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Non-formal learning:
good practice in re-engaging young people who are NEET

Local Government Association

About the research

This guidance document is based on the findings of a research study carried out by the NFER on behalf of the Local Government Association (LGA), between September 2008 and February 2009. The research team visited eight projects where non-formal approaches to learning were being used in order to re-engage young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The eight projects had all been identified by Connexions, local authority and other contacts as exhibiting good practice in recruiting young people, engaging them in learning, delivering activities or helping young people to achieve and sustain positive outcomes. A total of 16 project workers were interviewed, as well as 12 young people who were participating in the projects and nine who had previously taken part in the projects and had now moved on to education, training or employment. These interviews were used to explore the key principles of good practice in re-engaging young people who are NEET through non-formal learning approaches, which are presented in this guidance document.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This document provides guidance on good practice in delivering non-formal learning aimed at young people aged 16–18 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). It is based on the findings from research carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) with the support of the National Youth Agency (NYA) for the Local Government Association (LGA).

This guidance is aimed at those responsible for developing and commissioning non-formal learning programmes. It sets out:

What is non-formal learning?

Non-formal learning has been defined in various ways by different authors and organisations working in this field (see, for example, Colley *et al.* (2003) and Bamfield (2007)). This guidance document focuses on non-formal learning programmes aimed specifically at re-engaging young people aged 16–18 who are NEET. Within this context, non-formal learning programmes tend to take place in fairly relaxed settings, but involve an element of structure and planning by project workers. Some programmes may allow young people to accredit their learning via recognised qualifications or awards or they may recognise it using other certificates or incentives. Learning is intentional and usually aims to help participants to:

• Modify or develop some behaviours vital to succeed in education, employment or training

• Develop useful skills for further learning or employment

• Change their attitudes towards participating in education, employment or training in the future

• Choose and access some form of education, employment or training.

Why is non-formal learning important?

Non-formal learning was for a long time not considered to be an important part of mainstream education, although more recently it has been afforded a more prominent role. Its potential has particularly been recognised in relation to the re-engagement of young people who are currently not engaged in any form of education, employment or training, or who are at risk of dropping out. This is reflected in various recent strategies and initiatives including those listed below.

• The Learning Agreements and Activity Agreement schemes, piloted from 2006, offer financial incentives to young people up to the age of 18 who have been NEET for over 20 weeks in return for taking part in positive activities and/or courses of education or training.

• The government's ten year youth strategy Aiming High for Young People: A Ten Year Strategy for Positive Activities launched in 2007 aims to ensure that all young people have happy and fulfilling teenage lives, through their involvement in positive and structured leisure-time activities.

• The Entry to Learning programme announced in the Children's Plan in 2007, which has the intention to build on and test out innovative local provision, in both the voluntary and local authority-funded sectors, to help young people who are NEET to re-engage.

• Investment of up to £100 million over three years through the Youth Sector Development Fund, in order to support Third Sector organisations which can demonstrate effective outcomes for the most vulnerable groups.

Non-formal learning has the potential for gaining even greater importance within the context of proposed policy changes. This includes raising the education or training leaving age to 18 in 2015 and the responsibility for providing education, training and positive activities for young people up to the age of 18 being transferred to local authorities by April 2010. At the end of 2007, 189,000 young people

between the ages of 16 and 18 in England were NEET. This number may rise as a result of recent economic problems and the growth in unemployment. Non-formal learning programmes may hold the key to ensure that many of those young people who have previously not engaged in education or training can be encouraged to do so.

Case study examples

The following case studies provide illustrations of different ways in which non-formal learning projects can help young people progress onto positive outcomes. Please note that in order to preserve their anonymity young people's names and some of their details may have been changed.

Noel is 17 years old and left school having achieved three GCSEs at grades A*–C. He went to college to study media, but only stayed on the course for a month. 'I just thought I've left school and I should have more money not to be sponging off my mum and dad. Only on 30 pound a week! So I left there'. He thought he would be able to find a job easily but remained unemployed for about a year.

