

Traineeship Scheme - nextstep East of England Suffolk County Council

“It is fantastic to be allowed to train and work in a different field. If it had not been possible to change, I would have been stuck. It is like a breath of fresh air. I feel challenged, motivated and am learning new things.”

In September 2009 nextstep East of England recruited thirteen trainees as part of an innovative scheme funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). This is a summary of the Final Evaluation Report prepared for SCC by Lesley Haughton, NICEC Fellow, which was started in December and finished in July 2009

nextstep East of England is managed by Suffolk County Council (SCC), the Prime Contractor responsible for delivering careers services to adults across the region. Sarah Sharlott has had overall responsibility for the Traineeships scheme, which has been managed by Dot Granville and co-ordinated by Julia Butkus, who has acted as a mentor to both trainees and host organisations.

The Report is set in the current context of great uncertainty, cutbacks and constant change to contracts, entitlement to services and more on the way. It already seems a world away from the start of the scheme in summer 2009.

The conclusion of the Report is that the Traineeship scheme has been “innovative, successful and useful”

The selection process consisted of identifying host organisations, (trainees were recruited as employees of SCC under fixed term contracts and placed with a host nextstep sub contractor), the trainees themselves and then matching them up. As with many things, the evaluation pointed to the need for longer time scales for the whole process and this was also given as a reason for why some sub contractors did not apply to be host organisations. The host organisations also felt they should have been more involved in selection and they wanted clearer information. Some hosts would have liked to recruit their own trainees. All in all however, it was felt that the match between trainees and hosts was the right one.

The scheme had set out to recruit those on the unemployment register where possible and used Job centres throughout the region to advertise posts. There were some difficulties with this but 9 out of the 13 recruited were from the unemployment register. 5 of whom had been made redundant within the previous 6 months.

Our thirteen trainees came from a wide range of educational and employment backgrounds as the pen pictures below clearly show. Their age ranges also varied widely with 5 in their twenties, 3 in their thirties, 4 in their 40s and 1 in their fifties. We had 3 male trainees, so clearly females predominated but this is usual for the careers adviser profession. The trainees came from locations across the whole of the East of England.

These are the trainees we recruited:

Helen had worked in Childrens' and Young Adolescents' Services for 8 years before deciding to enter higher education and commence a Foundation Degree in Early Years studies. Upon completion of her Degree Helen sought a role where she could offer support and assistance to people and use the communication, problem solving and organisational skills she had developed over the last 11 years. After a few months of job searching Helen saw the Trainee Adviser role advertised, felt it was right for her and successfully applied. Helen carried out her placement at Bishops Stortford Next Step and obtained a post with East Herts YMCA, a Next Step sub-contractor.

Miriam – left school and attended University where she achieved a qualification in psychology. She then worked for two years in administration and project assistant roles including work for the probation service and adoption teams. During this time she also undertook and successfully achieved the Certificate in Personnel Practice. Miriam found out about the role of Careers Adviser and decided this was exactly the right job for her. Consequently, when her temporary job was about to end and she saw the Trainee Careers Adviser opportunities advertised she lost no time in applying. Miriam carried out her placement at Bedfordshire Adult Community Learning and has now obtained a Careers Adviser post with this Next Step sub-contractor.

Donna - was born in Suffolk and has lived in Italy, Germany and the United States. While in the US she brought up her family and worked for 15 years in banking and the financial industry, rising to the position of bank manager. Due to the economic downturn, Donna was made redundant and consequently decided to return to Suffolk for family reasons. When Donna saw the Traineeship posts advertised she was very interested. She realised that there were transferable skills and similarities between her banking role and the Careers Adviser role – as bank manager, through discussion and understanding the needs of the customer she would provide advice on the best routes and services. In both roles there is the need to build a rapport with the customer and match the right person with the right product or service. Having been successful in her application Donna undertook her placement with Suffolk County Council's Community Learning and Development team (part of Next Step) and she is now there in a Careers Adviser post working mainly in the Suffolk coastal towns.

Andrew - has a strong academic background in science with a Degree, MSc and PhD in biological sciences. He has also worked as a professional writer. Therefore he had a diverse range of transferable skills such as communication, research, presentation, planning and organisational skills which relate well to the role of Careers Adviser. Andrew realised this when he saw the Trainee Advisers posts advertised and, being engaged in temporary freelance work and wishing for a change of career direction, he applied and successfully gained a post. He carried

out his placement at City College Norwich and also Norfolk County Council's Norfolk Guidance Services in order to extend his experience. Andrew completed his NVQ in the allotted 9 months despite the added events of moving house and the arrival of his baby son - quite an achievement all round! He was successful in gaining an Adviser post at City College Norwich where he particularly enjoys the academic aspect of the advice role.

