opportunities Project Action
1. Lack of effective co-ordination between (and within) relevant agencies in transition	Transition Key Workers to provide a single focus for information and communication in transition planning
2. A focus on educational rather than “whole life” goals for the young person	Focus on Person Centred Planning (consistent with plans for Individual Development Plans in new legislation)
3. Lack of an effective voice for young people and families in the transition process	Family Liaison roles to work with families and young people
4. Lack of information on post-school options for young people and families	Helping families explore post-school options in practical ways
5. Poor social inclusion and small friendship networks	Inclusion Workers to develop inclusion in leisure, sport and other opportunities outside school. Engagement of Peer Mentors in supporting young people with SEN in inclusion activities
6. Over-emphasis on further education (particularly out-of-area residential college places) and day services as a next step	Provision of supported work experience while at school to help explore work as an option
7. A belief among professionals that continuing education and skill development is the way forward in the face of evidence that young people with SEN get few qualifications and few jobs from college:	Offering practical courses and psychology intervention to help young people be more independent, to understand relationships, to be safe, and travel training to help people travel independently
8. People with learning disabilities and/or ASD are under-represented in government work-based training schemes	Offering employment as a realistic option for the future for young people with learning disabilities and/or ASD, with some being found paid jobs
9. Lack of employment experience, post-school employment pathways and little effective support with low aspirations that people can work	Provision of supported employment to help people find, learn and enjoy work experiences in ordinary workplaces
10. There is a lack of availability of skilled job coaching offered through central government schemes to support people with SEN seeking employment	Providing skilled “job coach” support to allow for individualised placement
11. Families lack information about learning disability, difficult behaviour and other aspects of disability	Providing courses on a wide range of aspects of learning disability and ASD



The Impact of the Real Opportunities Project

The evaluation of the project by the Welsh Centre for Learning Disabilities generated a number of reports on specific elements of service offered by the Real Opportunities project. These reports established how well these elements were tackling the problems in the transition process identified through the research. We address these in turn, drawing on the results from these reports.

Transition Key Workers

Data from the Real Opportunities Project showed that, by the end of the project, 1098 young people had received the services of a Transition Key Worker (TKW). They had held 1402 transition meetings and completed 738 transition plans. Our research found that TKWs carried out a wide range of functions with families, being involved in: managing communication between staff involved with the family; direct work on person centred planning development and in transition reviews; action planning and sign-posting to other services; supporting visits to post-school options such as colleges; and travel training (Beyer and Kaehne 2013a). Their work was in generally targeted at young people in their final year, rather than across the years from age 14 onwards.

TKWs were helping families be clearer about future options and the support available, to set clear goals and to reduce uncertainty around future decisions. In particular, assistance they provided to help young people and families to visit colleges had helped some families to be able to make decisions on the next step with confidence.

Always went above and beyond. Mainly in last year at school, took to college, signed him up. Also when considering residential college, took him to appointments, supported with behavioural issues. Also helped with a move to Adult Services. [Family Member]

TKWs did assist some families in going through person centred planning and they did bring a different perspective to schools or social services. For some, they had helped families be more confident and to find a voice in the transition planning process.

They did a one-page profile. [TKW] explained things to me but she also included X as a person rather than a number. The lady put us at ease, she understands X and his needs, nothing was too much trouble for her and she would always give her time. She also involved X in his school review which had never happened before she really helped him to speak up and have confidence. [Family member]

At its best, the effectiveness of TKW input was related to workers being hands-on with families, providing practical help for tasks



such as applying for benefits as well as providing information and guidance. They were a trusted source of advice for families and contributed to the co-ordination of the input from other services.

I think it's the ruffling feathers thing.... I think that will be the success of our role.....making people if necessary amend the way they work with the client. They've been told they're not eligible, so we do things like bus pass, DLA applications, as kids become 16. Some of the families have a learning disability themselves. [Transition Key Worker]

TKWs also reported that existing options were not fully inclusive, particularly for people who were complex and challenging. TKWs were helping people to think about individual options but at times the services were not flexible enough to meet the aspirations of the young person.

