

Growth and Inclusion in North Northamptonshire (GAINN)



Legacy evaluation report

**Exploring the challenges and impact of
service delivery 2019 - 2024**

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Executive summary

- This evaluation is designed to look at the potential legacy emanating from the Growth and Inclusion in North Northamptonshire (GAINN) project during its five year lifespan from 4th November 2019 until 31st October 2024.
- The project was designed to support young people 18-24 years of age who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).
- Specifically the project was structured to respond to the social isolation, loneliness and mental wellbeing needs of young people who are NEET. The project works on the understanding that if these challenges are left unaddressed they have the potential to adversely impact the future development of young people as they move into adulthood.
- To support young people to address these issues the project was centred on a 36 week programme designed to boost confidence and wellbeing through a social inclusive approach. The project has been specifically devised to achieve these aims through a combination of mentor based support, peer based support and group activities.
- Over the course of the project 151 young people have been supported. These numbers fall somewhat short of the original expectations, however, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic undoubtedly had a significant impact on service delivery for a two year period of the project. The bankruptcy of Northamptonshire County Council in 2019 was another mitigating factor which has to some extent hampered the project and its ability to form effective partnerships in a stable environment – particularly in the first 3 years of service delivery.
- Over 70% of the referrals received over the duration of the project have been centred around the towns of Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough.
- Throughout the lifespan of the project rural isolation and public transport connectivity has proven to be an on-going challenge for young people.
- Project activities have taken place in Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough over the past 5 years. To help maximise mentor contact time with young people to project has had to strike a balance between travel time and the need to centralise some activities at Chesham House, Kettering the base of the project.
- Young people accessing the project have typically lacked confidence, self-esteem and a sense of purpose in their life. To help address these issues the project has offered on-going opportunities to help young people find their voice. This has included ambassador roles, involvement in recruitment panels and event planning discussions amongst other things. The available evidence suggest these activities have been effective in building confidence, team work skills and a sense of purpose.
- Consultation of the quantitative data reveals that on average young people have been able to improve their mental wellbeing and achieve reductions in loneliness during their time on the project.
- By comparison it has proven to be more challenging to evidence improvements in terms of distance from labour market. However, this said the project has achieved

commendable a 27% employment outcome rate. The available evidence suggests that more young people would have benefitted from an enhanced Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) offer and group sessions on topics such as employability, volunteering and training opportunities.

- Consultation with external stakeholders has revealed the value of the GAINN project alongside some of the difficulties experienced when supporting young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). In summary stakeholders who were consulted as part of the evaluation process felt that the local offer to support young people is too 'patchy' with not enough joined up provision.
- Whilst these challenges have existed the available evidence reveals the impact of the GAINN project in terms of the enhanced confidence, wellbeing and self-esteem of the young people. These are all crucial building blocks that they will need to maintain as they transition further into adulthood.
- As the challenges facing young people across North Northamptonshire are set to continue the key question remains how can young people who are at risk of becoming NEET be best supported after completing their formal school education?
- At a strategic level it is encouraging to note the GAINN project has a strong affinity with six of the ten strategic drivers released as part of the Integrated Care Northamptonshire strategy (2023) in terms of the requirement to help local people access the best education and employment opportunities to in order to be fit, well and independent.
- At the end of the GAINN project we are left with wider question...
- How can local organisations work in partnership to help provide pathways to assist more young people who are NEET to engage with employment, volunteering, training and education opportunities?
- This is a challenging question to ask, however, the answers to this question is likely to have significant implications for the demands placed on health, social care, police and probation services across the area in the years to come.
- The accumulated learning from the GAINN project provides a local example of what can be done to help support young people at NEET transition into adult life.

SECTION ONE An introduction to the GAINN project

The Growth and Inclusion in North Northamptonshire project (GAINN) has been specifically designed to support young people 18-24 years of age who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET).

Funded by the National Lottery Reaching Communities Fund GAINN represents a 36 week programme designed to help young people who are NEET tackle the growing challenges of social isolation and mental wellbeing through. The service model is underpinned through a combination of mentor based and peer based support.

