

Learning example

Motivational coaching programme with young people with SEND and/or SEMH needs - Local Authority of Wakefield

Introduction

Using funding from the Department for Education's Short Breaks Innovation Programme (SBIP), Wakefield set up a coaching programme for young people aged 16-17 with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and complex social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs.

Wakefield recognised a gap for a service which could offer intensive support to young people whose mental health, educational engagement, and social interaction had been disproportionately affected by the covid-19 pandemic and were struggling with the transition back to school or employment.

This learning example explores why taking young-person centred, relationship-based approach is crucial to connecting to young people with SEND who are at a significantly increased risk of poor outcomes as they reach adulthood, and how different parts of the SEND system should work together to enable this intervention to work as effectively as possible.

Some of the key learning includes:

- The qualities and skills to look for in a mentor who can undertake a flexible, intensive approach to relationship-building with young people with SEND and SEMH needs, and what this approach looks like in practice,
- The difference a trusted relationship between the mentor and young person can make to the young person's long-term outcomes, and
- The challenge of overcoming system barriers to set up a new support programme for young people with SEND, and the importance of multi-agency planning as early as possible.

Aims and Objectives

The long-term aim of the mentoring programme is to support socially isolated young people with SEND and other complex needs to reengage with their education, employment, and reintegrate in social activities.

Looking at the available information about how young people with SEND were coping after the pandemic, Wakefield recognised that a significant proportion of young people with Autism Spectrum Condition and complex sensory needs had not reengaged with education or employment and were spending the majority of their time at home, isolated from their local community and networks.

To connect with this group of young people and make a meaningful difference to their mental health and wellbeing, Wakefield decided to set up a specialist, one-to-one mentoring programme with the flexibility for a worker to come to their homes, building a relationship at their pace.

Through this supportive relationship, the programme aimed to set person-centred targets for the young person, to help them reengage with social activities as a gateway to ultimately reengaging with their education, a training programme, or employment.

Approach

Health and education were the key agencies involved in setting up the programme. They were able to share information about which young people met the threshold for the intervention, as they were most at risk of not engaging with any education or employment pathway as an adult and were socially isolated at a critical point of their development.

The aim was to test the impact of a one-to-one, supportive relationship on young people's outcomes. One practitioner was allocated to mentor three young people, to ensure they had capacity to engage with the intensity of the support.

The approach was dependent on this relationship, with the young person leading the focus and pace of sessions until they felt able to trust the mentor. The mentor was encouraged to be open-minded about the expectations of what would be achieved in individual sessions, focusing on longer-term goals.

During early stages of relationship building, this could involve the mentor sitting outside the young person's bedroom door to initiate a conversation, maintaining a gentle, staged, step-by-step approach until the young person felt ready.

Progress happened at the young person's pace. This could look like the young person moving from talking to their mentor from inside their bedroom, to feeling able to have a conversation in a communal space at home, building towards short walks in the community, and eventually taking part in activities they were interested in.

The additional funding from the SBIP gave the young person the time they needed to trust the mentor. This freedom and flexibility removed the pressures that come with time-limited therapeutic interventions, which often only 'scratch the surface' of the young person's needs and meant the development of their relationship was prioritised.

Key challenges

The main challenges encountered during the programme were:

- System barriers relating to procurement of the right practitioner,
- Barriers which prevented the project being scaled up to reach a larger group of young people, and
- Engaging parents in the programme and responding to the complexity of families' needs.

Procurement: Wakefield initially encountered system barriers when employing a new practitioner to take on the mentor role. Delays caused by procurement processes posed a challenge when the aim was to start the project as soon as possible, to reach the maximum number of young people. The solution was to utilise existing resources and skills in the SEND workforce, through a secondment for a practitioner already working in Wakefield who had the right professional background and knowledge in mentoring and SEND, and knew the available activities and educational and employment opportunities in the local area.