Noel attended the project twice a week from 1-3pm for 10 weeks – he liked the timing: 'because we got a lie-in'. He also found it really useful because he felt it prepared him for work – 'especially getting to know new people and having to get along with people you might not necessarily like'. Noel really liked the staff – they were very welcoming, treated him as an adult and participated in the activities 'like one of us'. He also liked being given a choice, rather than being told what to do: 'It was set work, but if we didn't want to do it say like there was an option of two things.'

After finishing his course, he was encouraged to go to a careers event by the workers at the project to help promote the youth club to other young people. During the event one of the project workers encouraged him to go and speak to an organisation about apprenticeships. They interviewed him and he is now doing a business administration apprenticeship with them.

Jane is 18 years old. She left school at the age of 16 with very few qualifications. She disliked school: 'I just didn't like going at all. I just didn't want to be there' and as her mother had a serious illness, Jane was often needed at home to help with her younger siblings. After leaving school, she took part in a few short courses, but spent long periods of time 'doing nothing'.

Jane found out about the project through her Connexions advisor and was attracted to it because she thought it would improve her self-confidence and enable her to meet new people. Once she joined the project, she really appreciated the relaxed atmosphere and the way the project workers treated her as an adult: 'They're not, like, shouting at you, saying you've got to do this, you've got to do that. They say it's up to you if you want to do it or not'.

Jane thinks that the team-building aspects of the project have really helped to increase her self-confidence: 'You get to know more people, so when you get a job, you're not scared of going and talking to other people'. She also appreciates the way speaking to the project workers helped clarify what she wanted to do after leaving the project: she applied, and was accepted, for a job as a receptionist at an animal care centre. She is really proud of her achievement: 'I really didn't think I'd get a job in animal care, but with my confidence being good, I got one'.

Good practice

The following four sections set out good practice in delivering non-formal learning programmes aimed at young people aged 16–18 who are NEET identified through this research, in relation to:

- getting young people who are NEET engaged into non-formal learning projects
- helping young people to engage in learning when they first start on a project
- keeping young people engaged in learning
- helping young people to achieve and sustain positive outcomes.

Getting young people who are NEET engaged into non-formal learning projects

Our research suggests that the following approaches are successful at helping projects to target and recruit young people who are NEET onto their non-formal learning programmes.

Working in partnership with other agencies

They came to my house and we immediately got on. They weren't like teachers or lecturers – I saw them as friends who could help me out and I could get along with and have a laugh with. (Carol, 17)

When recruiting young people it is important for projects to work closely with other agencies, who may already have contact with young people who are NEET and are, therefore, in a good position to recommend and refer potential participants. Many of the projects visited benefit from strong links with Connexions in particular. Connexions personal advisers give out information, such as leaflets and flyers, about the projects to young people who are on their NEET register. Connexions are also able to identify and target young people they feel would particularly benefit from engaging in a project. Projects also benefit from making links with other types of organisations, including the Youth Service, community organisations, providers and colleges.

- **Recruiting learners through links with local providers** – Part of one project manager's job is to network with other agencies that could help promote their project. This includes developing links with local colleges and training providers, who highlight young people who are at risk of dropping out or have already left a course and may not yet be in contact with Connexions or other agencies. The project targets these young people directly and helps to re-engage them in learning.

Using face-to-face recruitment methods

An important aspect of recruitment is gaining the young people's trust so they are willing to turn up to the project in the first instance. Meeting young people face to face is a successful way of doing this. Good practice approaches used by projects have included the following.

- **Direct targeting via telephone followed by a visit** – One project identifies potential participants via the Connexions NEET register. Project workers cold-call young people to tell them about the project and offer to visit them in their own home to tell them more about the activities on offer: 'As soon as we get through to someone, we say to them: "Can we come around now or tomorrow to tell you a little bit more about the project?" So we go out and see them and

get that relationship early on, without a long waiting time.' Project workers believe that this face-to-face contact makes young people less reluctant to get involved in the programme.

- **Outreach work** – Other projects visit young people without any preliminary contact in their homes or local areas. This is seen to be particularly effective by a project working in an inner-city location. Project workers use these meetings to help the young people to put a 'face to a name' and to build up trust. Even though this approach is time consuming, it is seen as beneficial for encouraging young people to travel out of their immediate neighbourhood to the project.

