

BORDERS YOUNG TALENT

Partners: Borders College, The Robertson Trust
Focus: Mentoring programme for students at risk of non-completion

Description

Borders Young Talent Programme was developed as a partnership project with The Robertson Trust and was established to widen participation in further and higher education for young people irrespective of their background or economic circumstances. Rolled out in 2018 as a two-year project, the programme provided mentoring support for young people facing additional challenges in making a successful transition to college from school while in their last year of secondary education. The target group for support consisted of young people who are care experienced, student carers who have caring responsibilities, young people who are experiencing considerable disadvantage because of social/rural deprivation and young people who are at risk of disengagement from education due to poor attendance (under 75%) or exclusion due to their behaviours.

The programme was subsequently extended in response to a shift in the identified need as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting periods of lockdown. The extension of the project saw a re-focussing of support away from part time school link programmes towards directly supporting full time first year entrants to college. Those identified for referral come from a variety of sources with Borders College working with Local Authority teams, SDS and schools. The new model adopted by the Borders Young Talent allows for greater scope in

providing support to young people and in helping the learners achieve their desired outcome.

“ With the Schools Academy we were quite restricted in terms of what we could and couldn’t do ... as they were still the school’s responsibility and they had to initiate whatever support was required. It was restrictive in what you could do and offer. With full-time college students you can offer bespoke support liaise directly with SDS or other support agencies, and we can navigate the direction. I think we definitely made the right decision in changing the programme vision.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

As part of the Borders Young Talent programme, young people are provided with a mentor who befriends them and provides one-to-one support with the aim of making a successful transition to college. The mentor’s role is to help the young person identify barriers to their successful attendance and/or completion of their college programme and support them through the transition to college. Mentoring involves a range of activities which are specifically tailored to the needs of the young person with the central focus for the mentor being getting to know the person they are supporting and the challenges they face. Through working with the young person, the mentor can identify the barriers faced to successful participation in education then implement strategies to help with

getting up and ready in the morning, preparing for study, coping with others' behaviour, avoiding risky behaviour, interpersonal skills development, coping with intersectional issues, dealing with social or rural barriers to name but a few. Whilst there are individual circumstances for each mentee, a common feature of the programme is building confidence through the support given by the mentor and trying out new strategies which can help in achieving goals/milestones and promote positive outcomes by positively impacting on the learner's development by building confidence and resilience in self.

Mentees themselves noted positive changes in their behaviours and in their approach to learning in college as a result of their participation in BYT, which contrasted with previous learning experiences.

“ It helps people out. I don't think I'd have quietened down if it wasn't there. I was a pretty loud one. I was hyper and I had a lot of stuff going on ... so I wasn't really learning. Well, I was learning, but the tutors didn't see it that way ... just boys being boys. This sorted all that out.

Learner A, Borders College

“ I was quite confident, but I was not the best behaved at school and at the start of college. But it's helped a lot, with my behaviour and that. It's helped me calm down a lot.

Learner B, Borders College

Two part time professional mentors, both working 2.5 days a week and combining as an equivalent 1 full-time post have been recruited to support the young people. These mentors have extensive experience of working with and supporting young people within the local authority area. In 2020-21 the project supported 32 young people and the project is currently supporting 38 young people.



Success factor: partnership

An important element of the programme is working with others to support the young person, not only whilst in college, but also with forward planning and development. Borders College works in close partnership within the local community and has strong links to the local authority and external agencies such as SDS. The College has also fostered positive connections and works closely with smaller local agencies and organisations, encouraging networking and knowledge sharing. Driving and maintaining these links is the programme coordinator who regularly keeps in contact with agencies to understand the nature of the support on offer and to bringing a multi-agency approach to supporting the young person.

“ During lockdown I invited support agencies within the Borders region to an online keep in touch session ... to see what was happening with their services during lockdown.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

“ Jen is pretty keen and is very good at keeping people on our radar. We have team meetings and people are invited along to that and keeps these links going. TD-1 are very local they are excellent and they work closely with one guy I support.

Mentor A, Borders College

Understanding the context and availability of local support extends the ability of the programme to offer targeted support and also creates sustainable links for the longer-term development of mentees.



“ Where students present experiencing problems, we discuss to see if there is a support agency that could come in and do some awareness raising. We have had Andy’s Man Club coming in to run sessions, Quarriers running resilience workshops, One Step Borders ... we look for opportunities to collaborate ... and although we’re small team we pack a lot in.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

“ Groups like Cheviot Youth help find apprenticeships, manage a home, deal with well-being. And, of course, all these groups can also tap into their own resources which we all benefit from. We work with Gamblers Anonymous and people like that ... Jen throws her net wide and that lets us tap into local interventions.

Mentor A, Borders College

There is an awareness also of the limitations of in-house college support and, in creating a hub of external networks, BYT also addresses sustainability issues related to project funding and actively promotes partnership working as a means of exploring opportunities for additional funding streams.

“ We have quite a good network available to us, through me being the lead for corporate parenting and liaising with the schools at transition meetings. Having those links really helps, and our network stretches quite far. We also link in with the Scottish Mentoring Network as mentoring is being done in so many different ways being a member of the network allows us to access wider support. You can access the network if you need something, whether that’s a contact that may help or a way of doing something differently. We also liaise with the local authority to explore options for funding options that may be available.