The project delivered support to young people across North Northamptonshire over the period of November 2019 – October 2024.

The project has been significantly influenced by the accumulated learning from the Northamptonshire Talent Match programme delivered by Enable over the period 2014-2019 across North Northamptonshire. This experience revealed the debilitating effect of social isolation of young people as they left the schooling system and progressed towards adulthood.

More specifically the Talent Match project brought into clearer focus a range of challenges facing young people as they transitioned in adult life. These typically included:

- Inadequate support networks, role models and structures to help young people move forward with a sense of purpose.
- Increasing levels of detachment from friends, families and communities.
- An overwhelming sense of a confusion on how to navigate through a myriad of options, feelings and challenges on the journey from education into adulthood.
- A growing sense of isolation and loneliness which left many young people feeling that they were unable to be actively involved and invested in the world around them.

These compounding factors typically eroded the self-confidence, self-esteem and mental wellbeing of young people which in turn has an adverse impact on their ability to forge positive relationships and progress into meaningful activities in terms of education, employment, training or volunteering.

To help tackle these issues the GAINN project was devised to help assist young people to move forward through a combination of Mentor and peer support approaches against a 36 week programme of support split into 3 stages:

Stage one – Inclusion activities (0-12 weeks) The initial phase was designed to settling young people into the project, understand their current situation and develop an action plan for the future. The inclusion phase also involves the provision of activities to help develop new skills and confidence.

Stage two – Growth activities (12-24 weeks) the second stage was centred on actively supporting young people to engage with volunteering, training or work experience opportunities to underpin their progression.

Stage three – Supporting others (24-36 weeks). Young people progressing through to the third stage were equipped to offer peer mentoring support to other young people at earlier stages of the project. The original expectation was that a smaller cohort of young people would progress to this stage of the project.

From the outset of the project an intentional evaluation framework was developed to help inform how a progressive evidence base could be created to evaluate the impact of the project. To do this three measurement tools were selected to provide an on-going assessment of young people's mental wellbeing, loneliness and distance from labour market as they progress through the project.

This evaluation report is designed to explore the journey of the project across its five year lifespan. Over this time it is fair to say that the project has encountered numerous challenges perhaps the most significant being the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

Whilst the project has since had to adjust its service model to rely more heavily on one to one mentoring sessions during the early years of service delivery it is clear that the project has provided much needed support to assist a range of young people that might otherwise be increasingly socially isolated. Despite all the challenges faced a significant amount of accumulated learning has been achieved over this time.

The remainder of this report is designed to provide readers with an insights into the performance of the GAINN project over the past 5 years.

Richard Hazledine

Independent Evaluator – ConnectMore Solutions

SECTION TWO - GAINN project service coverage across North Northants

North Northamptonshire represents a semi-rural part of the UK focussed around three principle towns of Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough. Over the past 5 years the geography of the local area has presented specific challenges for the GAINN mentors

Over the course of service delivery the GAINN Mentors have had faced an on-going challenge to support young people across an extended area. For example the journey from Corby to Wellingborough (North to South of the district) represents an 18 mile journey taking around 28 minutes. By comparison the journey from Desborough to Oundle travelling east to west takes in a similar journey time and mileage of 18 miles and 30 minutes

From the outset of an initial referral into the project it has been clear that not all young people have the capacity or confidence to utilise public transport to access support. Therefore mentors have had to use their time wisely to initially engage some young people in settings and settlements that they are familiar with.

As the table overleaf illustrates over 70% of referrals have been spread across the major North Northamptonshire towns of Kettering, Wellingborough and Corby.

Kettering represents the core focus of the project generating 42% of referrals. This is in part a reflection of the projects central base at Chesham house, Kettering. By comparison Wellingborough and Corby generated 16% and 10% of referrals respectively.