Using leaflets or posters instead of letters

Several projects use leaflets and posters to promote their services both to young people and other agencies. These are more effective than sending out letters to potential participants: 'sending letters, especially if they look official, does not work as the young people tend to throw them away without reading them'. Leaflets and posters can be placed, for example, in Connexions offices, police stations, counselling services or local colleges and can be used to create a positive image of the project – establishing the project in this way can help when young people are contacted by project workers. Another option is to use the internet to promote the project to young people.

Providing an incentive to participate

The offer of some form of incentive is often effective in encouraging young people to join a project. Incentives can take different forms, including financial incentives, access to particular types of activities, or the achievement of certificates or qualifications.

- **Providing a financial incentive** – One project offers all young people who attend regularly £30 per week (equivalent to the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)) and travel expenses. This financial incentive is thought to be particularly important as many of the young people's friends attend college and receive EMA. It is seen as one way to encourage them to attend: 'There has always got to be a carrot for some young people'. However, in the long term, it was thought that young people generally stay on the project for other reasons, such as enjoying the activities or liking the staff.

- **Delivering the project in an attractive setting** – One project is located in the stadium of a Premiership football club. Young people said that they were attracted to join the project because of this link and because of the sports-based activities offered by the project (alongside classroom-based learning). Project staff thought that young people are attracted to join the project because the setting is seen as 'non-political' and non-threatening: 'It isn't part of the establishment. So, like if I phone someone up and say: "It's Steve from Connexions", the phone goes down. But if you phone from the football club, it's like "What's this about?" kind of thing'.

Offering flexible start-times and dates

Allowing flexibility in terms of both the timing and start-dates of projects can encourage young people in different circumstances to access non-formal learning provision. One project, for example, delivers activities at different times of day to

suit different target groups, including an evening session for young mothers. Another project offers roll-on/roll-off provision, which means that young people do not have to wait in order to start on the project, which could lead them to lose interest or become further disengaged. This flexibility also means that if the young person finds employment or a place on a course they are able to leave before the end of the programme.

Creating an informal and relaxed learning environment

It's like being at home, you're learning something but you're relaxed (Mike, 17)

Making sure that the atmosphere of the project venue is relaxed and informal helps young people not to feel intimidated when visiting it for the first time. This can be achieved through the attitude and behaviour of the staff as well as the layout of the venue.

• **Providing a welcoming environment** – Many of the young people interviewed said that they liked coming to the non-formal learning projects because they provide a more relaxed learning environment than school or college. In one project, for example, all visitors and young people are always welcomed with the offer of a cup of tea by a project worker. This is seen as a way of helping them 'through the door – these young people generally have low confidence and therefore coming somewhere new they need friendly faces to welcome them and make them a drink otherwise they won't come back'.

Helping young people to engage in learning when they first start on a project

The research suggests that engaging young people from their first day of involvement in the project helps them to work towards successful outcomes. This has been achieved in a number of ways.

Providing an induction to the project and establishing ground rules

Most projects start their programme with some form of induction. In addition to providing young people with basic information about fire exits, emergency procedures and health and safety requirements, projects often discuss and agree the ground rules with project participants as part of the initial induction period.

• **Establishing the ground rules** – One project uses one of the first sessions to agree as a group what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour for both project workers and young people. These rules are written on a big poster and then everyone signs their names on it to show that they agree with them. This 'contract' is used on an ongoing basis – project workers can refer back to the ground rules during sessions. One project worker said that all she needs to do is 'point to the poster and they get it – I don't even have to say anything'.

Identifying young people's specific needs, goals and previous experiences

Spending time at the start of the project on finding out any particular needs, issues or challenges, enables projects to provide holistic support to young people, either internally or drawing on external agencies. It is also important that projects discuss with young people what they want to achieve and what they would like to do after

leaving the project in order to help tailor project activities to young people's aspirations. In some cases, projects can also access existing records to find out such information. Good practice approaches of some projects include the following.

- **Arranging a three-way meeting with Connexions at the start of the project** – One project arranges a three-way meeting involving the young person, their Connexions personal advisor and one of the project workers at the start of the project to discuss the young person's aspirations and previous experiences. The meeting also provides an opportunity for the young person to meet face to face with one of the project workers, which makes it easier for them on their first day.

