

SELECT COMMITTEE - APPRENTICESHIPS

MINUTES of a meeting of the Select Committee - Apprenticeships held in the Pendragon, Invicta House, County Hall, Maidstone on Tuesday, 22 January 2013.

PRESENT: Mr K Smith (Chairman), Mrs C J Waters (Vice-Chairman), Mr R H Bird, Mr A R Chell, Mr L Christie, Mr R J Lees and Mr M J Northey

IN ATTENDANCE: Ms D Fitch (Assistant Democratic Services Manager), Mr M Raymond and Mr G Romagnuolo (Policy Overview Research Officer)

UNRESTRICTED ITEMS

15. Interview with Penny Denne, Skills and Employability Programme Officer and Jonathan Smith, Participation and Progression Officer Skills and Employability Service, KCC
(Item 2)

(1) The Chairman welcomed Penny Denne and Jonathan Smith to the meeting

Penny Denne

(2) The Chairman invited Penny to give the Committee an overview of her role and responsibility. Penny explained that she was the Skills and Employability Programme Officer for West Kent and also, as necessary, provided support in Mid Kent. Her role included planned support and engagement work. Penny also co-ordinated the countywide Vulnerable Learners Project

(3) Penny gave an overview of the Vulnerable Learners Project. She explained that there has been a pilot phase (phase 1) of the project which had been very successfully run. The target number of vulnerable learners for phase 1 was 80, 69 vulnerable learners had started the scheme. Phase 2 is currently running, the target number is 35, 27 vulnerable learners have been recruited with the possibility of more starting, exceeding the target. The four cohorts of vulnerable learners were: those with learning difficulties or mental health issues, youth offenders, care leavers and young parents.

Q – Of the four cohorts is it the case that care leavers are the least successful.

(4) Penny replied that in her view the most challenging group were young parents, who had dropped out of education/training to have a family and were in effect NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training). There was more support for Children in Care under the age of 18, whereas young parents who had started a family had additional pressures including financial, there was not so much support for these young people as maybe there should be.

Q – What are the common barriers to vulnerable people getting involved in an apprenticeship?

(5) Penny explained that often vulnerable people did not know how to prepare themselves for employment or the route for advice. She stated that her team provided that service, they engaged with schools to talk about apprenticeships and to try to endorse that with employers.

Q – Is there a tension in the link between Further Education colleges and the Kent Association of Training Organisations (KATO)?

(6) Penny replied that officers worked closely with KATO and also pulled training resources in from all parts of the sector.

Q – You are the officer for West Kent, is there another officer for East Kent?

(7) Penny replied that there were Skills and Employability Programme officers for both East and Mid Kent. These officers also took a team lead for specific area of work; hers was the Vulnerable Learners Project.

Q – How would a 16 year old with a baby find out about your service? Would you look to guide them into education/training or is parenthood seen as a career option?

(8) Penny explained that for each of the four cohorts in the Vulnerable Learners project there was a cohort champion from the relevant KCC team, for example the cohort champion for the youth offender's cohort came from the youth offending service. In relation to young parents, the cohort champion would have come from the young parent's team but that team had been disbanded in the re-structure. There was only 1 young parent on the scheme who, because there was no champion for this cohort, the young parent was given extra support by Penny. Because this young parent has had issues at home her apprenticeship had been extended, this demonstrated the flexibility of the Vulnerable Learners Pilot.

Q – Is your service easy to find?

(9) Penny explained that there were 3 admin staff who took calls and asked relevant questions based on a set procedure, and the caller would be signposted to the appropriate people. The aim of the service was to ensure that there was no delay in signposting.

Q – In order to undertake an apprenticeship surely young parents would need to have a lot of support from their own parents or others and there must be enormous economic hurdles for them?

(10) Penny replied that it was about having the right processes in place and being flexible around each individual.

Q – If a vulnerable person is in receipt of income support they will lose this if they become an apprentice and their earnings as an apprentice would not replace the loss of income. What can you do to overcome financial barriers?

(11) Penny confirmed that the project did have funds for travel warrant to assist with travel.

(12) Jonathan explained that the project would pay the vulnerable learner not the employer unlike other apprenticeship schemes. The vulnerable learner would be paid £105 per week from the project budget, which was a KCC budget. In the current phase this meant paying 35 x £105 per week. He stated that consideration was being given to a 3rd phase of the project and a bid had been submitted to the National Apprenticeship Service for funding.

Q – Surely £105 per week is not sufficient particularly for young parents who would need to cover child care costs?

(13) Penny stated that in the past although there was help with travel warrants, she acknowledged that some vulnerable learners would loose out financially buy being part of the project. A lot of vulnerable learners also had other difficulties and issues around their home life.

Q – How far do we give the vulnerable learners practical support?

