

Big Life Employment

Funding: European Social Fund.

Good Practice themes demonstrated: Equal Opportunities

What does the project do?

Big Life Employment is part of The Big Life Group, a collective of social businesses and charities. The Big Life Group aims to “create opportunities for people to change their lives”. Part of this mission is providing training and support to people who are excluded from training and employment. Their work covers a range of people with complex needs including homeless people.

ESF funding supports pre training development, vocational training and supported employment. The supported employment (or intermediate labour market) programme, focuses on interpretation, childcare, youth work and ICT. The Big Life Group also provides a range of services such as health care, counselling and self help, funded by other sources.

How does the project ensure the participation of all?

The people that access the project have a range of complex needs. These include drugs misuse, mental health problems, and homelessness. Some may also have had bad experiences of mainstream provision in the past. In addition, stereotyping and discrimination are problems that some will face. Last year 3% of clients accessed therapeutic services from The Big Life Group because of an experience of racism.

The attitude that an organisation and its staff take to the people that access services is key to success, Colette Johnson, Assistant Director for training and employment explains; *“there are a multiple barriers but attitude plays a big part; the attitude of the employer the attitude of your organisation and the attitude of your staff. There must be respect, and confidence that people can make positive progress.”*



Ensuring that staff are trained and show commitment to this principle is very important to the achievements of The Big Life Group.

Another factor central to the work of The Big Life Group is flexibility. The needs of their clients, particularly those who have drug and alcohol problems or who are homeless, are unpredictable and don't always hold to conventional patterns. As Colette explains *"some of the people we work with are not used to a fixed routine, so getting to class at 9:00 is a big deal, so for those people we may start in the afternoon to begin with. We need to be able to work from where people are."*

The demands of clients can also change from day to day and the project, says Colette, is able to adapt to this; *"If we have someone on the supported employment who has anger issues, we can fix them up with a counsellor and say OK, take the afternoon off go to the session and then go home and think about it"*

For some of the individuals who access the project, progress is not always measured in a hard outcome like a qualification. Often a lot of work is needed to get someone with complex needs to the point of completing a qualification. The project has found a number of ways engaging people through their interests Colette explains, *"So, some of our clients may be interested in cooking, video, or maybe gardening or want access to the Internet and this is a way of bringing people in"*. Any organisation working with people with complex needs need to be realistic and appreciate that progress to employment may take time.

In conclusion Colette explains, *"The key is to be flexible, open minded and non-judgmental."*

As many support services are delivered by organisations that are either part of The Big Life Group or working in partnership this is easy to negotiate.

This model, delivering individual support in one place that meets all a client's needs, has also worked in **New Deal** and **SureStart** programmes. The safety net of support is essential to ensuring progress in the supported employment scheme. One point of contact also allows trust to develop, as does ensuring that the environment is non-judgemental.

Colette also thinks that close links to the community helps the project provide a service which meets the need of the people they serve. The structure of the organisation means that there are clear links between those working on the ground and those who develop the programmes of activity.

Further Information:

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