- **Developing a one-page profile** – Another project encourages each young person to complete a one-page profile about themselves, in response to a series of questions. This is used as a way to find out what the young person wants to do in the future and how the project can help them get there. The project workers also complete such a profile: 'This way we let them know that we are individuals too and we've got similar interests and we can have a bad day too. When I think about my experience back at school, we knew nothing about our teachers – they taught us and that was it'.

Developing individual learning or development plans

Information collected as part of initial assessment activities can also be used to complete learning or development plans. In some cases, this may include updating an existing record started with another organisation, but usually projects will need to work with project participants to draw up a plan. Most plans start with a detailed assessment of young people's previous experiences (including work, education or training), qualifications they have already achieved and any barriers or issues that they face. It can also explore their future aspirations and how the project can help them achieve these. Finally, most projects used the plan to set out both short-term and medium-term targets that could be reviewed or updated on an ongoing basis. Such a planning process not only helps young people to work towards realistic goals, but also ensures that they do not have unrealistic expectations of what the project can do for them at the start of the programme. Development plans can take a variety of forms:

- **Formal or more informal** – they can be a written down in a pre-set format or tailored to the individuals by using, for example, photographs or pictures rather than written descriptions.

- **Learning or outcome-orientated** – they can relate to developing a specific skill (such as improved IT or communication skills) or to achieving a desired outcome (getting a job or going to college).

- **Paper or IT-based** – some young people are put off by filling in paper-based forms and are less threatened by IT-based options, which can often be better tailored to young people's requirements, can be used to record activities or achievements (photos, voice-files) and can be stored electronically (on a CD or memory stick).

Getting them to want to come back

Projects need to ensure that the first day entices young people to come back – as several projects reported, drop-out often happens after the first day. If they are not engaged on the first day or feel too threatened they are likely 'to simply vote

with their feet – they won't come back'. Projects often use the first day for team-building activities that are fun and engaging. These also help project staff to find out the characteristics of project participants – to identify the natural leaders, and also 'to find out who the confident ones are and who are the quiet ones who tend to hang back'.

One project always ended the first day with a treat, such as going out for a game of bowling or visiting a fast-food restaurant.

Keeping young people engaged in learning

In school, if someone messed around, a teacher would shout at them. But here they'd kind of make it into a joke, but you'd still know you'd have to stop doing it. (Clara, 16)

The study showed that delivering activities in an engaging way is important to ensure that young people stay involved and work towards learning outcomes. A variety of methods can be used to achieve this.

Employing the right type of project staff

All projects agreed that the skills and qualities of project staff are one of the most important aspects of keeping young people engaged. Staff need to be friendly, non-judgemental, able to relate to young people and their concerns, patient and have a good sense of humour. One project delivering activities in a football club reported that many young people are attracted by the setting, but: 'if the staff that deliver on the project were rubbish, the kids wouldn't come back anyway. So, it's the staff that we've got that make it fun and enjoyable and that keep them coming back'.

Starting basic, but becoming increasingly more challenging

It wasn't doing loads of writing – sitting down and just writing. It was short little bits of writing and they helped you with it' (Philip, 17)

Young people are more likely to stay engaged if projects build up young people's confidence gradually, progressing from working towards relatively minor achievements towards more substantial learning outcomes. Good practice approaches adopted by projects have included those listed below.

- **Defining foundation, intermediate and advanced level outcomes** – one project has defined all their project learning outcomes at three levels reflecting the language used in many external qualifications. It is used to help young people see how they are progressively developing and to recognise small, but significant achievements.

- **Gradually challenging attitudes and assumptions** – staff in another project said that they start challenging young people's assumptions or attitudes only as they become more engaged in the project; 'In the early days you can't jump down too heavy on somebody, because they'll just walk out the door because they are not emotionally resilient enough to be challenged about issues they've got. But as they build the relationship with us, we can challenge a bit more. So we'll challenge negative comments and praise positive ones'.

Overcoming young people's learning fears

Projects reported that young people are often put off by any activities that remind them too much of school – in particular literacy and numeracy. A variety of approaches aimed at overcoming such attitudes have been adopted.

