

Friends4U Project Summary

Background

Friends4U was established as a pilot project to work with young people leaving care. The aim was to create a person centred approach to meet the needs of young people leaving care that utilised the skills and experiences of volunteers within their local communities.

The pilot focused upon East Lancashire and has been delivered by the Adult and Community Services Volunteer Service, with £21,128 secured from Children's Social Care to facilitate this. The project started April 2012 and ended February 2013.

Project start up

Policies and procedures were designed, developed and implemented to support both young people and volunteers including; referral forms, volunteer handbook, volunteer resource pack, young person's information sheet, risk assessment, and an induction programme.

The project was marketed and promoted to care leavers in East Lancashire this included;

- A promotional flyer developed and circulated and approved by LCC Corporate Communications
- Promotion via web and social media
- Project representation at care leaver events
- Co-ordinated promotion via leaving care staff and drop ins established
- Attendance at local leaving care team meetings

Volunteer recruitment at start up was positive, with 21 volunteers expressing interest, with 19 of these becoming volunteers and progressing through interviews, CRB enhanced disclosures, references, induction and training (e-learning and face to face).

A Project Board was established with membership and terms of reference agreed. It was also agreed that the project would

- Make a positive difference and improve the life chances for care leavers in East Lancashire
- Ensure that young people leaving care will develop their independence skills, thus enabling them to grow

A project plan was developed and subsequently monitored and reviewed by the Board.

Reports were prepared for each Project Board which included number of referrals received by area, number of volunteers recruited, budget update and case studies.

Timeline

Project officially started 2nd April 2012

Volunteer officer recruited 9th May 2012

Volunteer officer finished 29th June 2012

Volunteer officer from social care seconded on temporary contract 23rd July 13

Volunteer Officer off sick 14th January 2013 – taken off project due to stress 31st January 2013

Project end 28th February 2013

Financial summary

Of the £21,128 budget allocated, £17,839.90 was spent, with £3,288.10 being reimbursed to DfCYP.

Project summary

The target for the pilot was to recruit 20 volunteers to work with 30 young people. In total, 19 volunteers were recruited and supported. However, volunteer recruitment was put on hold due to the low number of referrals received. Only one young person was matched with a volunteer. As there were no young people for volunteers to work with, this resulted in 10 volunteers disengaging with the project. Measures and actions to address these issues were implemented throughout the course of the project for both the Leaving Care staff teams and volunteer officer. This was also impacted upon by staffing issues, initially regarding recruitment and retention and subsequently by illness. A combination of these issues resulted in a decision to conclude the project.

During the course of the project, a survey was conducted with 18 care leavers who highlighted that although most care leavers were aware of the project, 11 of the 18 consulted felt they had no need or wish for a volunteer or mentor. From the survey, those who did not wish to be involved cited their reasons as;

- Already too busy
- Already involved with too many people (Professionals, adults, appointments etc)

- They did not view the project as benefitting or helping them.

Those who did express an interest felt that a volunteer would be helpful to,

- Get them out the house
- Explore interesting hobbies
- Look at new ways to get fit

Every eligible care leaver in Rossendale, Pendle and Burnley has been approached to consider the scheme. Apart from those few already referred, no other young people expressed a wish to be involved despite the best persuasive efforts of Leaving Care staff team.

Emergent issues and learning points

There were engagement issues with young people who wished to have a volunteer. This included

- Planning and scheduling appointments and visits (late cancellations, forgetting, not attending)
- Young people being referred to the project, commencing engagement and then changing her mind
- The breakdown of placements once established often due to changes in life circumstances e.g. moving out of area, pregnancy

Future options

In considering the learning of this pilot, it is suggested that there is still a role for volunteer/mentor support for some care leavers in Lancashire, but not all.

There appears to be merit in adopting a targeted approach to young people who are commencing their transition to becoming to become care leavers in 6-9 months time and therefore still currently in foster homes or residential care. This approach would offer an option to engage and for a positive relationship with the volunteer/mentor to be established prior to them leaving care. This approach could be adopted across the county, with a targeted focus on young people with little or no established family relationships or networks.

Funding will need to be identified to progress this, and options for this are currently being explored. A review of the numbers of care leavers who might benefit for this will also need to be conducted. There is opportunity to secure additional value by linking to existing provision across Lancashire, e.g. East Lancashire befriending Service and the Lancashire Volunteer Hubs.