Geographic spread of GAINN referrals 2019 - 2024

Location	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Kettering	63	42.86%	42.86%
Wellingborough	24	16.33%	59.18%
Corby	16	10.88%	70.07%
Desborough	13	8.84%	78.91%
Rothwell	5	3.40%	82.31%
Rushden	4	2.72%	85.03%
Finedon	3	2.04%	87.07%
Raunds	3	2.04%	89.12%
Burton Latimer	3	2.04%	91.16%
No Fixed Abode (NFA)	2	1.36%	92.52%
Irthlingborough	2	1.36%	93.88%
Stanwick	2	1.36%	95.24%
Bozeat	1	0.68%	95.92%
Earls Barton	1	0.68%	96.60%
Northampton	1	0.68%	97.28%
Oundle	1	0.68%	97.96%
Market Harborough	1	0.68%	98.64%
Wollaston	1	0.68%	99.32%
Great Doddington	1	0.68%	100.00%

Source: GAINN project database 042024

The market and shoe making towns of Desborough, Rothwell and Rusden represent another 15% of referrals into the project.

The distribution of referrals across North Northamptonshire smaller settlements such as Bozeat, Wollaston and Great Doddington reflect the rural geography of the area and associated risks of rural isolation which young people face.

Planning events across the area

To help ensure the broadest possible engagement of young people the project has endeavoured to put on events throughout North Northants. For example, over the past five years this has included the following activities.

- Outward bounds activities at Stanwick Lakes
- Dog care activities with the Wellidog Charity
- Walking activities at East Carlton Country Park
- Creative writing workshops at Corby and Wellingborough libraries.
- Planning days and events eg trip to Birmingham Christmas market
- Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) sessions
- Problem solving games and activities with Northamptonshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Horticultural initiatives at the Greenpatch Allotment project, Kettering.
- Providing opportunities to help young people develop their artistic talents
- Pool group and gaming group

Having an evolving range of activities located across the area has proven to be beneficial to boost engagement. However, time pressures and limited public transport links have meant that the central focus of a significant number of events has remained Kettering, particularly in an around the town and Chesham House where the project is centrally located.

In order to maximise Mentor – young people’s contact time it has been necessary to strike a balance between hosting events centrally (Kettering) and hosting event in outer locations close to Corby and Wellingborough. This is has been crucial to avoid Mentos consuming an excessive amount of travel time.

The dispersed nature of the population across a range of towns and villages across North Northamptonshire will remain a challenge for future programmes designed to work with young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training.

SECTION SUMMARY

- The GAINN project has operated across North Northamptonshire a semi-rural area containing the towns of Kettering, Corby and Wellingborough. 70% of referrals onto the project come from young people living in these town.
- The rurality of the area has presented challenges for the programme in terms of public transport difficulties and engagement with young people.

- The project has endeavoured to provide a range of social engagement activities across North Northamptonshire to help engage a diverse range of young people.
- There has been a requirement for the project to balance the geographic spread of activities with the need to maximise the mentors contact time with young people.

SECTION THREE - Helping young people find their voice

Young people accessing the GAINN project over the past five years have often been able to improve their wellbeing, confidence and communication skills through the process of engaging with their Mentor and Peers. Over this time the Mentors have consistently been supporting young people to find their voice and build their communication skills. This represents an authentic part of the confidence building process.

As the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales and Campaign to End Loneliness Measurement tools suggest young people accessing the project have often suffered from a lack of purpose since leaving school. This has typically had a detrimental effect on their wellbeing.

For these reasons the GAINN project has intentionally created an inclusive environment to help young people find their voice and contribute to the development of the project and in turn foster their own sense of self-worth and self-esteem. This has been reflected in a range of opportunities to help young people progress. This includes:

Involvement in planning events and activities – Young people are actively encouraged to shape the design of events and activities taking place on the project. This involvement enables young people to develop planning, organisation and team working skills.

Development of creative writing and self-expression workshops – Over the past year the project has actively endeavoured to design creative writing workshops that have enabled young people to express themselves and their feelings in response to a range of life circumstances or world issues. The project has also encouraged self-expression through art with one young person having his work put on display in a public space in Corby.