In terms of it being very person-centred, you are fitting people in to what exists out there, fitting them into a group, college course, or day-service provision because that is all that is available; so we are promoting person-centred plans and we are supporting giving them what is important to them and yet very often we can't do that. [Transition Key Worker]

For some TKWs the joint working with statutory services was effective.

I feel quite fortunate to be honest, we've got very good relationships with social services. They will often ring up and say 'what do you think about this?' [Transition Key Worker]

For others, there were limitations on the effectiveness of the TKW model. There were constraints on the role, as it had to fit within existing transition planning structures and the roles of other professionals, particularly social work. At times there were conflicts with other professionals with statutory roles in transition planning. Even though they might have spent much time with young people and families, they could be excluded from key decision-making.

But I was told last week that I'm not a professional, so I shouldn't really be getting involved.....I worked with that young person for four years his parents said that I know him better than anyone else in that room. [Transition Key Worker]

There remains work to be done in establishing the role of TKWs alongside statutory services if their full potential is to be realised.

We talked to staff and professionals involved with the Real Opportunities project in some way. Wider staff were generally

positive about the work of Transition Key Workers with young people (Beyer and Kaehne 2013b; 2014e). Significant majorities reported that the TKWs helped young people and their families to be clear about future options and the support available, set clear goals and reduce uncertainty. Staff also agreed that families experienced reduced mental or physical stress due to the involvement of TKWs.

The information in the young people's transition plans has been shared with more 'downstream' professionals, and more of these adult service professionals are getting involved earlier in the transition planning process. [Staff member]

Some wider staff felt that the positive results were not shared by all young people, underlining that there may be some level of inconsistency across the project in terms of success.

The positive impacts [of TKWs] are not universal to all young people; there are still some young people for whom the joint working between professionals is problematic, and whose transition planning, coordination and outcomes fall short of what they should be. [Staff member]

Person centred planning

The individualisation of transition planning for young people, focusing on their hopes and dreams, strengths and their support needs, has been a central principle of the Real Opportunities approach. A wide range of person centred approaches was used in helping young people to plan their future. Over the course of the project, 872 “One-page Profiles” were produced, alongside Essential Lifestyle Plans and PATH formats from the collection of person centred planning tools. Other approaches included portfolios, digital stories, life boxes, and lifestyle wheels. “All About Me Books”, hospital passports, and communication charts. A one-day introduction to PCP course was delivered to 157 people, and a 5-day in-depth PCP course to 49 people during the lifetime of the project.

Our research looked at a number of indicators of the quality of reviews: numbers attending; accessibility of the language used in the review document; if good practice headings were used; and use of photographs to help students engage (Davies, Meek and Beyer 2014). The average number of people attending reviews rose over time from an average of 4 to 7 suggesting wider involvement. There was a significant increase in attendance of young people at their own reviews from 14% to 54%. The overall quality of Person Centred Reviews increased significantly over the maximum of 4 years the project operated, with 14.3% of reviews scoring in the top half of potential scores in 2010-11, and 65.9% in the top half

in 2013-14. Reviews using the new legislative IDP format scored even higher.

In terms of what was covered in Person Centred Reviews, school education or skills were still the most commonly discussed topics across all four academic years covered by the project. Discussion of paid jobs and evening jobs increased across the four years but they were still discussed in relatively few reviews. Employment staff did not attend any of the reviews we looked at.

There was a clear increase in the discussion of community involvement and relationships over time. Where Hubs were involved, more goals were set, previous goals were reviewed more often, and generally Person Centred Reviews were more consistent with PCP good practice.

Families told us about the impact of Person Centred Planning on their lives. They reported that the tools involved were accessible and helped them to get across the young person's point of view effectively in meetings (Beyer, Kaehne, Meek, Pimm and Davies 2014a).

Planning for X involves everyone and they all know her well. She knows exactly what they will say at the meetings. It's all done in pictures which keeps her interested and makes her look at the plan too. There are pictures of her and her friend doing all sorts of things like making lunch. [Family member]

Working on person centred plans in a place that suited the young person and family helped.

