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Feature

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Activity Agreements – Supporting vulnerable learners post school

John Cairns, Nicholas Asante-Ampaduh and Emma Ronald, Aberdeen City Council

“Opportunities for All is an explicit commitment by the Scottish Government to offer a place in learning or training to every 16-19 year old who is not currently in employment, education or training.”¹

Local Authorities across Scotland have funds from the Scottish Government to assist with delivery of the national ‘Opportunities for All’ guarantee. This guarantee offers a place in learning or training for every 16 to 19 years old who needs and wants a placement. If the place is taken up the young person may be eligible to receive a benefit each week.

Aberdeen City Council along with partner agencies has formed a ‘Successful Transitions to Adulthood’ outcome group to implement the commitment of the Scottish Government. The group has recently collaborated to produce a Youth Employment Activity Plan which profiles all local training opportunities within the city which are available for 16 – 19 year olds. The training opportunities provisions are profiled according to a *readiness of employability* scale. There are 5 stages to the employability scale and each young person is placed on this according to their readiness of employability stage.² Activity Agreements are Stage 1 within the employability scale. Stage 5 is work with support.

The purpose of Activity Agreements is to engage young people, who are identified as being furthest away from learning, training or employment, into activities which are of interest to them. It is hoped the activity will enable them to take the next step into more structured employability focussed training. The objective of an Activity Agreement is to provide young people with new experiences which can assist in developing their confidence and motivation so they can progress towards a sustained positive destination, via the employability pipeline (stage 1 to 5). Young people can spend as long as it takes on an Activity Agreement or until they reach 19 years old.

As well as participating in activities which should be self-motivating for young people, participants are encouraged to visit local personal development and employability training providers. It is hoped that visits will increase their knowledge of possible progression routes and build relationships with workers who can assist them to the next step on from Activity Agreements.

Referral routes

A range of services assist in identifying young people who would be suitable for Activity Agreements. During 2012/13 in Aberdeen, 31% of referrals were received via Skills Development Scotland, 18% from Social Work services, 11% from third sectors partners such as Aberdeen Foyer or Barnardo’s and 20% were self referrals .³ There were 100 young people participating in Activity Agreements in Aberdeen in the academic session of 2012/13.

It is interesting to note the large number of self referrals. This is largely due to a new approach of trying to engage young people who have traditionally been hard to reach by using a variety of different

¹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/11/7618/0>

² <http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.asp?IID=49048&SID=22730>

³ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

means of communication. This has included writing letters to both young people and their parents, phoning young people using telephone numbers from their school days and using social media to directly contact anyone who has been flagged up by participants in the Successful Transitions to Adulthood group.

Activity Agreements in Aberdeen are now promoted via Facebook (www.facebook.com/activityagreements) and Twitter (www.twitter.com/AAberdeen). Both social media sites have been vital in promoting Activity Agreements. The sites show photos of what an Activity Agreement can be, for example, young people surfing, or displaying their art work. The site also shows what opportunities are currently available.⁴ The sites are monitored daily and updated weekly.

Table 1: Summary of activities arranged in 2012/13

A range of activities have been organised for young people who are signed up to Activity Agreements in Aberdeen. The following table outlines those activities which have been accessed most frequently:

Activities	Providers involved in delivery locally
Computing	Excel/word sessions at ECPC (a computer training company).
Cooking	Sessions at Aberdeen Foyer & Royal Environmental Health Institute Scotland visit to Garioch Community Kitchen.
Creative Arts	Portraiture, Oil Painting, Furniture restoration, Life drawing, Kilnformed glass techniques, Print making.
Dance	Dance group run at Citymoves (September to November) and voluntary assistant to dance teacher placements within Citymoves classes.
Digital Media	One to One sessions at Station House Media Unit (SHMU).
ESOL	One to One sessions arranged by both Community Learning & Development Adult Learning team & Private independent company.
Extreme Sports	BMX'ing, Skateboarding, In line skating, Wall climbing at Transition Extreme.
Football	Voluntary placements at Streetsports and sessions at Aberdeen Foyer.
Horse riding	Weekly sessions at Hayfield riding centre.
Ice-skating	Weekly sessions at Lynx arena.
Job Search	Delivered within Fersands Youth Flat group and CLD SQA group.
Literacy	One to One sessions arranged by both CLD Adult Learning team and the WEA.
Music	One to one sessions at Torry Youth Project (CLD Youth Development team) & Aberdeen Foyer Musicbox in partnership with Aberdeen Football Club.
Outdoor Education	Mountain biking, surfing, gorgewalking, rock climbing, mountain bike maintenance (Adventure Aberdeen), Ski School.

⁴ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

Trades	Sessions at Aberdeen Foyer with local tradesman.
Work experience placement	Shop assistant at Oil & Glass, Golf assistant at Murcur Golf course, assistant at Duthie Park.
Voluntary placements	Nursery/after school club - early years placements.

