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| Meeting of: | CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE |
| Date of Meeting: | 4 SEPTEMBER 2024 |
| Report Title: | EMPLOYABILITY BRIDGEND UPDATE FOR CARE EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE |
| Report Owner / Corporate Director: | CORPORATE DIRECTOR - COMMUNITIES |
| Responsible Officer: | GEMMA HAYNE EMPLOYABILITY BRIDGEND TEAM LEADER |
| Policy Framework and Procedure Rules: | There is no impact on the policy framework or procedure rules. |
| Executive Summary: | <p>This report provides an update on the service Employability Bridgend provides to Care Experienced Children.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> As an externally funded project, we have to abide by our funders' restrictions, which mean we are only able to support residents of Bridgend County Borough who are 16+ and not in full-time education, with no upper age limit. For the Multiply project, this is 19+ with no upper age limit. Employability Bridgend is committed to providing individualised support, including mentoring, training, volunteering, employment and in-work support. There are a small number of declared Care Experienced Children supported by the Employability Bridgend project, and the project continues to build internal Bridgend County Borough Council relationships to provide more support for this client group. |

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1** The purpose of this report is to inform Corporate Parenting Committee about the service offered to Care Experienced Children (CEC) with Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) by Employability Bridgend.

2. Background

- 2.1 The end of the European Social Fund, as the United Kingdom left the European Union and is no longer eligible for support, created a need to replace funding especially that which focuses on employability. Employability Bridgend is funded externally with no BCBC core funding and thus has to respond to the requirements of funders.
- 2.2 The UK Government (UKGOV) established a new fund called the Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) which was split into three priorities – People and Skills, Communities and Place, and Supporting Local Business, covering the 2022-23 to 2024-25 financial years. Local Authorities put together bids for funding under the three streams with Bridgend County Borough Council's Local Investment Plan presented to Cabinet in July 2022. Cabinet also approved in July 2022 that Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council (RCTCBC) would assume the role of the 'Lead Local Authority' for the UKSPF for the Cardiff Capital Region. The total SPF allocation for Bridgend is £23,106,591.
- 2.3 The Employability Bridgend project was allocated £4,374,172 from the People and Skills element of SPF. As the agreement for the UKSPF was not received and signed off until the 28th March 2023, it was not possible for BCBC to undertake projects and schemes in year 1 as planned. The Employability project was therefore set to operate from 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2025, supporting the residents of Bridgend to access employment advice, training & qualifications, volunteering and job opportunities.
- 2.4 The SPF monies align with the Communities for Work+ (CfW+) funding through Welsh Government, which has been renewed annually since 2018. For 2023–24 £1,221,446.86 was allocated with £737,240 allocated in 2024-25. To ensure there is no duplication of provision across the two funding streams, the cohorts for SPF Employability Bridgend and CfW+ are different in terms of level of support required, distance from the labour market and employment status.
- 2.5 A separate part of the SPF monies was ringfenced for a UK Government mandated project called Multiply. The funding for this was £3,990,295 of the overall SPF monies. The aim of this project was to support people aged 19+ living in the Bridgend County area with numeracy skills, up to and including Maths GCSE. There are various cohorts for this project, including parents, those with debt issues and young people and this is supported by various sub-contractors, such as Bridgend College and Citizen's Advice, as well as other departments within BCBC.

3. Current situation / proposal

- 3.1 There are 296 16–25-year-old Care Experienced Children (CEC) in BCBC as of 31st March 2024. Of these, 88 are not engaging with offers of support from BCBC services at all and many of the rest will be in full-time education or in employment. Since 1st July 2022, all 18+ CEC were on a Welsh Government pilot Basic Income scheme. The number of Employability Bridgend participants who have declared that they are CEC as of August 2024 is 16. We are aware of projects within the Education Directorate that engage with CEC at earlier ages and provide ongoing training and employment support from 11 to 25 years of age, such as Bridgend Youth Support.