Recruitment panels – Young people have taken an active role in the recruitment of project mentors. This has provided an opportunity to foster an alternative perspective of the recruitment process that young people may not have considered before. Recruitment panels have also provide an opportunity for young people positively influence the recruitment of candidates who have been able to establish a rapport with a wide range of young people.

Project Ambassador – The project has intentionally created an Ambassador role which has been fulfilled by a young person progressing through the project.

Democracy and the general election – Most recently young people had the opportunity to consider the democratic processes underpinning the general election. This generated a significant amount of dialogue helping young people to understand the importance of voting.

Developing intentional activities to help young people find their voice has provided both benefits and challenges for the GAINN project as illustrated in the table overleaf.

Activity	Benefits	Challenges
Recruitment panels	<p>Young people have the opportunity to gain an employers perspective on the recruitment process. This is helpful for future job applications which they may make.</p> <p>Harnessing young people's experience to assess who will make an effective Mentor can often provide useful insights to support the recruitment process.</p>	<p>Young people require a training and induction package to ensure their skills and experience are effectively harnessed.</p>
Ambassador roles	<p>Provision of an entry level employment opportunity to promote the project to local agencies and offer peer support to young people on the programme</p>	<p>Development of appropriate induction, training and supervision packages to help young people fulfil Ambassador opportunities.</p>
Event planning	<p>Young people have the opportunity to work as part of a team to plan and organise an event. This can be helpful to foster the development of self-confidence and interpersonal skills.</p> <p>Young people are supported to develop leadership and planning skills in a safe place where there is freedom to make mistakes and learn from them.</p>	<p>Initial supervision support and development is often required to help groups appoint and approve team leaders.</p> <p>Supporting the development of cohesive teams with shared decision making processes</p>

Throughout the duration of the project young people have been encouraged to take part in a diverse range of activities to help raise aspirations and build new skills and confidence in a safe place. The value of these experiences are reflected in the testimonial feedback collated from young people.

'Taking my place on an interview panel felt daunting at the start. But felt good about it by end of the day. I learned lots about what questions to ask and how to word them. The experience of Interviewing applicants who wanted to work on GAINN was good.'

Young person accessing the GAINN project

I enjoyed having a role on the recruitment panel today and I think it was important that I was able to get involved and have a say. This has given me the confidence to prove to myself that I can speak to

people I don't know very well if I need to. It has been good that we have been able to use our experience of service to prepare questions that we might ask.

Young person accessing the GAINN project

SECTION SUMMARY

- A diverse range of activities have been created to help young people find their voice and influence the development of the project.
- Involvement in planning events and activities, recruitment panels, creative writing etc has proven to be invaluable to help improve wellbeing and self-confidence necessary for onward progression.

SECTION FOUR GAINN project – External stakeholder consultation

Over the period of 2019-2024 the project has operated within a turbulent and changeable context associated with the bankruptcy and dissolution of Northamptonshire County Council in 2018 and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020. Over the course of service delivery the GAINN project has engaged with numerous stakeholders operating across North Northamptonshire. This engagement has involved contact with many professionals who have moved into different roles over this time.

Throughout this time the stakeholders who have engaged with the project recognised the value of the support on offer to young people who are Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET). To help form a view of the GAINN project during 2024 representatives from three local stakeholder organisations were contacted. This included Prospects Careers Service, North Northants Council and Groundwork Northants.

Speaking to representatives from all three organisations there has been a clear a sense that the GAINN project has operated in a challenging geographic and economic landscape for young people leaving the schooling system to embark on their careers. Stakeholders recognised the issue of rural isolation and poor public transport connectivity across the area. Similarly, concerns were raised about the dependence of the local economy on the logistics industry and lack of opportunities in alternative industries. For those young people with no desire or expertise to work in the logistics industry wider opportunities were perceived to be limited. .