We were able to plan for the future and the transition and what we needed to look at. X could say what he wanted. They all came to the house talked through with X and us what we had said we needed to cover. We and X then worked out what we needed to do to meet those aims. [Family member]

Families were pleased that the person centred planning process had helped them to share the responsibility of planning with others and this seemed to allow them an opportunity to pursue greater independence for the young person.

I would never have been able to do it - give X her independence. Instead of thinking she might not be able to do something and worrying about evil people in the world, Real Opps have said 'give it a try'. You want social and independence for them but also want to wrap them up in cotton wool. I can't praise Real Opps enough. I think they are brilliant. [Family member]

When we talked to staff and professionals involved with the Real

Opportunities project in some way, the vast majority told us that more young people were receiving person centred reviews in their area. Furthermore, 97% of staff also agreed that person centred plans were of good quality. Again, a majority of the wider staff group told us that PCPs were leading to different goals being set to those delivered by the statutory transition planning process. Staff were less convinced that the young people's social lives were being planned through PCPs. A majority of staff also told us that goals set in review meetings were being achieved and again a majority of staff agreed that young people did prefer a PCP approach to the statutory transition planning process.

There were barriers to delivering person centred planning, the main areas of concern mentioned being lack of time from a range of partners to deliver PCP and a lack of effective joint working. In relation to joint working, a lack of respect for the contribution of Real Opportunities staff in PCP, and more broadly transition planning, was mentioned as a barrier.

We are not statutory, statutory bodies have a wariness of engaging with us and are sometimes derogatory towards the work we are doing. They are seen as official and they don't seem to respect the fact that we are professional staff with professional backgrounds also. [TKW]

Overall, the improvement in the quality of reviews over time may be attributed to the influence of Real Opportunities project staff, as a significant positive effect was found for the extent of hub staff involvement in reviews and quality scores. The fact that there had been significant training input may also have been a factor in these improvements.



Supported work experience

Large numbers of young people were involved in work experience placements with 879 being placed by May 2014. With two or more placements being offered, 1210 work experience placements were arranged and supported by employment agencies engaged in the Real Opportunities Project and some Hubs. Placements required the engagement of 751 employers. Employment support agencies involved in the project and Hubs delivered training around work and much of this was accredited through Agored Cymru, National Open College Network and Asdan. During the project, 727 young people gained a vocational accreditation. Although getting paid jobs was not a target of the project, 56 people found paid jobs and 67 on-going volunteer placements.

In our surveys, work experience was most frequently mentioned as the most important service families had received through Real Opportunities (Beyer and Kaehne 2013d). They told us that work experience seemed to offer young people excitement and a route to confidence through being able to demonstrate that they can work. Some, but not all, families also saw work experience as an important stepping stone to subsequent paid employment. Families reported significant changes in their awareness of employment, with the number believing that a paid job was a realistic option in the future increasing from 27% to 51% of our sample. A minority of families continued to report concern because of the difficult labour market, shortage of jobs and the poor level of basic skills the young person had, as reasons why they felt a paid job might not ultimately be an option.

The majority of families felt that placements had taught the young person about work, had improved his/her chances of getting work in the future and also impacted on their family's view that paid work was an option. The majority of these families told us that the Real Opportunities project had made a significant impact on their change of view. When we talked to young people, 50% 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.

The involvement and advice of employment agencies in the project had provided confidence that the person could get a job and be successful. Some families had seen significant changes in the person, either through their maturing, through the wider work of the Real Opportunities Hubs, or through the work of other services such that they now considered the person could cope with employment in the future.

In interviews, a sample of young people said that they had liked doing practical things and compared this unfavourably with what they were doing at school. They liked being in an adult environment and being treated as adults by others around them. They reported

that they were treated well by co-workers in work experience placements and had enjoyed meeting new people. The majority of young people said they thought they would get a paid job in the future. Most young people told us that they now had a concrete idea of what job they would like to do in the future.

In a study of the work experiences of 297 young people, we found that the work skills of young people grew significantly through their first and second work experience placements in six areas, the largest significant gains being in the understanding and independent action skill areas (Beyer, Meek and Davies Under Review). In understanding, there were significant changes in: concentrating; communicating with others; and remembering instructions. In independent action, there were significant changes in: doing a range of tasks; using initiative; and working without support. It is important to note that, with job coach support available at the workplace, there was capacity to teach young people these skills in a practical way and to problem solve, rather than through simulated training.

