Learning example

SEND Innovations Project: 4 Me and My Friends – Plymouth City Council

Introduction

Using funding from the Department for Education's Short Breaks Innovation Fund (SBIF), Plymouth City Council's Community Connections team have expanded the support on offer for children and young people with SEND. The SEND Innovations Project - 4 Me and My Friends supports children and young people with SEND and complex needs to prepare for adulthood, by helping them access the right pathway onto further education or meaningful employment.

The ethos of the project – which functions as two separate youth groups for younger children and young people - involves thinking outside of the box to empower young people with SEND to achieve their goals, boost their self-esteem, develop their skills and interests, and engage them with employment opportunities in local industries. The project also has a strong digital element, which has been made possible through additional resources from the SBIF.

Staff members also work holistically to support young people's parents/carers and guardians through regular updates on the young people's progress and face to face support.

This learning example explores the key aims and objectives of project, which focus on children and young people's experience of being prepared for adulthood and the encouragement and support they receive to have meaningful employment. It then explores the unique approach and principles underpinning the work and the key successes that the project has made to change young people's self-esteem, confidence, and outcomes, as well as the barriers the project has overcome to get there. The SEND Innovation Project has also shared useful learning for other local authorities to innovate their own short breaks delivery.

Some of the key learning includes:

- The importance of an inclusive, person-centred approach when working with children and young people who have a wide range of complex needs.

- The value of unique local resources and industries to plan an exciting programme of work experience opportunities for young people with SEND.

- How digital tools can be incorporated into engagement with young people, extending the reach of a project and supporting young people to learn new skills and develop their awareness of online safety.

Aims and Objectives

The overarching aim of the SEND Innovation Project is to address the lack of meaningful employment opportunities for young people with SEND in Plymouth.

Youth workers (who have expertise in SEND) have co-ordinated a programme of opportunities and activities to build up young people's confidence, social skills, and introduce them to potential career paths.

The aims of this programme are rooted in the barriers that young people with complex learning difficulties can face in the further education system, through dedicated, person-centred support and encouragement which helps them to pursue a different trajectory. An example of this is working with the city college to introduce a 16 plus youth club for SEND young people, with the aim of breaking down the anxieties and gaining the familiarity for when they are looking at further education.

The digital strand increases young people's digital skills, opens new employment pathways and helps address the digital divide experienced by some young people. Those at risk from social isolation can access the group online, and those interested in learning new skills are supported by the Digital Project Lead. Young people have been supported to create their own Discord server, create videos, edit images, and other techniques, and in the longer-term consider a career they otherwise might not have been exposed to. Youth workers also help young people learn how to stay safe online, and often involve parents and carers in this work, supporting young people to enable their parents/carers' understanding of why their digital lives are important.

Approach

Person-centred approach: The founding principles of the 4 Me and My Friends group are rooted in providing safe, supportive spaces for a diverse group of children and young people, who have additional needs such as ADHD, Autism, sensory processing needs, physical disabilities, and other social, emotional, and learning needs. There are two different groups, one for younger children and one for older young people, although both groups are supported with preparation for adulthood and participate in similar activities. Staff members work to build connections between the two groups, by asking the older young people to do presentations on their digital projects.

Inclusivity: Although the young people who attend have complex needs, 4 Me and My Friends is a youth group and does not label them as having additional needs. Following this inclusive ethos, staff members always take a person-centred approach to help grow young people's confidence: activities are adjusted to meet their needs, and young people collaborate with staff so they can express their concerns about new activities and come up with solutions together.

Digital engagement: The project's innovative digital offer is also rooted in co-production and collaboration. Supported by the Digital Project Lead, young people have led the development of building a Discord server, making decisions on how they want the server to run, and creating different online 'rooms' and communities for young people to engage with.

Utilising local employment opportunities: The project connects young people with exciting local employment opportunities in Plymouth. To move towards this goal, they are supported to develop 'softer' outcomes, such as learning how to work well in a team and interacting in different workplace environments. This staged approach helps young people inhabit a more outward mind-set, grow in confidence, and feel motivated to discover new possibilities. When they are ready, young people can engage with a wide range of workplaces and industries, from agriculture, environmental work, the dockyard, national marine aquarium, and the seaside, which are all unique to the local area.

Challenges and successes

Challenges

The main challenges and areas of learning for the first year of the project are:

- Ensuring staffing capacity to meet demand for the group,

- Engaging and involving parent carers in the work, and

- Access to some services in the local area for young people with SEND.