- **Getting young people used to IT-based learning via games** – One project found that some young people who come from families who do not have computers can initially be afraid of IT-based learning approaches. In order to engage them, project workers play simple games on the computers at the start of the day when the young people arrive at the project. 'So, many of them will want to give it a go themselves and we build it up from there, to start looking at things like word processing and the internet'.

- **Using group work approaches to overcome young people's fear of writing** – Another project found that writing tasks often led project participants to 'slip into back at school mode. The collars go up, the caps come down and they just don't want to be there'. So instead, the project initially uses groups for writing tasks, organises it in such a way that if someone has basic skills issues, there is always someone in their group who can do some writing for them. And instead of using worksheets, they use flip chart paper instead – 'again because it's different from school'.

Adopting a flexible and responsive delivery approach

Another way of keeping young people engaged is to ensure that project activities are delivered in a flexible and responsive way. Several projects emphasised that even though they devise a broad plan of activities, they are always willing to change this plan in response to project participants' concerns or wishes. The variety of approaches used includes those below.

- **Using a set plan only for the first few weeks of the project** – One project devises a plan of activities for the first few weeks, but once they have met with the young people they alter the programme to suit each group's needs or wishes. This means that: 'Each project can be totally different, because all young people are different'.

- **Responding to young people's concerns** – Another project uses a more structured approach, but project workers are flexible to respond to any concerns or issues raised by project participants: 'We may have a scheme of work that we want to do like CVs or job search or interview techniques. But if the young people are then in the corner talking about relationships, bullying, dad left mum last night, whatever the issue may be, we've got the flexibility to say: "OK, CVs are not going to work today, because for them drugs is an issue, homelessness is an issue or whatever that is."'

Evaluating the provision regularly

Carrying out project evaluations is another way to ensure that provision is meeting young people's needs. This can include both formal and informal approaches, using simple surveys, discussions or feedback sessions with young people at the end of activities or programmes. Most of the projects visited emphasised that their programmes are constantly evolving as a result of participant feedback. Such evaluation can focus on recruitment, project start-up, delivery of activities and how the project helps young people to move on after leaving the programme.

We are trying to make it as realistic as possible for young people but not to the extent that they walk away and don't come back (Project worker)

Helping young people to achieve and sustain successful outcomes

The study suggests that in order to prepare participants to make a successful transition into education, employment or training, projects should consider a number of points.

Making it real

For those young people wanting to move onto employment or work-based training, projects can assist them by giving them an insight into the behaviour, language and dress-codes expected in the workplace. Examples of approaches adopted by projects included the following.

- **Organising mock interviews** – On one project, project workers prepare the young people for future job or college interviews by organising mock interview days. Project workers come in dressed as they would for an interview, and encourage the young people to do so as well. They then discuss what is appropriate in an interview situation in relation to behaviour and dress.

- **Establishing language codes suitable for employment** – Staff in another project said that they do not restrict the way young people express themselves when they are in the project, so they can come in and describe a situation in any language they like without being told off. However, they use such instances to explain to participants that in an employment situation that would not be allowed: 'They can come in here and use their language, but then we tell them that if you used that language with your employer you'd be sacked.'

Relating learning to explicit goals

Projects can help young people to overcome their reluctance to engage in certain learning activities by linking them with explicit targets that are relevant to the young people. Successful examples included the following.

- **Offering a relevant qualification** – On one project, young people are encouraged to develop their literacy skills by linking writing tasks with the achievement of a sports-coaching qualification. The incentive of achieving a qualification relevant to their chosen career encourages many young people to complete such activities.

- **Linking activities to college entry requirements** – In one project, all learning activities are directly related to young people's goals identified at the start of the project. This means, for example, that young people are more willing to complete writing tasks when project workers link these to the basic skills assessment they need to complete to get into college: 'When they understand the link between this and achieving their goals, they tend to be keener to work on these areas'.

Supporting an informed choice of education, training or employment outcomes

The study found that young people are more likely to stay engaged if they are actively encouraged to choose an outcome that suits their skills and interests. Successful methods included the following.