Scale up: The mentoring scheme was focused on a select group of young people, reflecting the intensity of the work and recognising the need for the mentor to have a manageable caseload. In the future, when setting up similar projects with a therapeutic focus, ensuring buy-in and join-up between SEND and NHS is key to overcoming any procurement challenges.

Engagement with parents: As the mentoring scheme progressed, reflections about why the young people were not engaging with their education revealed complex, entrenched needs within their family relationships. By engaging with young people at home, the mentor was also able to build relationships with their parents and understand their own mental wellbeing needs, supporting them to have more positive relationships with the other professionals who support their child.

Additional coaching group: Parental engagement was also a barrier to setting up an additional coaching group to reduce young people's social isolation. The plan for this group was to run activities in the community and slowly address young people's anxieties about returning to school. As a longer-term solution, Wakefield have decided to take a similar approach to another short breaks project in Camden (part of the SBIP), to employ a second family worker who can build relationships with parents, so they understand the aims and purpose of the intervention, and enable the young person's participation.

Key successes

- The difference it has made to the three young people's emotional wellbeing, education, and employment,
- The success of the person-centred, staged approach, and
- The skills and attributes of the mentor.

Young people: Following their engagement with the mentoring scheme, two young people are now attending school, and another is completing a supported internship programme. This is a remarkable achievement for three young people who, at the start of the intervention, were unable to leave their bedrooms and had lost connection to other services and support. Seeing the changes in the young people was also important for their parents, who were moved by their children participating once again in fun, enjoyable activities. Parents were invited to attend activities – including Go Ape! – to witness the progress first-hand.

Person-centred, staged approach: The flexibility and time that was given to the mentor relationship was key to earning the trust of young person. By going at their pace, the young people understood that the mentor was invested in them and willing to listen to their needs. This was especially important for young people with SEND who had been significantly impacted by the social isolation of the covid-19 pandemic.

Skills of the mentor: Finding the right worker is key to the success of this type of intervention, which is rooted in the strength of the relationship. The mentor was seconded from their role as a 'Five Day Officer', who works within the SEND system to ensure young people can participate in opportunities outside of their usual college timetable. This was a practitioner who had the breadth of knowledge and skill, from their previous experience of youth work and mentoring young people with SEND at school.

Key learning for other Local Authorities

The most important aim of the mentoring scheme was to make a meaningful difference to a group of young people with SEND who have complex emotional, social, and mental health needs and had been significantly affected by the pandemic.

Young person-focused:

- To make a positive difference to young people's lives, it was essential to adapt the programme to their individual needs, no matter what.
- This involved going at their pace, even if progress between the sessions seemed slow, to appreciate how the covid-19 pandemic had affected different areas of their development.
- For some young people, it can take up to a year for them to engage meaningfully in a mentor relationship. However, time investment makes a tangibly positive difference to young people, helping them to achieve positive life outcomes.

Reduce the pressure to engage:

- It was important not to put the young person under any pressure to engage with the intervention.
- The focus of the early sessions was on building trust: goals and targets with the young person were agreed later, when they were ready, and from the strong foundation of the young person and mentor's relationship.

- Removing the pressures of a time-limited intervention is key for young people with SEND. The additional funding meant the practitioner did not have to meet weekly targets or scrutinise the young person's progress at a pace that wasn't right for them.

Importance of the practitioner

- The importance of the young person's relationship with their mentor means finding the right practitioner is crucial to the success of the intervention.
- When engaging with young people with SEND who are socially isolated, practitioners with expertise and experience across youth work and SEND is beneficial.

Multiagency working

- New, therapeutic programmes for young people with SEND and complex SEMH needs benefit from a leader within the SEND system who recognises the complexity of the intervention and the need to work flexibly to meet their needs.
- Engaging with your local Integrated Care Board during the planning stage is useful, as they will know about other community and voluntary groups and commissioned services doing similar work, to help you with delivery and finding expertise in practitioners outside of the local authority system.