(14) Penny replied that the apprenticeship was work based for 30 hours a week plus attendance at college. Some training providers carried out the training in the work place with the agreement of the employer. In relation to the issue of childcare for young parents this would something that the cohort champion would explore with the young parent. One of the roles of the cohort champion was to speak to the young person, listen to their aspirations, discuss these with them and give them advice. The young person has got to want to have an apprenticeship and understand what is required of them.

Q – Are many young parents prevented form having an apprenticeship because of child care issues?

(15) Penny stated that in phase 1 of the project there had been a lot of withdrawals by young parents because of child care issues. There was a balance to be struck for them, they may want to get involved and progress but if the opportunity is not there for them to get a job and earn money at the end of it then they may decide that it is no the right time for them to have an apprenticeship.

Q – Is there other training available for them?

(16) There is training in colleges, some from Job Centre Plus and there are also on-line courses but this is not the same as having an apprenticeship in the workplace and being part of a team at work.

Q – Have the results of the pilot project been submitted to the Department of Education, as the sponsoring department, for wider application and if so what has been the response from the Department?

(17) Jonathan stated that he was not aware of the feedback from the Department of Education.

Q – We want success stories – can you supply Gaetano with quotes from apprentices saying why the scheme has worked for them?

(18) Penny stated that there were quotes from apprentices in the report on the Vulnerable Learners project and she also had case studies.

Q – Are the new “traineeships” part of the level 2 apprenticeships?

(19) Penny explained that the traineeships helped young people to prepare for apprenticeships. In order to obtain an apprenticeship at level 2 the apprentice needed to have English and Maths at the appropriate level. If a potential apprentice did not have English and Maths at the right level then a traineeship would help them to get these functional skills via an apprenticeship style programme.

Q – Are the Vulnerable Learners level 2 apprentices

(20) Jonathan stated that in phase 1 of the Vulnerable Learners project the major of the vulnerable learners were not at level 2, so they did a pre apprenticeship course there were more than 68 vulnerable learners on the pre-apprenticeship training, this did not just cover academic skills but also office skills.

Q – If I was a Vulnerable Learner what extra Information, Advice and Guidance would I need to ensure that I got the right advice for me?

(21) Penny stated that cohort champions were used as they understood the process, she and her colleagues were passionate about this, and the key focus was on the apprentice. As a co-ordinator she linked with training providers, employers, and the cohort champions to ensure that there was one point of contact, i.e. the cohort champion for the apprentice.

Q – Is the funding for the Vulnerable Learners project at risk?

(22) It could be if we had a sudden intake

Q- There are thousands of young people in Kent who would fit into the categories of vulnerable, but the scheme has only 70 – 80 places, how do you spread the funding and how do vulnerable young people find out about the project?

(23) Penny explained that she and her three equivalent colleagues across Kent plus the two engagement officers went out and talked to employers. The cohort champions had links with appropriate settings such as Children’s Centres where they could spread the word about this advice service available to vulnerable young people. The vulnerable learners needed additional support, Penny and her colleagues made sure that it was put in place for them.

Q – Do you work with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP)?

(24) Penny replied that they did work with the DWP in relation to vulnerable learners with learning disability and mental health.

Q – Are there areas that we as KCC and the Select Committee can have an impact?

(25) Penny said that she would like to think that funding to support the project from KCC would continue. It was important to have an insight into the project, when you saw the look on someone’s face when they got an apprenticeship when they never

thought they would, it showed that it was possible to progress even if you were a vulnerable learner.

Q – What about contributions from employers?

(26) Penny stated that the idea of the apprenticeships for vulnerable learners was that hopefully the employer would see the value of the apprentice to their company and offer them a job. With vulnerable learners, hopefully in phase 3 of the scheme we will look at KCC paying for 8 months and the employer paying for the 4 months at the end of the apprenticeship to encourage the employer to offer them a job. We do monitor how the vulnerable learners are getting on in their apprenticeship and we build up a close relationship with the employer.

Q – How many of the employers for the Vulnerable Learners Project is in the private sector?

(27) Penny confirmed that in phase 2 there were 2 or 3 employers from the private sector.

Q - The income for a young person who has been on an apprenticeship is 70% to 80% higher than that of a NEET, if money is a barrier to taking up an apprenticeship how can this increase in earnings be achieved?

(28) Penny explained that an apprentice achieved a qualification and gained experience that enables them to apply for better jobs. However, she reminded the Committee that some vulnerable learners such as young parents struggled to stay on the programme. It was not possible for some vulnerable learners to overcome all of the barriers.

(29) The Chairman thanked Penny for answering questions from Members and invited her to stay and contribute to the Committees sessions with Jonathan.

Jonathan Smith

(30) Jonathan explained that he was a participation officer in the Employability and Skills Services, his current role in East Kent covered Shepway, Dover and Thanet. The main focus of his role was on NEETS and bringing business and education closer together in order to increase the number of apprenticeships in East Kent. He had been working with apprentices for five years and had a broad range of experience.