Stakeholders consulted from Prospects as part of the evaluation process in the last year recognised the good work that had been taking place in recent years through the South East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership (SEMLEP) to support schools work around the Gatsby Benchmarks. Although this was the case wider concerns were raised about the availability of provision for young people post 16 after leaving school – particularly those who were at risk of becoming long term NEET.

The wider evidence of the on-going struggles to build referrals into the GAINN project suggests that more collaborative work is needed across a range of agencies to coordinate Risk of NEET Indicator scores (RONI). This would be potentially very helpful to proactively identify young people who would benefit from the social inclusion support on offer through GAINN. In this respect the 18-24 eligibility criteria for GAINN participants was felt to be potentially problematic for some young people leaving the school system at 16 years of age who might encounter immediate difficulties and require support before potential declines in mental wellbeing and the associated issues of loneliness.

Overall stakeholders that were consulted recognised that the GAINN project had made a valuable contribution within the context of a local area where service provision was perceived to be very sparse.

The GAINN project is so needed and brilliant for young people it bridges a gap and helps young people to develop a routine and social skills.

Prospects Careers Advisor

We need more investment into youth services and projects like GAINN. We need better resourcing of transport links to help connect people to places. There is the potential for more young people to benefit from provision linked to volunteering, apprenticeship and internships.

Voluntary Sector Development Manager, Groundwork Northamptonshire

Many of the stakeholders that we spoke to felt that following the resurrection of the new North Northants Council there was now a pressing requirement to formulate some form of joined up strategic approach to help support young people who are NEET as they transition into adulthood.

SECTION SUMMARY

- As part of the legacy evaluation of the GAINN project representatives from three external stakeholder organisations were contacted to help assess the impact of the programme and future support needs of young people who are NEET.
- The three external organisations included Prospects Careers, North Northants Council and Groundwork Northants.
- All three organisations recognised the challenges to provide support to young people who are NEET across the area.
- There was a common perception that youth work provision was currently very fragmented and that the GAINN project had been providing valuable assistance to help fill some gaps in provision.
- All stakeholders agreed that more investment was needed in this area to help young people who were NEET to move forward. In this respect there was untapped potential for enhanced levels of partnership working in future particularly to help integrate targeted provision around Risk of Neet Indicator (RONI) type measures.

SECTION FIVE Quantitative performance of the GAINN project

Over the duration of the past 5 years the GAINN project has been able to support the progression of 151 young people. From the outset of the project an evaluation framework was established to collate data on the progression of young people in terms of three measures:

- Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)
- Campaign to End Loneliness measure (CTEL)
- Distance from Labour market measure (DLM)

This section of the report provides a brief overview of the trends associated with each of these three scales.

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS)

Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale Scores			
Baseline	12 weeks	24 weeks	36 weeks
38.06	42.99	44.85	49.33

Data source GAINN project database 0724

The incremental improvements in mean average WEMWBS scores at baseline, 12, 24, 36 reveals that on average young people improve their mental wellbeing during their time on the GAINN project. Many young people accessing the project are often struggling with anxiety and depression which is reflected in the low mean average score of 38. (NHS organisations classify scores below 40 to represent poor mental wellbeing)

Through peer support environment young people highly value the opportunity that the project provides to express themselves and build new routine and structure. This is part of the core strength of the project.

Campaign to end loneliness

Campaign to End Loneliness scores			
Baseline	12 weeks	24 weeks	36 weeks
4.15	3.53	2.33	2.31

Data source GAINN project database 0724

Over the course of the project the Campaign to end loneliness measurement tool has also revealed reductions in loneliness. Declining scores represent reductions in loneliness as young people assess the quality of their friendships, relationships and support networks. As wider NHS research reveals a complementary relationship most likely exists between the improvements in mental wellbeing as individuals forge better social connections to alleviate loneliness. In the course of welcoming some young people onto the project the Mentors report back that it is not uncommon to discover that some young people have no

established friendship group when they join the project. This demonstrates the potential of the project to help address the debilitating problem of loneliness.