- **Organising work-placements** – Young people taking part in one project are encouraged to set up a week-long period of work experience they are interested in. This gives them the opportunity to learn about applying for work and to find out whether they really want to pursue a career in this area. Their allowance is cut from £30 to £10 per week if they do not manage to set up a placement, which helps them realise that they have to be proactive if they want to get a job. As one project participant observed: 'You've got to go out there. It's not going to come to your front door'.

- **Drawing on external support** – A project which was delivered by youth workers drew on the services of Connexions advisors to give careers advice, as this was an area which project workers were less familiar with.

Supporting the transition process

Once young people move onto education, employment or training after leaving the project, support from project staff is important to help young people make a successful transition. This is particularly valuable in cases where young people do not have a supportive adult in their families who is able to support them in this way. Project workers have taken on this supportive adult role in a number of ways.

- **Carrying out external visits** – One project takes young people on visits by train to a nearby city. This not only builds the young people's confidence, as they have to buy the tickets and arrange the trip themselves, but also encourages them to consider the possibility of travelling to work or training opportunities which might be outside their immediate local area.

- **Providing practical support** – Project workers give support to young people by helping them to print out timetables for public transport, travelling to college with the young person on a 'trial run' before the course starts, taking them to college interviews, and attending open days with them.

Recognising achievement

It is important that young people's achievement is acknowledged using either recognised qualifications or more informal methods including praise, rewards or awards.

- **Offering a formal qualification** – One project has recently introduced an entry-level qualification to enable young people to get EMA as they need to demonstrate that they are doing 12 hours of learning hours per week to get it. Project workers were afraid that too much paper-work would put off many participants and so were trying to overcome this by allowing evidence to be captured using electronic media – using videos of discussions and photographs: 'At the end, we can give them a copy of the evidence on a disk to take away with them'.

- **Informal recognition of achievement** – Other projects use more informal approaches, handing out their own, non-accredited certificates for completion of the whole course (or part of it), for good attendance, or to recognise small, but significant achievements. Just using praise and positive feedback to recognise achievement was sometimes recognised as being equally important to the young people: 'If someone does well and succeeds at something, let's give them praise. Because the biggest thing to raise confidence and self-awareness is to know that you're doing a good job'.

Key principles of planning and delivering non-formal learning

The study has identified the following seven factors which constitute good practice in the planning and delivery of non-formal learning to young people aged 16–18 who are NEET. Projects exhibiting good practice:

1 establish effective partnerships with other organisations:
to recruit young people onto their projects, provide support to overcome personal issues or challenges, identify young people's needs and previous experiences, and help them move onto positive outcomes

2 employ skilled and motivated project staff:
who have the ability to relate to young people and their concerns, are friendly and non-judgemental and are able to help overcome young people's fears and barriers to learning

3 tailor their project activities to young people's aspirations and needs:
based on effective initial assessment procedures, development planning and the delivery of flexible and responsive learning activities

4 develop innovative activities and delivery approaches:
to overcome young people's fears and barriers to learning, including using new technologies, group work and delivering activities in a non-threatening and friendly environment

5 put in place systems to monitor and evaluate provision regularly:
by gathering young people's views regularly, focussing on recruitment, project start-up, delivery of activities and how the project helps them to move on to positive outcomes, in order to ensure that provision continues to meet project participants' needs

6 develop formal or informal ways of recognising young people's achievements:
using recognised qualifications or certificates, or more informal methods including praise, rewards or awards

7 support young people's transition to positive outcomes:
using, for example, work experience placements, college visits, and external advice and guidance to help choose destinations that are suitable to their needs and aspirations and will keep them engaged; and supporting them through the transition process by acting as a supportive adult.

Documents you might find useful

Bamfield, L. (2007). *The Contribution of Non-Formal Learning to Young People's Life Chances: a Fabian Society Report for the National Youth Agency*. Leicester: NYA [online]. Available: www.nya.org.uk/shared_asp_files/ GFSR.asp?NodeID=110385 [25 February, 2009].

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Further information

Further details of the research and case studies of some of the projects visited are available on www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/lin01. Alternatively, contact Thomas Spielhofer at t.spielhofer@nfer.ac.uk.

www.nfer.ac.uk