Activity Agreements: Statistics 2012/13 – Aberdeen City

It is important before interpreting the meaning of any statistics on this cohort of young people to understand the nature, backgrounds and difficulties that many of the Activity Agreement participants have had to face before embarking on their agreement. The majority of the young people have had some difficulty which has hindered them progressing directly into a positive destination.⁵ The primary purpose of Activity Agreements is to enable these young people to build the confidence, resilience and life skills they need to enter the increasingly more competitive and complex job market. Aberdeen is almost a unique city, in that, in these times of austerity there are jobs available for young people. There are 1.2 jobs in the city for every person in Aberdeen (16-64).⁶

Some groups of young people are targeted for Activity Agreements. They are considered to be part of a group of young people at high risk of disengaging with the world of learning, training or work. The factors which are associated with a risk of disengaging are:

- Looked after children and care leavers
- Young carers
- Young parents
- Young offenders
- Low attainment at school
- Truancing when at school
- Physical or mental health problems or disabilities
- Alcohol or drug misuse
- Behavioural issues
- Additional Support Needs
- English is a second language
- Winter leavers
- Attended a Special school
- Homeless
- Young people who are a risk to themselves or others
- Young people who do not sustain an initial positive destination

(SG National Activity Agreement Guidance)

Many of the difficulties caused by having some of the risk factors outlined above the potential Activity Agreement participants face are not always outwardly obvious. Some have marked confidence and self-esteem issues which act as barriers to participation in any group activity; others may present with mental health issues such as eating disorders, self-harm, depression and anxiety. Significant high proportions are young offenders (25%), persons with issues of drugs or alcohol (11%) and/or were in care (26%).⁷

⁵ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/308354/0097118.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.aberdeeninvestlivevisit.co.uk/Live/Facts-and-Literature>

⁷ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

Educational background

The majority of young people participating in an Activity Agreement have attended mainstream (62%) or Special (14%) schools within Aberdeen City. A smaller percent have returned to Aberdeen from outside the authority.⁸

Age at Referral

Just under half of the young people on Activity Agreement are aged 16 (43%) with the next highest representation with 17 year olds (31%). There are slightly fewer participants that are 18 or 19 (26%).⁹

Leaver Destinations on Completion¹⁰

Just under three quarters (72%) of those young people who completed their Activity Agreement have since gone on to a positive destination. They went onto some form of training, employment or further education.¹¹

The reasons given for those young people (28%) who did not manage to sustain their Activity Agreement were thought to be because of the following observations, (as noted by the Activity Agreement team):

Social network: If the young person has friends who are disengaged, this can lead to them also becoming disengaged due to such things as staying up late into the night and so making getting up in the morning difficult.

Family history of unemployment: Gaining employment is not always seen as a priority.

Need to provide support to family: The young person may experience pressure from family members to support older relatives, to look after younger siblings or to provide a caring role.

Relationships: Volatile relationships with peers, relationship breakdowns and in some circumstance's fear for their personal safety or fear of retaliation from peers has led to them dropping out of their activity agreement as they see avoidance as their only means of escape.

Offending: Peer risk factors also come into play when the young person is associating with other young people already engaging in offending behaviour. A number of young people have dropped out after being charged with an offence or because they have received a jail sentence. Although alcohol and drugs abuse may not be the main cause for their offending it has definitely played a key role in them participating in criminal activities. Often they have been intoxicated while committing their offence or have needed money to buy drugs and they feel crime is the only way to achieve this. The mental and physical effects on their bodies after taking drugs directly affects their mood, energy level and ability to cope with stressful situations. As a result they find they are unable to participate in any physical or group work activities.

Social Skills: Lack of social skills can sometimes make it difficult for young people to succeed especially during a transition period. Specifically when moving on from their activity agreement to a training course, into work or further education. Often the young people disengage at this point and do not manage to move on to the next stage. Transition of any kind presents challenges; psychological, emotional and behavioural but many of the young people do not possess the coping skills or strategies to deal with this. Lack of communication and isolating their concerns rather than voicing them has resulted in the young person dropping out.

⁸ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

⁹ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

¹⁰ This graph includes young people who started before April 1 2012 but who completed Activity Agreement during this time

¹¹ Aberdeen City – Activity Agreements – End of Year Report 2012/13 (published June 2013)

Relationships: Volatile relationships with peers, relationship breakdowns and in some circumstance's fear for their personal safety or fear of retaliation from peers has led to some young people dropping out of their activity agreement as they see avoidance as their only means of escape.

Mental Health: Mental Health issues such as anxiety have sometimes had a direct effect on young people being able to sustain their agreement. Dealing with anxiety has various affects including; stopping the young person from sleeping, affects their concentration or stops them from travelling (fear of public transport) or from even leaving the house. Panic attacks are often symptoms of anxiety and have resulted in young people missing sessions and ultimately dropping out of their agreement because they choose to avoid any situation that might make them feel like this.