Distance from labour market

Distance from labour market scores			
Baseline	12 weeks	24 weeks	36 weeks
4.10	4.43	4.98	4.80

Data source GAINN project database 0724

By comparison the project has found it more challenging to help young people significantly improve their distance from labour market scores.

On a 0-12 scale where 0 is furthest from the labour market and 12 is closest to the labour market scaled scores have tracked between 4-5 distance from labour market points. A closer inspection of the data suggests that significant numbers of young people would have benefitted from an enhanced level of employability support particularly around Information Advice and Guidance (IAG). For example, as young people progress through the programme not all young people have been able to develop a clear understanding of 'the skills employers want'. Similarly significant numbers of young people struggle to confirm that they possess 'good specific skills for the job they are looking for'.

Although improvements in distance from labour market scores have been sluggish to improve the project has been able to secure an employment outcome rate of 27%. In certain instances it is apparent that some young people accessing the project are much closer to the labour market and do not necessarily need the intensive inclusion support work to rebuild confidence and establish basic employability skills.

There are some key learnings from this part of the project which will be featured in the recommendations section of the report.

Wider outcome measures

A closer inspection of the specific outcome figures reveals the following situation associated with the project.

Outcome type	Frequency	Attainment rate
Total sign ups of young people	151	n/a
Employment	41	27.1%
Volunteering	7	4.6%
Taken up additional training	12	7.9%
Commenced college course	14	9.2%

Data source GAINN project database 0724

As referenced in the preceding sections of this report the project has been able to achieve a 27% employment outcome rate. The majority of young people have benefitted from the socially inclusive nature of the project. By comparison smaller numbers of young people have moved on into training 7.9%, college 9.2% and volunteering outcomes 4.6%.

Ultimately moving young people out of their comfort zones at the end of the 36 week support period has been an on-going challenge facing the project. This also represents one of the key challenge facing the Mentors.

SECTION SUMMARY

- From the outset of the GAINN project an evaluation framework was established to help track progression of participants in terms mental wellbeing, loneliness and distance from labour market.
- Analysis of Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) data reveals the positive impact of the programme on mental wellbeing. Incremental improvements in mental wellbeing have been secured on average at 12, 24 and 26 weeks compared with baseline.
- Analysis of the Campaign to End Loneliness measurement tools (CTEL) also reveals reductions in loneliness at 12, 24 and 36 weeks.
- By comparison the project has found it much more challenging to build significant enhancements to demonstrate improvements in distance from labour market measures. Although 27% of sign ups have achieved an employment outcome the wider evidence suggests many young people have struggled to enhance their employability. Further analysis of this trend is explored in greater detail in the final section of the report.

SECTION SIX GAINN project legacy and key learning

Recommendations for on-going support to assist young people who are not in education employment or training (NEET)

The final section of the legacy evaluation report for the GAINN project considers the key learning from the past five years of service delivery. Since the project commenced a significant amount of accumulated learning has been established over this time to help assess 'what works' when supporting young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).

This section of the evaluation documents the key features of the GAINN service model which have helped young people to make progress over the past five years. The section of the report also considers the key challenges encountered over the course of project and the implications for any subsequent projects targeted at young people who are NEET across North Northamptonshire.

Key features & critical success factors

Mentoring & person centred planning

Mentoring represents the core strength of the GAINN project. Effective Mentors have the ability to provide multi-faceted support to young people. These roles typically require skills and experience around Information Advice and Guidance (IAG), mental health first aid, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and person-centred support planning. The most effective Mentors are those who can sensitively encourage young people to move out of their comfort zone to build greater self-confidence and ability to access opportunities. Given that no two young people are the same project person-centred planning has proven to be crucial underpinning part of the project.

Key learning: Mentoring and person centred planning represent the cornerstone of initiatives designed to engage young people who are NEET.