Kate - having initially worked in administrative and financial roles Kate became involved with a number of projects dealing with unemployed students. She then gained the post of Project Officer for a Young Parents Project where she managed the project, designed the programme, recruited young people onto the project, delivered advice and guidance, identified and resolved barriers and worked extensively across agencies and organisations. Due to cuts in funding Kate was facing redundancy and so was very interested when she saw the Traineeship posts advertised. As she already had the NVQ Level 3 in IAG Kate felt that this would be a marvellous opportunity to enhance her skills and qualifications and to continue growing in the advice and guidance role which her skills and experience were ideally suited to. Kate carried out her placement with Norfolk County Council's Norfolk Guidance Services (a Next Step sub-contractor) where she is now fully employed as a Careers Adviser working in the Norwich area. Kate would like to say that:

"The Traineeship was a huge success for the trainees and it has enabled me to move into a career I really enjoy. Without the time at SCC it would be likely that I would never have had the opportunity to do this."

Andrea – was a qualified Quantity Surveyor who had been made redundant when the economic downturn severely affected the building industry. Andrea had excellent transferable skills and achieved a post on the Traineeship scheme where she carried out her placement at Thurrock Adult Community College. Andrea proved to be a very good adviser and she thoroughly enjoyed the role but when she was suddenly offered a job as a Quantity Surveyor with a firm she had worked for before she felt she had to accept the post, mainly for practical reasons, and reluctantly left the Traineeship scheme.

Emma - had worked in a variety of roles where she had gained a good range of skills. These roles included: administrative assistant, head groom, PA to a managing director and teaching assistant teaching special educational needs groups. Emma then commenced a Law degree (LLB Honours Degree) which she successfully completed while carrying out a placement at a firm of solicitors. However, at that point she was not sure that the Law was the right career for her, so when she saw the Trainee Careers Adviser posts advertised she was struck by how much the role appealed to her. Feeling that she had the skills and qualities necessary for the role Emma had no hesitation in applying. She also said that ironically it was her own experience of making an incorrect career choice that urged her to want to help others avoid doing the same. Emma carried out her placement at

Suffolk TAP (part of the Chamber of Commerce). She also worked with Suffolk County Council's own Next Step Direct Delivery Team on some major pieces of redundancy work and she is now employed with this Team carrying out a variety of advice work.

Julia - applied for a Trainee Adviser post when she was already working as a volunteer at the Volunteer Centre Broxbourne and East Herts, one of Next Step's sub-contractors. Julia had been volunteering there for a year, mainly providing administrative support, booking IAG appointments and delegating work to other volunteer staff. At the same time she was combining this work with her NVQ Level 3 in Business Administration. Julia was thoroughly enjoying her volunteer role and felt the Traineeship would be the perfect opportunity to progress at the Centre and develop a new career. Prior to volunteering at the Centre she had worked in administrative and insurance roles before taking time out to pursue family commitments. Julia was successful in her application for a Trainee post and was pleased to carry out her placement at the Volunteer Centre where she is now employed as a Careers Adviser.

Andrew S - started his working life with the RAF as an Aircraft Technician and on leaving the service became the assistant hospitality manager of a Cadet Training Centre. Andrew then moved into the business and commercial sector managing export and sales departments and eventually took a freelance role where he had responsibility for all administration and customer service within a large company. For the last fourteen years, as well as working full time, Andrew has also been an Officer with the Army Cadet Force. He currently has a Senior role with the responsibility for the training and safety of all cadets and staff within Suffolk ACF. Here Andrew works with young people from the ages of twelve to nineteen who come from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and have a variety of abilities and skills. When the economic downturn hit his employer, overheads had to be reduced and Andrew's post was affected. When Andrew saw the Traineeship posts advertised he felt strongly that his years of experience in guiding and developing young people combined with his commercial experience gave him the right skills to become a Careers Adviser. Andrew carried out his placement with two Next Step sub-contractors, Cambridge County Council where he worked mainly seeing customers at libraries and Jobcentres and with Cambridge Housing Society which involved outreach work in the community. Having two placements did increase Andrew's workload but as he says – 'it gave me a marvellous experience, the best of both worlds'. Andrew is now involved in working with offenders and is employed by Tribal.

Sameena - completed her Degree in Sociology and Criminology and then took up mostly temporary roles in administration in the banking and recruitment sectors. Sameena was seeking a role where she could use her good communication and organisational skills and build a career so she was very interested when she saw the Traineeships posts advertised. Having successfully achieved a Trainee post Sameena carried out her placement at Luton Rights, a Next Step sub-contractor,

where she is now fully employed as a Careers Adviser and enjoying every moment of the job.