Staffing: Although the size of the group has grown from the additional funding, it is run by three staff members, two who work full-time, and one who works part-time. To ensure the group remains a safe and supportive space for the young people, numbers are limited, which reduces the scope of the project. This is important as each young person has individual needs and fears that need to be attended to. The intention is to bring in more staff and upskill older young people so they can run parts of sessions while also developing their work skills.

Engaging parent carers: Youth workers have widened the scope of their work by building relationships with the parents of young people. This takes time, through regular contact to give them information and updates on their children's progress, and addressing any of the parents' own needs, by signposting them to services and support. Workshops for parents are being developed to aid them in supporting their young people particularly in understanding the digital lives of young people.

Access to services: The group would like to build more connections with local services, to expand SEND provision in the local area and ensure young people with SEND have as many opportunities as possible to participate in what's on offer.

Successes

Some of the key successes achieved in the project so far are:

- The meaningful difference the interventions have made to young people's confidence and outcomes, especially in relation to further education and employment.

- The strong connections the group has built with other local industries in Plymouth, widening young people's employment opportunities.

- The digital group, which takes an innovative approach to engaging young people in support and boosting their self-confidence and skills and encouraging them to look at education options that would previously not have done.

Young people's outcomes: Plymouth are pleased to share real-life examples of young people's journeys through the project and the meaningful difference it has made to their confidence, sense of empowerment, and outcomes:

- One young person has gone on to set up their own jewellery making business.

- Another young person has gone to university, a significant achievement after starting the group with anxiety and feeling socially isolated.

- One young person, who first joined the group needing support with behaviour that challenges in social situations, has set up a youth patient liaison steering group at a local hospital, supporting patients to raise issues and concerns about their care.

- One young person who joined the group having completed five different Level 1 apprenticeships without progressing to a Level 2, is now engaging in work experience placements.

- One young person recognising their online behaviour as cyberbullying and becoming more aware of appropriate online behaviour.

Building connections with local industries: Additional funding from Year 1 of the SBIF has allowed staff members to build partnerships with other local industries in Plymouth. These experiences not only expose young people to new employment pathways, but also help with their emotional regulation, wellbeing, and feeling more included in their community. Young people have been able to learn about animals at local farms, learn about architecture, arts and crafts, tree felling, and other industries which are open to taking on the young people as apprenticeships.

Success of the digital group: The project's Digital Lead has collaborated with young people to build a server where they can share artwork and play games. The digital server not only develops young people's digital skills but has facilitated the engagement of young people with social anxiety who do not feel ready to join face-to-face group sessions but still want to access support and connect with their peers. A smaller group of young people are being trained to be moderators of the digital platform and earn digital badges to recognise their growing skills in filming, editing photos and videos, using a 3D printer, programming and coding. The Youth Group awards digital badges to other types of achievements, such as planning, organising, and carrying out attending a residential trip. Digital safety is built into the work, and youth workers work with both the young people and their parents to help them stay safe online.

Key learning for other Local Authorities

- 4 Me and My Friends was commissioned through collaboration with the council, education, and the voluntary and community sector. This partnership has helped change agencies' perceptions of each other's roles and responsibilities. Wider partners are involved in deciding how to allocate funding to achieve positive outcomes for young people (e.g. aquarium), and the expertise of youth services has been showcased. Decisions are rooted in young people's views and experiences in the group, which helps to shifts everyone's attitudes about getting young people with SEND into employment.

- Invest time in building strong connections with local partners, and those partners can start to become more inclusive for young people with SEND. For example, a local farm in Plymouth is now adapting their programme of outreach services so it's accessible for those with sensory issues.

- To raise awareness of your work, use local media, and consider working on a digital project with young people to create a video to advertise the group.

- When taking a person-centred approach to working with young people with SEND to help them prepare for adulthood, it is important to balance setting high aspirations for employment with preparing them for the expectations of a more formal work environment.

- Embracing digital tools can boost your engagement with young people and lead to innovative ways of supporting them to prepare for adulthood. For example, by collaborating with young people to create short videos and animations about their experiences, this develops their skills and can be re-shared with younger children at a different stage of their journey to adulthood. Digital provision also helps to 'future-proof' your project, so that young people can have access to support online.

- Think about how to make the group as inclusive as possible, so that young people who do not have a diagnosis but do have additional needs feel able to participate.