Supporting access to public transport

To maximise the impact of the GAINN project it has been necessary to support young people to develop the necessary skills and confidence to utilise the public transport network. Significant numbers of young people have required 'travel training' to make progress. To compound this issue large parts of North Northamptonshire are rurally isolated with poor transport connectivity to the major towns of Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough. This is likely to be an on-going issue for subsequent projects designed to support young people to move forward.

Key learning: Projects working with young people who are NEET across North Northamptonshire will need to devise support packages to help young people engage with public transport systems.

The positive impact of peer support to help young people make the transition into adult life

The quantitative and qualitative evidence reveals the positive impact of the GAINN project on those young people who are willing to commit to the 36 week programme. Young people particularly benefitted in terms of improvements in mental health and reductions in loneliness. In many cases it was reassuring for young people to hear that they were not alone in their struggles to make the transition into adult life.

Key learning: Bringing young people together who are NEET is potentially very impactful to boost mental wellbeing and reduce loneliness.

The power of social activities to engage young people

Many of the young people accessing the project are lonely, anxious or depressed. They are often lacking confidence and unsure how to move forward with their lives. The thought of speaking to an employer, commencing volunteering or accessing college is often considered overwhelming. For these reasons a gentle introduction to group activities has consistently proven to be an effective approach to help young people move forward. Feeling included is a crucial part of young people's journeys.

Key learning: Social group activities have consistently proven to be an effective mechanism to engage young people who are NEET.

Project development points and legacy for the future

The need to provide Mentors with CPD around mental health and SEND

Through the course of the project it has been apparent that young people accessing support are often struggling to maintain a sense of mental wellbeing. Often these issues have been compounded by the presence of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) which are either diagnosed or undiagnosed. In both cases it cannot be assumed that there is a talent pool of Mentors in the local area which has suitable knowledge, skills and experience of both issues.

Recommendation: Organisations working with young people who are NEET should be prepared to provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to staff around mental health first aid, wellbeing practices and SEND.

The need for an enhanced employability offer

Whilst young people accessing the GAINN project have been able to enhance their mental wellbeing and reduce loneliness the available evidence reveals it has been comparatively harder to secure improvements in employability with distance from labour market measures lagging behind those of the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and Campaign to End Loneliness measures.

Whilst social activities have been helpful to build confidence, communication and teamworking skills the project would have benefitted from an embedded Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) offer from the outset. The learning from these sessions would have been valuable to integrate within the action planning process. Similarly, the young people would have also benefitted from closer links with employers and education/training providers.

Recommendation: IAG support should be embedded within projects designed to help young people who are NEET to progress into meaningful opportunities.

Provision of an established personal budget fund

Young people who are NEET may not have access to the necessary funds to engage with projects. For these reasons projects should think seriously about the development of personal budget arrangements that allow targeted financial support to be provided to resolve on going needs eg bus/train fares, mobile phone credit, vocational costs – equipment/uniform.

Recommendation: All programmes have a nominal personal budget made available each year. Front line workers are able to quickly and easily access funds to resolve ongoing costs to help young people engage with support.

Partnership development with local organisations to build referrals

Over the past five years quantitative the qualitative data has consistently revealed the extent of mental wellbeing and social isolation present when young people leave the schooling system at 16 years of age and fall into a NEET life style. Whilst this is the case the project has found it difficult to build a consistent stream of referrals. Given that many young people are struggling with their mental wellbeing it may have proven to be beneficial to have linked services to local mental health organisations eg Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) who are typically unable to service low level mental health demands. Similarly, schools and careers agencies such as Prospects maintain Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI). This data would be invaluable to help target referrals campaigns at potential cohorts of young people with unmet needs. Finally, given that significant numbers of young people presented on the project with either diagnosed or undiagnosed Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) it is reasonable to suggest that closer working relationships with organisations operating with the SEND field also had the potential to send a complimentary flow of referrals.

