

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Scrutiny Review: Post-16 Education, Employment and Training

Visit to Lift Youth Hub: Thursday 8th December 2016

On 8th December 2016, members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee visited the Lift Youth Hub at White Lion Street to meet four young people who had previously been NEET and their Progress Advisors.

The visit was attended by Councillors Theresa Debono and Nick Wayne and representatives of Children's Services and Democratic Services.

During the visit the following main points were made:

Young people's experiences of becoming NEET and engaging with the Progress Team

- One young person advised that she attended college for a year before deciding that her chosen course was not appropriate for her. At that point she wished to change course and applied to different colleges, however her college tutor was not supportive of her decision and refused to give her a reference. Without a reference the young person could not be accepted at another college and became NEET.
 - Since becoming NEET the young person had engaged with the Progress Team, who referred her to Street Step, a dance and fitness academy that supports young people into education, employment and training. With Street Step she attained Level 2 qualifications in Maths and English and was supported to successfully apply for a Nursing access course.
 - The Council did not have data on the number of young people who had been refused a reference by their college, however all schools gave their pupils a reference on their exit from Year 11. The young person advised that she did not receive any support or advice from her college when they knew she was becoming NEET.
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- One young person advised that he stopped attending a school outside of the borough. Although he was predicted good GCSE grades, he was registered to sit 13 GCSEs and struggled to cope with the workload, which he described as overwhelming. His relationship with the school deteriorated and he applied to attend schools inside the borough; however the schools would not admit him as it was too late in the academic year and he had been studying different syllabuses. He became NEET as a result.
 - The young person engaged with the Progress Team, who referred him to the Holts Academy, which specialises in jewellery making and design. He was supported in attaining Level 2 qualifications in English and Maths and accessing a traineeship. He said the Academy was incredible and he was now looking into Open University courses, which he was unaware of before.
 - It was noted that very few colleges offered a full GCSE programme for young people who wished to re-enter education on an academic pathway. The only provider known locally was Barnet and Southgate College.

- One young person advised that she could not cope at school and was eventually excluded from a school inside the borough. She left school with no qualifications and was referred to the Progress Team by social services.
- The Progress Team helped to develop her CV and employability skills and found a placement for her on a hairdressing course; however she was intending to leave this and take up business studies instead.
- The young person reported that her school did not provide her with any advice when she was excluded and she did not know about her options or who to contact.

- One young person reported that he did not achieve his expected GCSE grades and as a result was not accepted onto his preferred college course. He took up a Media course as an alternative, but the course was not appropriate for him and he disengaged from education. The young person spent some months NEET, before being referred to the Progress Team by his mother, via the Council's Housing Service.
- His Progress Advisor helped him to assess his options and referred him to the Arsenal Community Hub, where he studied for Maths, English and ICT qualifications. He was supported in developing his CV through voluntary opportunities. He had also successfully applied for a part-time job with the support of the Progress Team.
- The young person reported that his confidence and self-esteem was very low after leaving education, he said that not achieving his expected results was 'crushing' and he felt that he had let his family down and that he had nothing to show for his time at school.
- He commented that the Progress Team and the Arsenal Community Hub had set him on the right track. His confidence had improved and he welcomed that the Arsenal Community Hub was focused on practical skills. For example, mathematics was taught in a real-life context, related to money, budgeting and paying bills. He considered this to be much more useful and engaging than the academic maths taught at school.
- The young person reported that his school did have a mentor system and careers advisors, however he acknowledged that he had a difficult home life and struggled when this type of support was not continued at college.
- Whilst at school, the young person suspected that he may not achieve the qualifications needed to get onto his preferred course. This was raised with his mentor at the time; however his mentor would not consider a back-up plan, instead encouraging him to 'get his head down' and focus on his studies.

The work of the Progress Team

- The Progress Team worked intensively with young people, meeting them around once a week to help them draft their CV, apply to courses, and develop their employability skills. Progress Advisors continued to engage with young people after they had been referred to education or training providers, to ensure that they remained in education, employment or training.

- The young people reported positive experiences of working with the Progress Team, commenting that they were very determined to get them into education, employment or training, and supported them like they would their own children. Progress Advisors explained everything to the young people in a way that they could understand and that was considered very valuable.
- Young people were contacted through telephone calls, text messages, and letters. Information about support services was available on the Council's youth website, which was being re-branded.
- Officers emphasised the importance of partnership work with other services and agencies to generate referrals to the Progress Team.
- It was commented that not all London Boroughs provided such comprehensive employability support and guidance to young people. A former Islington resident had contacted the Progress Team after moving to a south London borough because she was NEET and there was no equivalent local authority support service.