Students were supported to perform well for employers. A large majority of employers were satisfied with the performance of the young person in all significant aspects of work. 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%). Further, 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.

Fifteen peer mentors worked with ELITE supported employment to support other young people in part-time paid jobs. ELITE provided further training on how to support people in the workplace. These peer mentors provided support to young people on work experience placements, substituting for 'job coach' support. Feedback from employers was again that the pairs had worked effectively for them.

The Real Opportunities project has demonstrated that multiple work experience placements are possible if they are individually designed and offered with job coach support. The reactions of employers have validated that young people with learning disabilities make good workers, and that they would be hired if funding allowed.

When we talked to wider staff and professionals involved with the Real Opportunities project, a significant majority of staff agreed that families and young people were now more aware of employment as an option after leaving school or college; and that employment was now seen as a realistic option by both. The majority of staff also agreed that their own awareness of employment as an option had

increased and that they too felt that it was now a realistic option. A majority of staff reported that there were more employment options now. A significant majority of staff reported that more people were getting work experience placements and more were becoming volunteers in their area. A minority reported that young people were getting paid jobs. Respondents also reported that there had been some increase in acceptance by wider staff teams of the fact that young people can work.

We have seen more acceptance to people being aware of youngsters with disabilities and willingness to work along side them. [Professional staff]





Inclusion work

The goal of the Real Opportunities initiative in relation to social inclusion was to pursue mainstream social activities rather than activities specially arranged for young people with disabilities. Implicit in this was the development of wider relationships with non-disabled young people through involvement in the activities that everyone takes part in at this age. Youth Inclusion Workers supported 734 young people during the project, finding community activities for them and supporting their attendance at a range of youth clubs, sports clubs, social activities and connections with friends and acquaintances. These activities were supported by Inclusion Workers or other Hub staff. Associated with this were supporting travel training courses and staff organising travel for people. Hubs also offered a programme of activities for participants and peer mentors during school holidays in local communities, residential events and camping expeditions for groups.

Results from two focus groups with staff showed that Hub professionals were enthusiastic workers, willing to contribute positively to the inclusion and independence of young people they are supporting (Vigna, Beyer, Meek and Kaehne 2014). They reported that the inclusion service had offered opportunities that young people and their families had never had before.

She [mother of a young person] didn't know what was out there so she didn't know where to go for help or where she could send her boy or anything like that. [Inclusion Worker]

Inclusion in mainstream activities, and mixing with the full range of young people, was a central goal of the Real Opportunities project. Mainstream activities are, therefore, important contexts for young people with learning disabilities to become familiar with other young people and to become more socially included. One area had been operating longer than others and reported significant progress in linking young people with learning disabilities and/or ASD into mainstream activities with non-disabled young people.

... I researched into different clubs within the local area and went along myself first to find out a little bit about the club and the age groups within the club and spoke to the instructor to see if it was okay to bring this young person along. And then I just went along the first time with the young person. She didn't actually participate the first time, we just sat down and watched. And then the following, when she said she wanted to go again, the next time then we just went along with her and she joined in....[Inclusion Worker]

Focus group respondents from other areas highlighted how their use of clubs primarily for young disabled people may represent an

important step to inclusion before introducing a mainstream club to the young person.

.... The boy did the autistic football team, did it for a couple of weeks, and then said 'actually they're not that good at football, I'm really good and I'd like to actually move on'. And now he plays for his local team, which is mainstream.....Sometimes personal circumstances showed how a club for disabled young people was the best option for some young adults. [Inclusion Worker]

In some Hub areas, staff reported that there are psychological and physical barriers to be broken down before young people with learning disabilities are able to enjoy the experience of a mainstream club, and work to help mainstream groups to become more open. Staff members highlighted how “mainstream young people” needed to be educated more to understand disability and to be able to deal with their peers who have a disability. In some cases the activities run by Inclusion Workers had brought young people from the project together with local young people, to reduce barriers.