Recommendation: NEET projects should have established arrangements to access Risk of NEET Indicator (RONI) scores with local partners particularly career agencies and secondary schools. Similarly, the flow of referrals would have also have been potentially complemented with partnership development with organisations working around mental health and SEND issues. There is the potential to create more integrated relationships with this type of provision in future. For a certain cohort of young people the possibility to engage with support projects like GAINN at 16 years of age is hugely valuable. In the worst cases early intervention prevents more entrenched issues unfolding by the time they are 18.

Employment, training and volunteering outcomes

The available evidence suggests that young people have been able to proactively engage with the 'inclusion' and 'growth' phases of the project. Moving certain cohorts of young people onto the 'supporting others' phase of the project has, by comparison, proven to be harder to achieve. When working with young people who are NEET it is helpful for programmes to have both 'push' and 'pull' factors eg the Mentoring ethos of the project is helpful to prepare young people to develop their confidence, communication skills and team working skills. Whilst these are noble objectives to achieve young people also benefit from 'pull' factors eg a pipeline of entry level job opportunities or networks of volunteering opportunities and training provision. This is something that the young people accessing the GAINN project would benefitted from.

Recommendation: Whilst young people accessing the GAINN project have been able to secure, employment, training and volunteering opportunities there is further untapped potential to help young people understand how to access a range of opportunities to support their onward development. In any subsequent projects it would be advisable that a range of local partnerships are established with local organisations in order to provide an holistic approach to support progression in terms of employment, volunteering, training and further education. This includes local charities, colleges, employers and local authority involvement.

Conclusion

Over the period of November 2019 – October 2024 the GAINN project has supported 151 young people who are NEET over a 36 week period.

The project data reveals the significant impact of this support in terms of improvements in mental wellbeing and reductions in loneliness. This finding is consistent with the qualitative feedback from young people who consistently report back on the benefits that the project has provided in terms of confidence, self-esteem and routine.

Whilst the project has secured a 27% employment outcome rate this trend is not reflected in substantial improvements in distance from labour market measures. The available evidence suggests that the project would have benefitted from an Information Advice and Guidance (IAG) offer from the outset. Similarly, the project would have benefited from more targeted interventions on the concept such as employability, volunteering and wider training opportunities to complete the range of social activities that are required to build self-esteem, confidence and skills.

Undoubtedly young people have benefitted from the project over its lifespan, however, the available evidence suggests the project has experienced significant challenges which have had significant influence on its impact. Whilst the early absence of IAG support represents one of these issues the onset of the coronavirus pandemic five months into service delivery

exerted a massive issue on a service model that was originally designed around group interactions. This had significant implications from project sign-ups.

Similarly the bankruptcy of Northamptonshire County Council in 2019 and fragmented nature of service provision has not helped the project in its quest to build partnerships, nor has the labour turnover of staff. To compound this issue none of the initial GAINN team members that were in post at the outset of the project are in post at its conclusion.

The challenges faced by young people making transitions from adolescents into adulthood are very much in evidence across the area. In the words of the outgoing project Mentor the project has been needed for these reasons.

The GAINN project has been needed over this time as young people with anxiety are at a high risk of becoming NEET in the transition from school and into adulthood. Young adults with mental health difficulties and/or special educational needs struggle to have the experience, self-belief, and drive to make positive choices for their future without support, and this is where the GAINN project helps to guide them in the right direction.

GAINN Mentor

As the challenges facing young people across North Northamptonshire are set to continue the key question remains how can young people who are at risk of becoming NEET be best supported after completing their formal school education?

At a strategic level it is encouraging to note the GAINN project has a strong affinity with six of the ten strategic drivers released as part of the Integrated Care Northamptonshire strategy (2023) in terms of the requirement to help local people access the best education and employment opportunities to in order to be fit, well and independent.

However, how this will be achieved specifically for young people who are NEET is something that requires wider discussion. This leaves all stakeholders with a wider question...

How can local organisations work in partnership to help provide pathways to assist more young people who are NEET to engage with employment, volunteering, training and education opportunities?

These are challenging questions to ask, however, the answers to these question are likely to have significant implications for the demands placed on health, social care, police and probation services across the area in the years to come.

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