Suggestions for improving services

- The young people were asked how they thought young people could be better supported to stay in education, employment and training.
- It was commented that most young people had no idea that the Progress Team and other support services existed. One young person said that he spent a few months NEET as he didn't know that there were any services available to support him. He suggested that if he was aware of the available services then he would have accessed them much earlier.
- It was commented that schools put a disproportionate emphasis on GCSEs, and young people didn't know the range of alternative qualifications and pathways available, or how to access them. The young people had thought that without GCSEs they would not be able to gain employment or access further education. One young person suggested that, without appropriate guidance, young people NEET tended to either mope or turn to crime.
- It was suggested that schools and colleges should advise their pupils on their options if they don't attain their expected grades; this should be practical advice, delivered positively. The young people identified that schools, colleges and their peers did not talk about back-up plans. One young person noted that some people joined the Army when they did not achieve their expected grades, suggesting that this was not necessarily because they wanted to do so, but because they were unaware of any alternatives.
- In response to a question, the young people thought it would be helpful if support organisations and post-16 education providers came into schools to talk to pupils about alternative pathways.
- One young person was supported at the session by her sister, who commented that she was in a similar situation when she left school four years ago. Although she eventually found a college course by herself, she commented that if she knew about the support services available at the time she would have definitely made use of them.
- One young person commented that the letters he and his parents received from his school after he stopped attending amounted to bullying or harassment; and these actually discouraged him from re-engaging with education.

- Some of the young people thought that their becoming NEET was entirely avoidable, and that they would have moved directly from school into another pathway had they known about the options available. They stressed the importance of stopping young people becoming NEET.
- The young people emphasised that their NEET status should not define them, and that they were too often classified as ‘failures’. They instead considered that the system had failed them. They said they were ambitious, good people, who wanted to contribute to society. They emphasised that they were not ‘trouble makers’.
- Some young people identified that their former schools’ education, employment and training support was not sufficient and highlighted the difference between a ‘mentor’ who provided encouragement and generalised advice, and an ‘advisor’ who could provide practical, independent and specific careers advice. Some young people thought that greater access to advisors was needed.
- One young person commented that the education provider he was now attending was closing down due to a lack of funding. He had secured a move to another provider; however he queried if more could be done to support the sustainability of smaller providers.

- The Progress Advisors and Children’s Services officers were asked how support services for young people could be improved. It was commented that Progress Advisors attended some schools on results day and were available to discuss options with the pupils who did not attain their expected grades. However, some schools did not allow them access to the school.
- Not all schools provided information to the Council on the pupils who would benefit from support from the Progress Team. Some schools provided the Council with details of the pupils that did not attain their expected grades; this allowed the Progress Team to meet with the pupil on results day, or at least speak with them on the telephone. If schools did not identify these young people to the Council, then they would only be contacted by the Progress Team after they were identified as not being registered with a local college. This process could take several weeks.
- It was asked why some schools did not cooperate fully with the Progress Team and if there was a difference between the engagement of academies and LEA schools. In response it was advised that there was no difference between schools and academies in this regard. Some schools considered that their own support arrangements were sufficient. Other schools did not have a structured results day which allowed for such issues to be discussed, with pupils simply collecting their results and leaving the premises.
- If pupils in need of support were not identified to the service on results day, then it became increasingly difficult to contact them, particularly if they changed telephone number. On occasion the service did send Progress Advisors to carry out home visits, but this was very resource intensive and only used as a last resort. It was sometimes found that young people had moved out of the borough.

- Members queried if referrals could be made to the Progress Team before young people left school, if it was thought that they may not attain their required grades. In response, officers commented that this would be very helpful, however for this to work the profile of the Progress Team needed to be raised at a strategic level within schools.
- Members commented that academic pathways were not suitable for all pupils and queried if stronger vocational pathways were needed in the borough. It was suggested that a strategic review of the quality, range and accessibility of vocational pathways would be useful. The Committee's previous review of Alternative Provision found that some young people were referred to Alternative Provision as a means of accessing vocational education. It was suggested that a more flexible arrangement, allowing pupils to sit vocational qualifications alongside their GCSEs in school, would be desirable.
- Members suggested that the Progress Team could make use of advertising at bus stops and in the local press around results day.

Members thanked all of those present for their attendance.