



Organisation name: Sunderland Chapel of Light

Project name: Southwick Employability Project

Location: Southwick, North East England

Grant amount: £9,900

Award date and duration: December 2018, 1 year

Project context: Southwick Employability Project was set up to support people to find work. The grant from The National Lottery Community Fund was used to pay two staff members who helped people to improve their chances of finding work through classes and one-to-one advice.

Project aims: The project aimed to provide more employment opportunities for local people in the Southwick area which is one of the most deprived wards nationally for youth unemployment.

Project aims

The project was set up to help the local community improve their job opportunities by providing sessions and one-on-one contact with a qualified staff member with experience in supporting job-searching. It was based in Southwick, one of the most deprived areas nationally in terms of working population, especially regarding youth unemployment. The original set up was intended to help the unemployed and tackle high local rates of unemployment but evolved to also help those currently in work to improve their employment situation.

About the grant

Southwick Employability Project was set up by MICC Chapel of Light to provide a range of employability services and classes for local people. Many of the service users were recent immigrants from Africa who had achieved qualifications in their home country but were working in lower paid jobs in England as they did not have certain soft skills required to stand out in job applications and interviews.

The project ran for a few months in 2019 and the funding was mainly used to **employ two staff members**, though a smaller amount went on **software and**

utilities. There are now further aims to develop the project and to set up an employability café where participants can volunteer and therefore gain experience to add to their CV.

The grant enabled the project to take place and contributed to improved employment outcomes. Two people were employed to support service users, each focusing on a different topic. The first focused on **improving digital literacy**: using the internet and software, for example PowerPoint. The second focused on **preparing CVs, job applications and interview techniques**. The staff showed service users how to 'sell' their skills in a way that they had not previously done. One example was someone who had cared for an elderly mother for ten years: they did not have a formal qualification, but they had transferable skills from this experience that were being left off their CV.

Project set up and delivery

The Chapel of Light had received similar funding in 2014. This allowed them to run a career coaching and job-seeking service in four local schools. As a result of this success, they ran a session outside of the schools at a local museum and were encouraged by the results. Peter, the project lead, identified a need within the community for employability skills and spoke with stakeholders in the community, such as the **local council, the national refugee service and housing associations** about putting together an employability service.

The project was well known in the community, especially among the relatively small ethnic minority population of Sunderland, and spread through word of mouth originating from the Chapel of Light church. The participants we spoke to had heard of the project through their peers, either from friends or through their local church.

The project had links with DWP and had also offered support to some people using the job centre. They also used several other ways to promote the project in the local area, including leaving leaflets in shops, churches and doctors' surgeries as well as setting up a Facebook page.

The project took the form of sessions from a qualified facilitator. Participants were able to sign up and attend several classes that were designed to help them improve their opportunities of finding employment, no matter what their area of expertise. The classes focused on a different aspect of the job application process at each session. These classes included topics such as: using PowerPoint; updating your CV; searching LinkedIn; and interview preparation and techniques.

As well as classes, the project also offered **one-to-one contact** with participants where they would run **mock interviews**. Additionally, participants spoke of being able to contact a staff member for help regarding specific job applications and interviews.

“It’s hard to say how much the project helped me get my job, but in real terms before for every 5 applications 1 person might agree to an interview, but this definitely improved since the project.”

Tom, Service user

The number of sessions varied person to person but averaged around five and each session lasted around an hour. The classes would take place face-to-face in a classroom; as well as this, participants also spoke to the staff members over the phone.

Everyone we spoke to praised the personalised aspects of the coaching, which helped them achieve roles in a number of sectors. They were able to talk to the staff member about where they were, what they wanted to achieve and then he was able to discuss with them how they could go about getting there. The coaching felt relevant to them and everyone had moved forward in their careers since attending the project sessions. One participant, who was qualified in engineering, was surprised at how much they were able to help despite not having a great engineering knowledge.

One of the challenges facing staff members was that some participants struggled to afford to reach the venue to attend the sessions. As a result, they offered telephone advice and guidance and, in some instances, the Chapel of Light, **offered free transport** to those who could not reach the site.

Other challenges they faced were from participants turning up after being referred to from the job centre and using the service as a tick-box exercise, and not engaging with the staff members.

They tried to create an atmosphere that **encouraged anyone who wants to come feels comfortable to**. The approach was **personalised**, something flagged by the participants as being particularly important, and they aimed to avoid treating the users as clients by keeping the atmosphere as friendly as possible.

Project impact

Key highlights

Numbers supported

- The project included 58 hours of classroom training and 26 hours of one-to-one interview sessions and guidance
- 44 service users attended the classes either in session or over the phone.
- 25 service users found new employment since attending the project, either moving into work from unemployment or improving their job in terms of pay, skill or both.

Key impacts

- Increased access to information and support to improve knowledge and skills.
- Improved financial and material wellbeing.
- Improved confidence self-esteem and resilience.

Gained access to information and support to improve knowledge and skills

All the participants interviewed spoke of gaining skills during the course that helped improve their chances of finding work.

“I have experience in the professional sector but the facilitator opened my eyes to a lot of things from a HR perspective that people are looking for that I wasn’t aware of.”

Adam, Service user

Particularly well liked were the CV building classes and the mock interviews which helped people look at those tasks from a different perspective. These activities were highlighted as being key to participants’ ability to secure new employment.

Additionally, the access to information

wasn’t restricted to the classroom as participants were able to call the staff members if they needed help applying or preparing for a specific job role.

Improved financial and material wellbeing

A result of helping people find work is that, if the course is successful, they improve their employment situation and thus improve their financial situation. Peter gave an example of a man who signed up to the service as he was desperate for a job and about to lose his house. Within a week of updating his CV, with the help of the project, he had been offered a job as an expat teacher in China. Another participant said that he signed up to the project because he had just got married and wanted to earn more than his current £12,000. He secured a job in London in the education sector, substantially improving his financial wellbeing.

“It came at the right time, I needed to get a job on my tier 2 visa so I knew I couldn’t just apply for any job, they were able to help me find suitable jobs available in my field and then help me prepare for them.”

James, Service user

Improved confidence, self-esteem resilience

The personalised and hands-on approach was flagged as being important for participants in finding the right job for them. This approach helped participants believe in their ability to achieve the role they wanted. They spoke to every single person at their own level and provided one on one support prior to a job interview. One participant flagged this aspect as being key as when they reached their job interview, they felt prepared and confident in their responses.

“The interview preparation session was second to none, it took the nerves straight out of me before I went in”.

Adam, Service user

Overall reflections

The personalised aspects of the project appeared to have the biggest impact on service users. It developed from a project that focused on getting unemployed people into work to include people who were looking to improve their job situation. Many of the clients were qualified in some sort of profession in their country of birth but for one reason or another had not managed to achieve the same level of employment in the UK. The project helped them realise their potential in the job market.

In addition to this the project appeared to have good success developing relationships with local partners to help a wide range of people. The project had

connections with DWP and so received services users from the job centre. They also had ties with Sunderland College who sent volunteer apprentices to them for mentoring.

Most of the participants agreed that without attending the project their opportunities would have been more limited and they would have had much lower chances of securing the jobs they were applying for.

About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Peter, the founder of the organisation, and Tom*, Adam*, and James*, all beneficiaries who attended the employability project.

**Names have been changed.*