If you have never experienced anyone who has got special needs, they are scary, they might be seen as scary. It is the fear of the unknown. Our kids are not scared of mainstream kids because they have spent all the summer hanging out with mainstream teenagers. [Hub professional]

In our surveys, young people and families reported that involvement in these 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. Family members welcomed the widening of the young person's horizons through the Real Opportunities project's facilitation of new activities and relationships. Families confirmed that impacts had occurred, reporting that the Real Opportunities Inclusion Workers had opened up many new activities for their young people.

All sorts of activities offered. Assisted in attending Youth Club, catching the bus ...Helped with confidence although he plays football with Dad at weekends and has a wide social circle. He's now doing things independently of the family. [Family member]

Before starting youth club, was very shy. She really enjoyed outdoor activities, canoeing, white water rafting. Now she's planning to go away with them for a weekend again soon and enjoys a disco once a month. Staff work closely with school. [Family member]

The families also welcomed the fact that the person was helped

to do things without the family's involvement, for some the first time this had been possible. Families reported that it was important that the staff supporting the young person in these community activities was a person trusted by the family and someone who really cared about the young person. Families told us that Inclusion Workers had worked effectively to draw out the young person to engage in new activities, supported them appropriately when in activities, and faded their support over time.

... Things are totally different now as he has lots of friends from his activities. We are inundated at home with all his friends visiting. They all have a variety of disabilities. He particularly likes bowling and cinema although he says they only go to see "baby films"! [Family member]

When we talked to staff and professionals involved with the Real Opportunities project, a significant majority said that they had impacted on young people meeting more non-disabled young people, in accessing ordinary clubs and groups, and in using ordinary settings in the community. A majority felt that the Inclusion Workers were helping young people meet friends when and where they wanted to. For these respondents, there appeared to be more complex barriers to meeting friends and acquaintances at flexible times and places, most notably the availability of transport and personal support. Significant majorities of staff reported that families were getting more time to themselves and that families were now more positive about their young person joining in ordinary activities. These wider staff respondents also felt that young people were being helped to be included more in ordinary life and to contribute to society as volunteers or participants in community activity.

Again, there were substantial majorities of staff reporting that members of the public were meeting young people and that the public was having positive experiences of being with the young people. There was a smaller majority who reported that the inclusion work was actually changing the views of the public towards people with learning disabilities, but a significant majority were undecided. This would suggest that contact is taking place, but that there is some way to go before there is a comprehensive change in attitudes. Wider staff respondents did identify further barriers to inclusion work. Some reported that members of the community were constrained in spending time with young people with learning disabilities because they felt that it was a specialist task.

"People feel that they need specialist knowledge in order to work with people with learning disabilities and are afraid that they do not have the necessary skills."

The lack of availability of transport, the lack of ability of young people to travel independently, and the costs of accessing community settings acted as further barriers. Finally, families' fears about exploitation and bad experiences if their young people do venture out into the community more were also barriers.

Independence

Independent Living Skills Workers had provided services to 939 young people during the project. The programme offered direct one-to-one work with young people on a broad and individual set of independence issues, as well as offering a wide range of courses delivered through Hubs. Psychology assistants worked to remove personal barriers to an ordinary life. Examples of courses offered through the project are shown below¹:

- Use of Public Transport
- Introduction to Road Safety
- Personal Hygiene
- Sex & Relationships
- Confidence Building
- Friends
- Introduction to Community Leisure
- Introduction to Countryside Awareness
- Introduction to Personal Shopping
- Cooking Skills: Following a Recipe
- Basic Nutrition, Hygiene & Food Skills
- Preparing a Meal
- Introduction to Countryside Awareness
- Introduction to Carpentry
- Basic Carpentry Hand Tools
- Duke of Edinburgh Award
- Participating in Leisure Activities
- Outdoor Safety
- Completing Forms
- Pre-interview Skills
- Person Centred Planning
- Peer Mentoring
- Practical Gardening/Allotment
- Beauty Therapy
- Tackling Bullying
- Safety with Strangers
- Internet Safety
- Anger Management
- Emotional well-being
- Substance Misuse
- Duke of Edinburgh Award
- Developing Effective Social Skills
- Disability Awareness
- National Navigation Bronze Award
- Basic Kitchen Hygiene
- Everyday Food & Drinks
- Personal Care & Hygiene
- Household Expenses
- Personal Awareness
- Personal Health
- Law & Order
- Milestone – Me & Others
- Knowing your Local Area
- Working as a team
- Self Advocacy
- Health & Fitness
- Taking Part in Sport
- Developing a Group Performance