Q – Could you explain the two parts of your role, i.e. working with the KCC apprenticeship scheme and going out to generate apprenticeships in other Kent organisations.

(31) Jonathan explained that the internal KCC apprenticeship scheme started in 2006 and to date 580 people had come through that programme. Since 2011 when it was brought into the Education Learning and Skills directorate it had been run as a stand alone apprenticeship service focusing on all areas of KCC for example Bewl Waters, legal services, ICT, youth services, highways and administration. It was possible to join this apprenticeship at any time and the success rate was 75%. KCC

used an external training provider. In relation to areas such as highways procurement for every £1m of spend there had to be an apprenticeship.

Q – What do you think are the advantages of employing an apprentice?

(32) Jonathan stated that young people had a huge range of abilities and brought a lot to an organisation, employers he talked to could not believe the IT skills that a young person was able to bring to their business. Also by employing an apprentice a business had a young person that could grow and develop with their business, taking on the company ethos.

Q – Do existing staff enjoy having an apprentice?

(33) Jonathan replied that by having an apprentice in the work place provided an opportunity for other staff to gain supervisory skills. He could see that having an apprentice could be seen as a threat in times of cut backs but 90% of companies embrace having an apprentice.

Q – The apprenticeship scheme has a 75% success rate, why do 25% not complete the scheme?

(34) Jonathan stated that there were a number of reasons why apprentices did not complete the scheme, there were lifestyle facts such as becoming pregnant or some decide that it is not for them and that they would prefer to get A levels. **Jonathan offered to supply the statistics of the drop out rates and the reasons.**

Q – One of the reasons that you gave was pregnancy, surely they could continue if they wished? Have you dismissed any apprentices?

(35) Jonathan replied that there had only been 10 apprentices dismissed. If an apprentice became pregnant they could continue with the scheme, it was their choice to leave. Penny pointed out that once they became parents they could be part of the Vulnerable Learners Project.

Q – In relation to Highways does the £1m per apprentice apply to sub-contractors? Adult Social Services also commission services is there the same requirement?

(36) Jonathan confirmed that all KCC procurement had a requirement that £1m spend equals 1 apprenticeship.

(37) Jonathan stated that there was the issue of quantity v quality. In his view the programme should be capable of getting a person on an apprenticeship and into employment; there should be a sustainable workforce pathway. An apprenticeship should not be a pathway leading to being a NEET. There needs to be a job at the end of the year otherwise it is just 1 year's work experience with £105 a week cheap labour (companies can see this as cheap labour with no added value). He stated that talks were going on with all Directors so see how many apprentices that they needed going forward. Also talks were taking place with schools such as the Marsh Academy which will be offering apprenticeships from September.

(38) Jonathan undertook to supply data on the gender and geographical location (where they lived and where their apprenticeship was based) of apprentices plus the sectors that they were working in.

Q – Should incentives, such as tax breaks, be offered to companies who take on a certain proportion of apprentices?

(39) Jonathan stated that companies such as British Gas employed a large number of apprentices. It came down to the message “what is an apprentice?” Schools/employers/training providers all have different perceptions. His role was to give advice and guidance on apprenticeships and to train apprenticeship ambassadors to talk to schools, parents and teachers to clarify what an apprenticeship was.

Q – KCC tends to have apprenticeships in soft skills?

(40) Jonathan stated that as an apprenticeship should be leading on to a job, the types of apprenticeships provided will reflect the organisation, KCC as a local authority tended to be a soft skills environment. There was scope for high level apprenticeships, a young person on an apprenticeship two years ago may have completed level 2 and would like to progress to level 3 or 4. The advantage for KCC or any other employer is to bring more talent into the organisation.

Q – What is needed from KCC to propagate apprenticeships at level 3 or 4?

(41) Jonathan explained that officers were talking to the National Apprenticeship Service (NAS) about driving this forward. They were also working with colleges and training providers. He gave the example of teaching, an apprenticeship programme in a school for teaching assistants could lead on to a pre-foundation course, and work was being carried out with Christchurch University. Whatever background people came from there should be pathways to level 2, 3, 4 and 5. The key was to get private sector business on board with the higher level apprenticeships.

Q – Quality v Quantity of apprenticeships?

(42) Jonathan stated that an apprenticeship was a pathway to qualifications and experience for a young person. Before the change to apprenticeships it used to be the case that a young person would be on an apprenticeship for 12 months and then leave. It was a numbers game. The quality of the apprenticeship is important, not the number of apprentices. It is better to have fewer but to give them the opportunity to progress onto a job. Apprenticeships are not a one year work programme. An apprenticeship should lead to employment and the opportunity to move on in the work place to supervising and management in order to add value to the organisation and benefit the young person. If an apprentice becomes a NEET at the end of the apprenticeship the young person will not have gained from the experience (the apprentice will only have gained a short amount of experience without a clear pathway). The ethos should be about life-long learning for everyone. Successful economies have that ethos.