Ashley - completed a Degree in Business Studies and also passed the Chartered Institute of Marketing Diploma. He then moved into City Insurance and worked for a number of years in this sector as a Broker travelling extensively worldwide in the course of his work. He then took a Post Graduate Diploma in Advertising and worked for two of the top five advertising agencies in the UK before returning to insurance. However, when the economic downturn hit Ashley was made redundant and then started to think about a career change. He then started to do voluntary work as a youth worker and also for his local SOS Bus; this bus provides a safe haven for any vulnerable person on Friday and Saturday nights in his local town centre. Ashley's key duty on the bus is to be the first point of contact for anyone at risk due to mental distress, homelessness, drug/alcohol misuse or violence. This experience made him think about different types of work and when he attended a Jobs Fair he visited the Next Step stand and realised that the role of Careers Adviser was just what he was looking for. Fortuitously, soon after that he saw the Traineeship posts advertised, he applied and was delighted to be successful. Ashley carried out his placement with Suffolk County Council's own Next Step Direct Delivery Team and is now employed within this team as a Careers Adviser.

Nikki - following completion of her Degree Nikki worked as Scheduling Manager for television companies. Here she managed schedules, created campaigns, built relationships with channel sponsors and edited on-air materials. She then moved into the hospitality industry where she soon progressed to the position of manager responsible for a team of 21 staff. Nikki carried out this very busy role while studying on the industry's own management course, this involved theoretical and written assignments and project work. Then Nikki re-located for family reasons and when she started looking for a job she was very interested in the Traineeships posts advertised. Nikki felt that the communication and organisational skills she had used and enjoyed in her previous work would be ideal for the Trainee role as would be her skills in helping people fulfil their potential that she had developed through managing a large staff team. Nikki carried out her placement at both SEETEC College and Essex Adult Community Learning in order to extend the range of her experience. She is now employed as part of Suffolk County Council's own Next Step Direct Delivery Team of Careers Advisers.

Lauren - completed her University Degree in English and entered retail management. Following redundancy she then obtained a post as Account Administrator with a large horticultural firm. However, due to the unsociable hours of this job she was looking for another post when she saw the Traineeship opportunities advertised. When she thought about it Lauren realised that she had developed excellent transferable skills that would relate very well to the role of Careers Adviser. These were skills, for example, in - research, presentation, accuracy, awareness of different audiences, organisation and use of initiative.

Following her successful interview Lauren commenced her placement with Essex Adult Community Learning. She is now employed in Suffolk County Council's own Next Step Direct Delivery Team.

Some comments from the Trainees themselves:

- *I wouldn't have been able to do this without the scheme, and the constant support from SCC and the host organisation. I can't fault it –it has been amazing*
- *I have learnt not to be a perfectionist and know all the answers*
- *We are very lucky to have been offered this route in to this career – the only other routes are academic and not on the job. You rarely see trainee posts*
- *Have enjoyed it, re-evaluated myself and would see myself in related work*
- *A really positive experience - it has probably been the best experience of my life. I couldn't have had a better placement. This is a real turning point.*
- *"It has been fantastic – I came across it by accident, but really wanted to do it from the start. A lovely scheme - a perfect way to a new career. Julia's role was pivotal and the whole SCC and nextstep team was very welcoming. I have met a lot of nice people, including the clients. It is a great job – I love it."*

Trainees were asked about the relevant transferrable skills they felt they had brought to the role of adviser:

- "People skills", communication, working face to face and one to one with the public, being first contact point
- Listening skills
- Action planning
- Mentoring
- Building rapport
- Being non-judgemental
- Working in a confidential environment
- Keeping records
- Researching
- Sharing information
- Making referrals
- Contracting with customers
- Networking
- Managing time

The Trainees commenced employment on the 28th September 2009, with four days of initial training and induction held at a hotel in Ipswich. This included sessions on:

- Familiarisation with nextstep; IES; matrix; IAG
- SCC induction including Safeguarding and Health & Safety
- A day's training from the NVQ provider, White Rose Training Ltd
- A workshop offered by an experienced adviser
- IT training and Skills Action Plans

- Sessions on Learning Styles, Transferable Skills and Interview Practice
- Visits from host organisations who talked about their services.

