

Black Country: helping people into work

Summary

A charity-led programme to support people to help them progress closer to work, training or education with around 20 partners involved. For people with multiple conditions, over half of clients, there are links to public health and mental health providers to address their health concerns alongside employment support.



Main points

- Local charity Steps to Work applies to European Social Fund and National Lottery Community Fund for funding
- New programme set up tapping into the skills of multiple local partners, including NHS, local councils and voluntary sector
- Referrals are managed by project officers who organise support to help people move towards employment
- Programme set targets to ensure those with physical and mental health conditions are helped
- Programme given three-year extension to 2022 following success

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– THOMAS BEALE, CLIENT

Context

The Black Country covers an area to the west of Birmingham, taking in the metropolitan boroughs of Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley and Sandwell. The name is thought to come from the soot from the heavy industries that defined the area in the 1800s, including coal mining, brick-making and steel works.

Following the decline of those industries, the area suffered high rates of unemployment. Even today finding work can be difficult for some with the area having some of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the country.

The economic situation has seen a number of different organisations spring up to support people into work. One of the most established is Steps to Work, a charity which was formed in the late 1990s and has worked with over 30,000 people.

What was done?

People with long-term conditions can face multiple barriers to gaining employment. The health conditions themselves can make it more difficult to find work or may have meant individuals have no longer been able to carry on working in the job they used to do.

The charity Steps to Work applied to the Building Better Opportunity Programme for funding to provide one-to-one support to over 24s with complex needs. The programme is funded by the European Social Fund and National Lottery Community Fund.

The vision was to create a programme of support that tapped into local partners from the NHS, local government and voluntary and community sectors. Bridges (Building Reachable Individual Dreams Gaining Employment and Skills) was launched in July 2016 with 28 delivery partners on board, offering a diverse range of services and activities. It is led by Steps to Work who then have contracts with the individual partners.

Each delivery partner has their own team of staff working on Bridges. Across the partnership there are 85 staff in total working within the community supporting people and an additional 44 offering administration and management support.

Clients are referred in from a variety of sources, including by the delivering partners, NHS staff, social care, librarians and the Job Centre as well as via self referral.

They are given a project officer who assesses what support they need. That officer can be from any of the delivery partners and then coordinates the support with other partners. Most of the work is community based – clients are often met in cafes or community centres.

Current partners include Just Straight Talk, which offers workshops on employability skills such as team building and interview techniques as well as housing support, and the Beacon Centre which works with people with visual impairments.

Meanwhile, from the statutory sector there is the Dudley and Walsall Mental Health Partnership Trust and public health services that can provide lifestyle support to clients.

Steps to Work head of operations Stephanie Hammond said: "It is about tailoring the support around the individual. We might see them every week or just once a month and the support can last a few months to a few years. We have some clients who have been with us since the start. It really does depend on the individual's circumstances.

"These are people who have real barriers to finding employment. It can be financial, social or physical. Sometimes we work directly alongside social care or the NHS. The first step is to develop action plans and then to start organising support. We then go from there."



What has been achieved?

An evaluation of the programme in March 2019 by Enriched Consulting found the support given to people had had an extremely positive impact. A group of 31 clients were interviewed in depth. All said they were very satisfied with the help they had been given. They were also asked to rate the feelings out of 10 on a range of subjects at the start and end of the support.

The evaluation found:

- Sense of purpose increased from 1.8 to 8 on average
- Skills increased from 4.1 to 8.1 on average
- Confidence went up from 2.8 to 7.4 on average

The testimonies of individuals who have been helped also illustrate the positive effect of the programme.

Thomas Beale was homeless, had suffered a mental health breakdown and had poor health when he was referred to Bridges. His project officer helped find him accommodation and worked with him to build up his confidence. He is now being trained in welding and forklift driving. "I have had support before, but never with a such a caring approach. Nothing is too much. Thanks to the approach taken, I have started to realise my potential," he said.

Meanwhile, Andrew, who has autism and suffers from anxiety, spent time doing workshops to build confidence, communication and team-working skills. When he was ready, Bridges helped him produce a CV and apply for jobs. He is now working full time as an Amazon warehouse operative. He said: "Bridges has encouraged me to think about my future in a positive way."



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– STEPHANIE HAMMOND, STEPS TO WORK HEAD OF OPERATIONS

What lessons have been learned?

The programme was tasked with supporting 840 people with physical and mental health conditions by the end of June 2019. It more than achieved this – seeing over 1,600 in its first two-and-a-half years. It means just over half of its clients have a long-term condition. But this is very much a conservative estimate. The figures are taken from the initial assessments.

Ms Hammond said: "We have found that not everyone is willing to disclose their health condition straight away, especially if it is a mental health problem, or they may be unwilling to admit they have a health condition.

"So we have found we have had to be patient and help them access health support when they are ready for it. There is one woman we have been working with who only now is getting beginning to help for her mental health condition.

"We have partners – public health and mental health services – that we can link them to or we can help them attend a doctor's appointment. But until you start helping them address their health, you cannot make much progress with employment."

What is happening now?

The programme is constantly being refreshed with new delivery partners being brought in and some leaving. There are currently 19 on board.

Ms Hammond said: "We have found partners will leave. Some have been put off by the admin – there is quite a robust auditing arrangement because we have to prove our outcomes to our funders. So it does mean we do take on new partners because of that or because we see new opportunities for partners from different fields to get involved. It is evolving all the time.

"Recently we have had to re-organise our mental health support. We lost one partner so we have given Dudley and Walsall Mental Health Trust more of the funding to cover a wider population." And that evolution is set to continue. The programme only initially had funding until the end of 2019, but that has now been extended until 2022, allowing the programme to build on what it has achieved so far. It means total funding provided over the whole period – 2016 – 2022 – will be £17 million.

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