¹Collected by Real Opportunities project management for progress reports

Independence development was reported most frequently as the most important aspect of the Real Opportunities project for the young person and their family. When we talked to families they reported that they had seen the benefits of these courses on the behavior and confidence of their young relative (Beyer, Kaehne, Meek, Pimm and Davies 2014a).

When he first came, he couldn't catch train or bus, now has freedom. Much more organised. Life changing. [Family member]

It has created confidence and opened doors for him. He is able to go to town to do shopping. He knows what to do and done very well. [Family member]

There was strong, positive feedback from families on the impact of Psychology Assistants on individual

young people's behaviour. Families reported that Psychology Assistants had helped with the young person's emotions and feelings, with ways to respond better socially and also with anxiety problems faced by young people.

He [Psychologist] goes into school and is able to spend time with X looking at expressing her feelings as she has problems with making relationships and friends. He has made a difference as she is able to express herself more. He can talk in a different way as a professional and younger person. [Family member]

X thought he was amazing and X trusted him totally, he was always open and very honest with (Psychologist) and this is what he needed, he really needed a male influence. [Psychologist] was a godsend. He has built up a real bond with X and he has been worth his weight in gold. [Family member]

When we talked to staff and professionals involved with the Real Opportunities project, a majority confirmed that young people were experiencing greater independence.

Increase in daily living skills and independence, growth in confidence and self-esteem. Young people being more aware of what's available to them and the opportunity to try out new things. Enabling young people to make informed choices, promoting self-advocacy and helping the voices of young people to be heard. [Professional worker]

Improved independence at an earlier age, and parents understanding about the need for increased independence as the young person moves through into adulthood. [Professional worker]

Travel training has 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. When we talked to a small sample of families who told us they had been worried about the prospect of the young person travelling independently.

Because he can't read and write he's really vulnerable. [Family member]

The majority of families had their fears addressed by staff talking them through the process and offering reassurance and support. The majority of our family sample felt that travel training had



helped their relative to do things that they had been unable to do previously, especially in terms of increased confidence.

I think it's built his confidence and now he knows that he's capable of doing it on his own. [Family member]

In cost terms, we 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.

Engaging peer mentors

The Real Opportunities project provided a course offering “An Introduction to Mentoring Skills” that was delivered in slightly different ways within Hubs. The course was run either in a number of whole days (usually two) or over shorter sessions for a number of weeks. The courses were accredited by agencies such as OCN/ Agored Cymru as a Level 2 award, with one Hub validating through AQA. By August 2014, 1096 young people had participated in mentoring training, of which 858 young people (78.3%) had gained one or more accredited units relating to the course.

Only a small number of trained peer mentors played a role in the Real Opportunities project (Beyer, Kaehne, Meek, Pimm and Davies 2014b). ELITE provided a scheme whereby age peers were engaged and trained to provide Peer Mentoring support to people with learning disabilities and ASD in the workplace. In some Hub areas, Peer Mentors helped students with learning disabilities/ ASD from the project to integrate into college. There were three forms of impact from this work.

First, 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. People were becoming better listeners, and better at supporting people. 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.

A variant of the course was delivered for people with learning disabilities, “Peer Mentoring” leading to an Entry Level certificate. 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

² Of these, 25 young people took part in an unaccredited buddying course.

Mentors with learning disabilities reported their main outcomes to be that they had more friends now, knew how to talk to people better, that they could help people now, were more confident with people and understood themselves better. Half had used their learning, again mainly in their own school's mentoring scheme.

Second, there were outcomes for employers from having mentors and mentees in their workforce. 40 out of 41 employers evaluating work placements reported that the pairs had been effective at work and that the mentor had contributed to the young person's success in the placement.