The induction provided by SCC was valued by all trainees and the most useful aspects were seen to be:

- Advisers talking about their day (3)
- Input about the NVQ process by White Rose (6)
- The White Rose DVD of an adviser working
- Introduction to nextstep (some had not heard of nextstep until this opportunity arose) and to SCC (3)
- Meeting the host agency (3)
- Getting to know the other trainees, and bond as a team (5)

Looking back on that process, trainees felt that the following would have been useful at that stage:

- More teaching/ knowledge about the role and skills needed
- Interviewing skills training
- Action planning training
- CV preparation and jobseeking skills training
- Group work skills training
- Would have preferred working in small groups on action planning with an adviser rather than the IT session
- All subcontractors present at induction
- More information on personnel matters, an SCC handbook, rights and responsibilities
- Lone working and more on safeguarding clients and self
- A guide to acronyms in the learning and skills sector

Some felt that the process should have been longer to allow for a more in-depth introduction to working with clients. *“I felt like a rabbit in the headlights – I needed more tools to start with.”* However, it was acknowledged this may have been better covered at the host organisation, which is what happened in most cases. Reviewing this at the end of the scheme, mentoring by experienced advisers, shadowing, observing, working alongside other advisers, basically learning by doing was thought to be the most effective method.

The scheme as a whole included a range of components provided by SCC, White Rose Training Ltd, and the by the host organisations and their networks. The basis of the scheme was:

- Induction by SCC and host organisations
- The NVQ programme and assessment provided by White Rose Training Ltd
- A programme of training days held at Pampisford, arranged by SCC and delivered by different facilitators
- On-the-job training, feedback and support provided by host organisations
- Mentoring support for trainees from SCC

The training programme as a whole was seen by trainees and hosts as successful and comprehensive; all activities fitted together well and all were helpful. It was suggested that the induction period should have included a detailed Training Needs Analysis for each trainee, to identify individual strengths and weaknesses so that hosts could focus on some of these, and this is added as a recommendation in this report for future schemes. Most of the trainees would have liked more training about face-to-face work with clients and key skills needed by clients such as CV writing and job-seeking skills before they started interviewing.

The speed of the process of NVQ assessment caused some anxiety at first, although White Rose did their best to set out steps clearly and to support candidates. There is still residual feeling among trainees and hosts that the assessment process was too quick to assure competence. In November 2009, some of the trainees had not been able to carry out full nextstep interviews and the early assessment of their competence did not seem very realistic. Trainees were asked in July 2010 whether in their opinion the NVQ is fit for purpose as an indicator of competence for nextstep advisers. Typical comments were as follows:

“I do feel competent, and it is probably fit for purpose, but it is not necessarily the only baseline qualification which is needed by advisers. Coaching and lifeskills training may be more important.”

“I was apprehensive about the NVQ at first since it was new – it seems an odd way of gaining a qualification before having any experience. I feel competent, but am not sure if I am doing enough – however I met the standards!”

“I would have preferred more theory but gained a lot of new concepts and understanding of what goes on in the wider world (e.g. Skills for Life – I now understand the scale of the problem, the effects of long-term unemployment, and the extent of mental health issues for adults)”

Typical Hosts’ comments included:

“This was a quick intensive NVQ and quite theory-based. This was acceptable because our trainee likes studying in their own context and age group, and this has happened within the whole scheme.” . As a host we had no involvement, but as an employer would expect to the process to take two years and combine training and experience. In addition the host would still need to train an employee.”

The prompt and comprehensive support provided for trainees by Mentor Julia Butkus has been a major success factor in the scheme. This included mentoring, setting up peer support through a networking group, acting as a facilitator and go-between for hosts and trainees, setting up additional training and development opportunities as required, and feeding back issues to SCC as an employer.

Suggested improvements were:

- A less hurried start, but understand the reasons
- More written information could be included in the advertisements, did not understand what would be doing and when
- More information in advance about the induction process
- Provide earlier training in interviewing and other skills

Among issues raised by the Hosts was the need for quicker CRB checks.

The perception of what constitutes good practice is very impressive and shows a depth of understanding developed by trainees throughout the scheme. One of the hosts commented that the trainees are a new breed of advisers, which is needed to deliver services in the 21st century context. Successful advisers will accept and work with new skills needed to deliver a service that will continue to attract funding and offer customers a realistic view of the opportunities and the help available to them to manage their lives and careers. One trainee who was observed by SCC during the scheme noted that it was very interesting that the SCC criteria for observing interviews are not so much about guidance skills as the way that the adviser handles ICT, MIS, targets and outcomes. "I have been trained and groomed for the nextstep service, client centred but focussed on outcomes"

This is also reflected in the hosts view of the strengths of the trainees and what they have brought to the service.

Concluding comments from host organisations:

"The scheme is not only innovative but represents value for money"

"The apprenticeship model is a great way of doing it - do it again!"