Employability Bridgend provision for CEC is improving the confidence in 'soft' skills, as well as vocational training, qualifications, and employment prospects, as well as improving access to other support agencies. The project has been successful thus far in engaging participants to improve valuable life skills, which has positively impacted social isolation, confidence, and labour market position of participants.

Employability Bridgend offers support out in local communities, in venues such as libraries, life centres, community centres, Memorial Halls, for both 1:1s and group support. Employability Bridgend Marketing and Engagement team organise regular engagement events such as Family Fun Days, Creative Connections and Digital Festivals as well as the annual jobs fair in conjunction with Job Centre Plus, to be able to engage with participants and partners to ensure that support is targeted correctly for the participant and the local business need.

Multiply provision within Social Services for Care Experienced young people is improving the confidence in numeracy skills, qualifications, and life chances of participants. This is especially the case for those who may have had a low attendance and attainment whilst at school. The project has been successful thus far in engaging and supporting young adults to improve valuable life skills, which has positively impacted financial independence, aspirations, and job prospects of participants. The Multiply Engagement and Skills Project Officer works closely with BCBC's Social Workers, Personal Assistants, Council departments and supported living providers to ensure that numeracy support is targeted to the needs of individuals. External partnership working with housing providers, such as Dewis and Pobl who provide supported, semi-supported and independent accommodation, has also been imperative to the successful engagement of participants. Support offered includes 1:1 sessions and group sessions, which are completely flexible; sessions are held at home addresses (where appropriate), community centres, libraries, and external supported living accommodation.

There have been several engagement events and courses which have been devised and implemented to target the needs of care experienced young adults. Many of the courses have supported numeracy life skills, such as financial budgeting, cooking on a budget, confidence building and Essential Skills Wales Qualifications. A specifically devised Escape Room which incorporated core numeracy skills was delivered to encourage hard-to-reach young adults to engage with the project, with further fun activities planned soon; this was successful and resulted in new participants to the project.

The unique style of delivery, with the Multiply and Skills Project Officer working alongside the Social Services team, has been beneficial in supporting the young people's well-being needs to allow them to access the educational opportunities on offer, moreover the flexibility of delivery has been paramount to supporting the care experienced participants.

- 3.2 To date there have been 16 CEC engaged on Employability Bridgend projects, from 1st April 2023 to August 2024 and the following 3 case studies demonstrate the support they have received.

Case study 1: Participant A aged 18, who was a care leaver and living in supported accommodation. He was struggling with access to computers and interview techniques. He was supported with interview techniques; he was given prompt cards to use in interviews as he would often go off on a tangent. He was successful at gaining at interview with Pobl, which was online. His Employability Bridgend Mentor provided him with the use of a laptop and set him up in the reception room in the Employability Bridgend Porthcawl hub. This allowed him to have a quiet space and the technology for the interview. He was successful at interview and gained a position of 'Support Worker'. He is always recommending Employability and talks to others about what support we offer when he volunteers in the foodbank. Employability Bridgend consequently supported a friend of his into work following a recommendation from participants.

Case Study 2: Participant B had a baby whilst in care and has spoken about sitting her exams in her foster care, holding the baby whilst she sat her maths exam. The participant is a single mum to 2 children. The participant has also enrolled onto the Multiply project and is having support with maths that will benefit her children as her eldest is just about to start school. The Employability Bridgend Mentor managed to build a rapport with her, and they are exploring what work she could do when her youngest goes into nursery. The Mentor has also supported her to get proof of her national insurance that she did not have before.

Case study 3: Participant C was living at North Lodge care home at the time of enrolment and exit. He was referred by Awen Cultural Trust. It was identified from the enrolment that he had a number of barriers and was some distance away from work, lacked confidence and self-esteem. He was not keen on attending a confidence course, so the Employability Bridgend Mentor's aim was to build his confidence during their appointments. He has some behaviour issues, so it was a case of building a rapport with him, so he felt comfortable and at ease. Over time, he started to be more relaxed and started attending appointments on his own without a support worker. A new CV was completed, and he restarted a placement at B-Leaf and Bryngarw Country House.