Third, family members reported that, where non-disabled peer mentors had been involved, it had helped young people feel more relaxed in going into work and had helped the young people gain appropriate skills and become better at social interaction. They had also helped the young people with travelling on public transport in some cases.

Peer mentoring was described by one Hub professional as one of the most vital schemes within the Real Opportunities project. Having a peer mentor at college helped newly recruited students to integrate into college, with less support needed from the Real Opportunities Team.

For me I think it is the most vital scheme we have been doing. Especially this year, they went to college the first week we were there and we gradually take a step back. And last year they couldn't wait to see us there. We sit down we had dinner with them, and we went down everyday, and then twice a week and then once. This year we went down and they didn't want us there. We haven't been to see them, we know they are doing well from the peer-mentors and lecturers. [Hub professional]

The contribution of peer mentors did impact on families and young people through supporting work experience. Families told us that people felt more relaxed in going into work and that mentors provided valuable input to the young person in developing appropriate skills and social interaction. They also helped with support in travelling in some cases.

Fabulous. Through Elite, a Sixth Form peer mentor from the local comprehensive took him to work experience, stayed with him and came home with him. Took his nerves away. [Family member]



Conclusions

The Real Opportunities project targeted a number of long standing issues within the transition system by providing services designed to tackle the problems directly. The project provided a broadly integrated service approach linked to schools, driven by a person centred approach, with the availability of hands-on support to deliver selected transition goals. This integrated approach was well received by families, young people and professionals and delivered significant outcomes. Evidence from our final family follow-up study suggests that the end of the time-limited project represents a significant loss to them and their son or daughter.

The research demonstrates the importance of incorporating PCP as an everyday way of working; where PCP is a central part of working culture, as it was with Hub staff, the quality of planning for a young person's transition is significantly increased. Our data suggest that it is reasonable to expect that replacing all plans with one integrated IDP will lead to significant improvements in the planning process, as the government predicts (Welsh Government 2012), especially in areas where a traditional Annual Review format is currently the norm. Hub staff did have access to an intensive Person Centred Planning course delivered through the Real Opportunities project by Learning Disability Wales. Our findings do suggest, therefore, that significant training will be needed to ensure staff engaged in IDP have good person centred planning skills to make the most of the IDP process.

Supporting families and young people to play their full role in planning the future is central to the transition process now, and under new IDP arrangements. The Real Opportunities project has shown that significant person centred planning efforts and outputs are possible. The reaction of families to this person centred way of working is encouraging for those who wish to embed person centredness within new IDP arrangements. Real Opportunities does show that people need help to take part in these processes. Roles such as Transition Key Worker are central to the success of a person centred approach. They are flexible, able to take a hands-on approach in helping people see potential placements and develop practical ideas for the future. The trust of families is important. Being able to come to the family, to help them build confidence and independence, and to provide an independent source of advice and guidance to young people with learning disabilities and/or ASD are key to winning that trust. This takes staff and time to deliver and delivering this will be a challenge for the newly reformed system.

The data from our studies does suggest that inclusion in mainstream activity is a realistic goal for many. Inclusion is progressing with more young people accessing ordinary activities with family being more supportive of their activities. While there are caveats, staff do report impacts on society members as well as for young people and families. Overall, the Real Opportunities project provided a well-organised system, supporting the young person and the



family to find and attend social activities and help them to create new relationships with largely age peers. They provided other elements that underpin social interaction, such as building up the young person's confidence through supported activity and helping young people with fear of social situations. The provision of these elements of positive social inclusion was shared widely among staff in Hubs and was a very important service for families and young people.

There remain, however, barriers to full inclusion for large numbers of young people. Work needs to continue in raising aspirations among families and in changing the culture to one where disabled young people are welcomed among organisations that deliver sport, leisure and recreational if many more young people are to be included. Experiences within the Real Opportunities project show what can be achieved and the changes that successful inclusive activity can make to young people's lives and demonstrate what strategies are effective. One of the lessons is that individual solutions require roles such as Inclusion Workers to do the work needed to build support for inclusion with families, to build confidence in the young person to make the first steps, and to arrange many of the practical things needed for the person to take part in more inclusive activities. The Real Opportunities project has also demonstrated the unfulfilled need for the psychological support to remove barriers to inclusion and independence.