However, as illustrated Activity Agreements do assist the majority of young people to make their first steps onto the employability pipeline as the following two case studies show. (NB - names below have been changed to protect anonymity)

Jane's Journey through her Activity Agreement

Jane struggled to attend school even when supports were put in place including an individualised educational programme. She left school without any qualifications. Jane made contact with Skills Development Scotland along with her brother. Her brother was due to go to Transitions Extreme for a session but decided at the last minute he did not want to go. Their elder sister thought she would go to Transitions Extreme to meet with the Activity Agreement worker to find out more about Activity Agreements and took Jane with her. During this meeting Jane was signed up to an Activity Agreement to prepare a portfolio of art work to allow her to apply for a further education course and gain experience of working with others.

Initially one to one sessions were arranged with an art tutor within Jane's local community. After a few weeks her Activity Agreement grew to include visits and sessions within the Aberdeen Art Gallery. In addition to one to one session, Jane signed up to Adult Life Drawing Classes to broaden her portfolio. The Creative Arts Team were so impressed with some of Jane's work that they asked to publish one of her pieces in their promotional postcard packs.



Figure 1 Jane's art work on the Creative Arts Team promotional postcard.



Figure 2 The art shop which gave Jane a volunteering opportunity.

As Jane became more confident additional opportunities were added to her activity agreement to provide her with a wider breadth of experiences. One experience was volunteering at a local art shop called Oil & Glass from which she received a Saltire certificate.¹²

Being signed up to an Activity Agreement allowed Jane to access additional opportunities that she would otherwise have not been aware of. In August she was offered a place on the 'Portraits in Parliament' Course. The course lasted for 10 weeks and included a 2 day visit to the Houses of Parliament in London. This was the first time Jane had left Aberdeen. She went with a group of ten, mostly older retired people, from Aberdeen.

Literacy support was also provided for Jane to help her prepare for applying for College. After her College interview, the course tutors were so impressed with the standard of the work in her portfolio that they offered a place on a higher level course which normally requires pre-entry qualifications.

Comments from her art tutor, Kelly-Anne;

"Her confidence has grown in the time that I have been working with her in both her social skills and her artwork. I have a lot of faith and confidence that with guidance and support Jane will continue to progress through college and on to Art School and be a name to look out for in the future."

Comments from Jane;

"I loved my Activity Agreement. It has helped me get back on track with my own life. I feel happier and more able to go out and do things for myself"

Outcomes achieved through the Activity Agreement

- More career focused
- Understands own skill and level of ability
- Able to identify areas of weakness or where requires support
- Planned journey path to get to ultimate goal of Art School
- Able to work with others in group situations
- Time management improved
- More confident in decision making
- Happier and more interactive
- Accessing new places and services
- Portfolio of work which can be kept forever
- Own bank account and responsible for own money



Figure 3 & 4 Samples of Jane's art work

¹² www.saltireaward.org.uk

John's Journey through his Activity Agreement



John had low confidence, self-esteem and some difficulties with literacy but loved nature, plants and the outdoors. When he met with his Activity Agreement worker he said he was most interested in trying out extreme sports and adventurous activities. When he was in school John carried out a work experience at Duthie Park. He was keen to continue this within his activity agreement and was allowed to do this.

With the help of his Activity Agreement worker John applied for a position as a crew member on a tall ship through the Ocean Youth Trust. He was successful and boarded the tall ship at Greenock. The tall ship voyaged around the Irish Sea stopping off at historical buildings. John learned seamanship, map-reading, rope work and navigation skills, gaining a massive sense of achievement, a boost in his self-confidence and the will to learn which continued when he returned home.

Onshore, John applied to the 'Get Some Credit Programme' with the Conservation Trust Scotland for a modern apprenticeship. He was accepted and then supported to undertake a 6-month on-the-job and theoretical programme equipping him for environmental, landscaping and forestry sectors at employability level 4. During the apprenticeship he was part of The Conversation Volunteers Team working at various sites across Scotland.

John flourished on the modern apprenticeship and has now gained a permanent position as a Volunteer Support Officer helping other volunteers get the most out of their experiences.

Comments from John (Taken using the 'Blank Sheet Method')

"Activity agreements helped me to boost my confidence. I haven't made up my mind about what I would like to do but it has helped me to think about different choices." (After voyage, before apprenticeship)

Comments from John's Mum (On Facebook 12 Oct 2012)

"I am so so proud of both my boys for getting jobs today (both on the same day, how freaky is that?!) Well done lads!!! and thanks to Activity Agreement Aberdeen especially Nick, for all his help : I'm a happy mummy!"

Conclusion

Offering young people an Activity Agreements in Aberdeen in 2012/13 has only been achievable because of the partnership with key local delivery partner providers. The Activity Agreement team, who first meet the young people, then lead on arranging the chosen sessions with partner providers as well as ensuring that young people attend their arranged sessions are vital to the success of the young people taking their first employability steps. This support and monitoring continues throughout the time of the Activity Agreement. It prepares the young people in their journey towards further education, employment or training and provides them with opportunities and experiences which help them start to think about what they want to do next.

Assisting 72% of participants into a progressed positive destination has exceeded initial expectations.