There was a period where he missed several appointments and after re-engaging, he confirmed that he was not work ready but was keen to start a college course. He wanted to start a business skills course. His Mentor managed to source a course for him at Bridgend College, supported him with the application and a start date was confirmed. He was still actively engaging at B-leaf and with the course close to starting, it was agreed to close and exit him from the programme.

Multiply Case Studies: Since the Multiply Engagement and Skills Officer has been in post (September 2023), four care experienced young adults have achieved formal qualifications, with a further four working towards a qualification. In addition, three participants that have achieved formal qualifications are currently working towards higher level numeracy qualifications.

Three participants have gained employment since enrolling and engaging on the project. One learner is now job hunting following an extended period out of work, due to the confidence gained from sessions.

One participant has progressed onto a full-time course with Bridgend College. Four participants have moved from supported living providers' Step-Down provision to private rental accommodation.

A care experienced participant achieved Entry Level 3 in numeracy, which he has said will help his job prospects. This is particularly exceptional since he never went to school as a child and arrived in the UK just over 4 years ago as a 16-year-old, unaccompanied asylum seeker who could not speak English. This participant is currently working towards a Level 1 qualification through Multiply and hopes to run his own business in the future.

3.3 BCBC referrals represent less than 1% of our overall referrals, with the rest coming from external sources such as Job Centres, Foodbanks, and self-referrals, despite the many attempts that been made to encourage more referrals internally. These attempts at internal referral building will continue as Employability Bridgend's offer can enhance well-being and employment and life prospects for many BCBC service users. We do not want eligible residents of Bridgend County area to miss out on support which could improve not only their own lives but also their families and communities.

3.4 A representative of Employability Bridgend attends the Corporate Parenting Board meetings, and the programme has signed up to the Corporate Parenting Charter and has committed to adjusting paperwork to ensure that more information on CEC is collected to be able to report back in future. By asking if the participant is CEC on the enrolment questionnaire, this will be participant declaration and only if they are willing to make that disclosure.

4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)

4.1 The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh Language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives

5.1 The Employability Bridgend project demonstrates the sustainable development principle by ensuring that by meeting the needs of the present they do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs this is evidenced through the 5 ways of working:

- **Long term** – it is important that CEC are provided with support in early adulthood which sets them up for their lives.

- **Prevention** – working with BCBC colleagues and other agencies to ensure that CEC are referred to Employability Bridgend for support.
- **Integration** – It is important that BCBC departments work together to ensure that support for vulnerable Care Experienced Children and Young People is joined up.
- **Collaboration** – working together to ensure that Employability Bridgend has the right offer to support CEC is vital to the Corporate Well-being aims of helping people become more healthy and resilient, and supporting a successful economy.
- **Involvement** – Employability Bridgend will continue to attend the Corporate Parenting Board to ensure that the support offer is up-to-date and shared and the voices of CEC are respected and actioned where possible.

6. Climate Change Implications

- 6.1 There are no climate change implications resulting from this project. However, we are committed to supporting the implementation of the local authority's 'Bridgend 2030 – Net Zero Carbon Strategy' and Welsh Government's carbon reduction commitments.

7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications

- 7.1 Employability Bridgend has a commitment to the Safeguarding Policies and Procedures of Bridgend County Borough Council and Welsh Government, establishing and maintaining effective ties with pivotal areas, including the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH), and safeguarding leads. Managers and staff integrate safeguarding into team meetings and have undergone safeguarding training to ensure consistency of service delivery to participants.

8. Financial Implications

- 8.1 The Employability Bridgend project is fully funded by the UKGOV Shared Prosperity Fund and Welsh Government Communities for Work+ in 2024-25.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 It is recommended that: the Cabinet Committee Corporate Parenting considers and notes the service offered to Care Experienced Children (CEC) with Bridgend County Borough Council (BCBC) by Employability Bridgend.

Background documents

None