Q – What can KCC do to persuade a greater number of employers in Kent to take on an apprentice?

(43) Jonathan explained that there was the Kent Employment Programme and the West, East and Mid Kent areas where officers carried out a sales role for apprenticeships. There was also an external consultancy which was carrying out marketing as part of a gradual drip feed to businesses. Officers were also talking to local businesses both big and small via Chambers of Commerce and attending networking events with business. There was a marketing push for “Kent Jobs for Kent Young People”.

Q – Is there anything else that the Committee can do to increase the number of employers involved with apprenticeships? Any suggestions for recommendations that would help?

(44) Jonathan stated that the service did offer a quality message in relation to apprenticeship and offered business connection to apprenticeships. We try to think outside of the box in relation to business need. The message that needs to be clearly given is that KCC is committed to this and is pushing on with it.

Q – Are there more potential apprentices than employers offering apprenticeships?

(45) Jonathan stated that this depended on the part of the county and the sector.

Q – Do you think that there is duplication and if so how do you deal with that?

(46) Jonathan replied that there was a single phone number and they worked with the NAS. There was a need to move away from more silo working, there was a need for a one stop shop with an expectation that we would work more with KATO and the NAS. The employability service needed to be in house.

Q – If employers had several people come to talk to them about apprenticeships or cold calling to speak to them it is not constructive, colleges say that this is their role – what do you think?

(47) Jonathan stated that officer’s role was around advice and guidance to enrich young people about what opportunities are available to them. Another aspect was working with both primary and secondary school children to make them aware of different job opportunities, primary school children knew what a fireman was they also need to know what an apprenticeship was. It was important to make young people aware of apprenticeships.

(48) Penny stated that she had come from a Primary School background and she saw year 6 pupils going onto secondary school and hit with career choices and pathways. Awareness of different careers could be gently raised in years 5 and 6.

Q – Most young people have heard of an apprenticeship – If only from the programme “The Apprentice” which might have given them an unrealistic view of what an apprenticeship is. I would like to see apprentices encouraged to go out and be entrepreneurs. What do you think?

(49) Jonathan explained that apprenticeships were ad hoc and businesses did not necessarily match academic need. He stated that East Kent College had become a Peter Jones Enterprise Academy. It was important to make apprenticeships bespoke enough.

Q – The quality of the apprenticeship is important it should be a real career path.

(50) Penny stated that one of the keys to a successful apprenticeship was to get the different elements working together and growing. It was important to get rid of misconceptions around apprenticeships. In the workplace there should be support from the employer and a clear idea of where the apprenticeship was leading. There was a need to learn from apprenticeships via apprentices, employers and training providers and to move forward.

Q – Apprenticeships were government driven, are you saying that the market needs to get increasingly stronger?

(51) Jonathan stated that personally he was of the view that businesses needed to drive what was needed. Kent had 91% SME (Small and Medium Enterprises) the opportunity to grow comes from the correct staff coming through. Young people need to be encouraged to have aspirations and to work hard and to get on. There were currently young people of 23 who had never worked not even a Saturday job or paper round.

Q – Where do employment agencies fit into this? There appears to be nothing in the apprenticeship process to bring them any money.

(52) Jonathan said that he had meeting with the New Employment Group (NAG) employment agency, who said that if they could not supply someone for a job then they would asked if we would help to find an apprentice, but they have to be a training company themselves. The employment agency could work in partnership with KCC to offer clients a full service for recruitment and Apprenticeships, but only accredited providers can deliver the frameworks for an apprenticeship, so a partnership between providers and agencies would be needed.

It was mentioned that the Committee would be speaking to British Telecom about their apprenticeship programme.

(53) Jonathan mentioned that McDonalds had one of the best training models. They trained a large number of young people in business related skills and gave then experience in the workplace. A number of these young people then went on to run their own businesses. McDonalds were a quality training provider.

(54) Jonathan stated that schools were key in getting young people ready for the work place by developing social and interpersonal skills, but he appreciate that there were lots of pressures on schools and they need to keep up their rolls for their funding. However, the world was getting smaller, if businesses did not get involved in developing the workforce of the future there would not be the employees coming through to the labour market in 10-15 years time. He gave the example of Thanet, it was important to map out the provision in terms of the labour force and to plan provision. Work needed to be done with businesses to know what skills they will be looking for.

Q – What chance do minority groups have of accessing an apprenticeship?

(55) Jonathan stated that it was important to raise the aspirations of all young people at an early age. Education and businesses should come together to show how things work and to build aspirations.

(56) The Chairman thanked Penny and Jonathan for helping the Select Committee with their work.