Independence

Real Opportunities did deliver more independence skills for the young people concerned through individual action and courses. Growth in independence was highly valued by families. The Real Opportunities project has supported a stronger consumer voice and control over services through providing independent information advice and assistance, through PCP and roles such as Transition Key Workers. Work by Independence Workers and other Hub staff in providing "hands-on" support appears to be very important to success in delivering individualised outcomes. Real Opportunities demonstrates through creating independence, raising aspiration and awareness of work, and promoting social inclusion, a potential for less dependence on costly services. To understand if these opportunities are delivered, we need to follow young people through further to see how they engage in employment and future housing options. We also need a greater emphasis on calculating the cost and benefits of early independence work compared to later support costs.

Peer Mentoring

The potential of peer mentoring is clear. The interest of mainstream students in peer mentoring is encouraging. It provides benefits to the peer mentor and the mentee and represents a wider society-



based strategy for changing the culture of social separation that we are currently working to reform. The involvement of peer mentors in supporting people on a one-to-one basis in employment appears to have been successful for peer mentors, the young worker and employers. It demonstrates that, with careful planning, mutually beneficial support systems can work. However, the responsibilities of one-to-one involvement in activity need longer-term support and careful management if it is to be successful. Professionals need to believe it is possible and desirable before more can be done. Until then, it is likely that the involvement of peer mentors will remain primarily with groups.

Supported work experience

We have seen the large-scale involvement of people in supported work placement. We put the emphasis on supported here, as the advocacy of skilled staff in finding the right individual placement for the person, winning the placement, supporting the person and the employer and problem solving is needed if work experience while still at school is to be effective. Overall, staff report that young people and families are becoming more aware of paid employment as a realistic option. Although numbers are small, some are getting paid jobs.

The Real Opportunities project has demonstrated that multiple work experience placements are possible, using individually designed placements with job coach support. The reactions of employers validate that young people with learning disabilities make effective workers, and that they would be hired if funding allowed. The performance of young people with learning disabilities in paid work is good within this supported employment model. However, family reactions to employment remained ambiguous. The work of the employment services was largely well received, but only a minority reported being positive about the young person getting a job in the future. The poor jobs market, geography and availability of support were factors in this view.

Evidence from this study also suggests that young people build skills over multiple work experiences through supported employment and that it represents an effective vocational learning model. The problem of delivery is therefore not weaknesses of young people but the availability of effective job coaching services, and the resources to pay for them while people are aged 16-19 years of age. While this project did not set out to achieve paid jobs, a small number of those represented here did go on to achieve paid employment.

There is a role for employer leadership and co-worker involvement. Young people made a contribution and there were benefits for companies - it is not a charitable act. We have a legacy of positive experience to build on. However, we still see a large-scale movement to colleges of FE after school, despite interest in

employment and a growing awareness that it is a realistic option for many. This route of young people into college is powerful. If we are to see sustained paid employment as an outcome, we will need to provide the levels of job coach support seen in this project to people leaving school. There remains a challenge as to how we support young people with learning disabilities who graduate from further education to move to the next step - paid employment. This study suggests that there is benefit in practical learning on the job with skilled on-the-job support. There may be potential in this approach to impact on wider client groups, such as those Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEETs).

There is evidence here, and from internship programmes in England and elsewhere, that longer term placements that lead to a job are more effective than shorter term work experience, delivering over 36% paid job outcomes for primarily college leavers³ and 51.9% for school leavers⁴. There will be many who still go to college. This kind of support is needed for college leavers and a shift to extend ALN arrangements to 25 are welcome in this respect.

Acknowledgements

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³CooperGibson Research (2013) *Supported internship trial for 16 to 24 year old learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities: An evaluation*. London: DfE.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/learning-difficultiesdisabilities-supported-internship-evaluation>

⁴Kaehne, A. (2014) *Final Report: Evaluation of Employment Outcomes of Project Search UK*. Bath: South West Employment Institute.



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