



## Reflections: A Supported Employment Perspective



**As well as providing an income, jobs can improve our health and wellbeing by enabling us to play an active and valued role in society. The same applies for people with learning disabilities; who, with good support, prove hard-working and enthusiastic employees and bring new skills, talents and perspectives<sup>1</sup>.**

### Aims

Bristol is a great place to live and work. However, like all cities, it has its challenges. 7.4% of 16-17 year olds are not in education, employment or training (NEET)<sup>2</sup>, and only 5.6% of people with learning disabilities have a paid job<sup>3</sup>.

By working with employers and expanding the range and quality of support available, efforts are being made to improve employment opportunities and raise the aspirations of young people.

This includes the development of a number of supported internship programmes across the city.

Supported internships are specifically aimed at young people aged 16 to 24 with an Education, Health and Care Plan who want to move into employment and need extra support to do so. In Bristol, the joining of educational programmes with good-practice job coaching has enabled more employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities.

Crucially, supported internships shift the emphasis of education and assessment away from the classroom into the workplace by adhering to the following principles:

- Most of the young person's time is spent in the workplace
- Teaching of English and Maths happens alongside work experience
- There is a proper match between the intern's interests, abilities and needs and the needs of the business
- Good quality job coaching support is provided<sup>4</sup>

### Examples

The initial supported internship programme offering in Bristol was Project SEARCH. This was hosted by the City Council, which partnered with the City of Bristol College and Sixteen (Job Coaching) Co-operative Ltd to offer a model firmly based on evidence of what works with a significant support element and regular improvement reviews.

Additional programmes have followed, including Into Catering, a hospitality sector programme; and B-SIP I

and II (Bristol Supported Internship Programmes) that target the many smaller employers in the city.

In all cases, interns spend a significant amount of time in supported work experience placements; demonstrating that where young people spend longer periods of time with employers, more successful and sustainable employment outcomes are reached <sup>4</sup>. In addition, all interns currently follow college-based qualifications that offer employability skills or sector-specific training.

## The importance of follow-on support in securing jobs

By the end of June 2018, only 21% of the 33 young people who had graduated from supported internship programmes had been supported into paid employment.

However, job development work continued throughout the summer; helping to increase this figure to 57% by the end of August and 72% by the end of September.

## Factors of Influence

During the establishment of internship programmes in Bristol, particular focus has been given to developing clear employment pathways for young people, as well as improving opportunities and job outcomes.

Giving good quality support to people who are interested in finding work, and matching their skills, interests and aspirations to the needs of local employers, leads to good job outcomes.

Research suggests that such evidence-informed practice can provide more consistent supports to move people with learning disabilities into employment <sup>5</sup>, are cheaper than other forms of support <sup>6</sup> and offer positive impacts on health and well-being as well as economic security and community participation <sup>7</sup>.

However, supported internships are about more than just finding someone a job. They are a personalised approach to study, designed to support people into real jobs where they can fulfil their employment aspirations and achieve social and economic inclusion.

It is a journey that involves educators and experienced job coaches to work together to match the needs of the individual with the needs of local employers <sup>4</sup>.

## Key areas of consideration that have helped in Bristol

Please note that the following is not an exhaustive checklist of 'must-dos' but instead a reflection of the areas to be considered from a supported employment perspective.

### Create a strategic fit

Internship programmes are located under 'Employment and Skills Development' at Bristol City Council and benefit from a well-defined governance route.

Development plans cover all internship programmes and map the journey available for young people with learning disabilities and difficulties as they leave school and college, follow education and employment routes, and are supported into work.

### Ensure clear pathways

Clear referral routes to all programmes are being developed with schools, colleges and the SEND team. The internship recruitment process involves all partners and reflects the programme's employment aims. Understanding where internships fit within a young person's transition into adulthood enables clear pathways to be built for each individual.

### Develop strong partnerships

All three partners work closely together and understand the importance and benefits of collaborating. Although at times difficult, this partnership remains vital to the success of the supported internship programmes.

### Sustain good quality job coaching

Throughout the internships, access to evidence-based supported employment practices has been key. Discovery, vocational profiling and employment planning are used throughout and continue seamlessly after graduation. Funding is vital to develop a consistent workforce of trained and experienced job coaches; helping to develop enduring relations with employers and providing reassurance to families.

### Respect the needs of employers

It has taken time to build relationships with employers in order to understand their businesses and develop a good reputation. Supported employment is about matching people to the right job; it is equally important to spend time helping employers to navigate the process and provide practical guidance along the way.

### Deliver Appropriate Education

Any qualifications offered must reflect progression and be useful for young people's future careers while also reflecting the intern's experience in the workplace.

### Honour the focus on employment

All programmes focus on paid employment in the community and aim to build the skills and experience of young people to secure and keep a job. This underpins the whole programme including the recruitment process. This means having a conversation at the outset about the family's expectations of work. Extensive time in the workplace with support is a cornerstone of the success of supported internships, along with the seamless transition to job search at graduation.

### Monitor and review

Data collection and analysis have enabled the partnership to know what is working; while ensuring that all programmes reflect good practice, respond to innovation, and offer the best opportunities to the young people involved.

## Conclusion

Supported internships have significantly improved employment opportunities for young people with learning disabilities in Bristol; boosting strategic work and raising the aspirations of people with learning disabilities and those who support them.

However, in order to sustain and further improve these outcomes, more work is needed to:

- Improve school curricula to better meet the needs of local employers; while also preparing young people and their families for a working life
- Ensure the sustainability of support for those in work through the involvement of a range of partners
- Give greater recognition to the skills and abilities of young people
- Improve the understanding of good-quality job coaching and workplace support as essential components of successful outcomes

Internships continue to represent an important element in the infrastructure of support for young people with learning disabilities in Bristol.

## References

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