We have many students who come here to study from far and wide, having these links allows us to make connections with Social Work teams across the country. We cast our net wide ... but maybe that’s just about me getting myself out there and leading the way on corporate parenting. Just making sure we always have a name on the table.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College





Success factor: Positively reframing support for young people

The mentoring programme has also been successful in changing the ways in which the mentees perceived and engaged with external agencies. The recruitment of trusted and experienced professional mentors with established connections within the local community and local authority has been a major strength in fostering networks and opening up extended and external avenues of support. The project initially explored a range of recruitment options and spent time researching and engaging with existing mentoring programmes and networks to find a workable solution which met the particular needs of the College.

“ Following our initial year we reflected on our recruitment of mentors and felt that younger mentors didn’t necessarily have the experience required, and maybe instead we needed to broaden out ... looking for those working with young people with difficult backgrounds. We wanted to recruit those with experience and who also had lived experience. For the Borders we always knew it had to be a paid mentoring role rather than volunteers for it to be successful. Given our rural location, we knew getting a volunteer mentor for an hour a week would be challenging, you spend that just travelling. We needed someone who would manage a specific caseload. We did try ‘matching’ mentees with mentors but for the project this didn’t work as we only had a few mentors.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

Mentors come with their personal experiences and backgrounds and that brings in different ideas and opportunities to engage with lots of different types of support.

“ I work for the Council and have those connections, I know all the teams, I know what is out there and I can go to them as an individual and have an informal chat. You really need to know what is out there.

Mentor B, Borders College

Mentors work to foster positive relations through the establishment of trust and capacity building. This is achieved the consistent and sustained relationship between the dedicated mentor and young person. For many of those referred to the programme there has been a series of interventions throughout their lives which have not always resulted in positive outcomes.

“ We are aware that the challenge for the young people who experience considerable loss in early life is often in making a meaningful connection with the institution, sustaining this, and making a success of their studies. To facilitate the young people being able to understand these challenges fully and to help them overcome them a small team is required who are well prepared for making a sustained connection with the young people.

Borders College (Bid for Support Document 2018)

“ My first step is to establish a relationship and often I do that with parents, carers, grandparents just so that they know who I am. I had to phone one learner’s granny this morning just to see where one of them was.

Mentor B, Borders College





“ One learner got in trouble with the police, and she received a warning for her behaviour ... but there was a story behind that which was actually quite serious. So we got to know about that and worked with her and she’s stuck it out at college. I was there and she could phone or text me and I was there for her. I say to them that they can phone or text me, whether it’s about the course, their family, something that’s happened outside. We’re seen as non-statutory and to have someone speaking to them who’s not a statutory agency and actually speaking to them and hearing their thoughts and aspirations ... that makes a huge difference.

Mentor B, Borders College

It was expressed that it was not uncommon for the young people to feel that they have little autonomy and a lack of voice resulting in a cycle of ineffective previous engagements and interactions with institutions and external support. The mentoring programme has provided a safe space for the young people leading to more positive engagement with support and within the broader learning environment.

“ I think, well in my case, it’s like the whole support stuff CAMHS and support things, I’ve tried it all and it’s just never worked for me. But it’s nice to just sit with someone and not to feel pressured. I don’t have to tell [him] anything and he’s made that clear, but like I choose to, because he’s nice and he says the right things. He listens to what I have to say. It isn’t about what other people have to say. He asks me my opinion on it, and I think that’s really important, because not many people do that. Usually, it’s just like ‘we know what’s best for you’ and ‘you’re just a teen’.

Learner A, Borders College

The informal tone and open nature of the conversations which develop between mentor and mentee create a more approachable perception of support and have resulted in positive relations within the College, helping learners sustain their studies and develop soft skills.

“ He puts you in the mood. Puts you in the mood for the day. He does a lot of wee things, comes round, and meets you and just keeps you going. He comes for a coffee and a chat, and I even had him down at the farm and he was clipping sheep. He got his wellies and boiler suit. He just kinda chats away ... just about normal stuff.

Learner B, Borders College

“ When I was in school, I used to have section 31s with Social Work and that, so I was never talking ... but I think he’s broken that out of me. I speak a lot better now. I’ve got more pals and that. College, on the first day, I got on with everyone.

Learner B, Borders College



Success factor: tackling food poverty

In working to target social issues and offer targeted supported, the issue of food poverty has been identified as a barrier to learning, affecting the young person's ability to maintain wellbeing and sustain their studies. The professional mentors work to understand the context of the learner and gain a deeper understanding of challenges and issues. From here, practical solutions are discussed which can then be implemented to support the learner.

“ Some examples ... those students who had to move quickly into their first tenancy. Things like ‘do they know how to cook a meal’, ‘how to run a house’ ‘what have they got in their cupboards ’... you’re stepping into that kind of territory.

Mentor A, Borders College

In one instance, this approach led to an intervention which not only dealt with the immediate issue of food poverty, but additionally engaged the mentor with local volunteering as a means of offsetting initial reluctance to accept support from a foodbank.

“ I had this person at Christmas time who was really low, and I thought the way to buck them up was provide a gym membership, but also to look at what he was eating. When I was chatting to him about food, I asked him to shout out what he had in his cupboards. He really had nothing there ... and nothing fresh, which is a big part of wellbeing, but he really didn’t want to take a foodbank donation. Within 2 hours we had sorted a big parcel of what he needed. He said he felt really bad taking food, and we chatted about how he could ease this by volunteering 2 hrs a week to help the foodbank. They’re all good people ... the students we support ... and they actually don’t think twice about giving back.

Mentor A, Borders College

As a direct result, the mentee is now actively engaged and visible within their local community, and has acquired work experience, leading to the development of skills for future employment.

“ Getting him involved with food parcels, making up and delivering food parcels and he’s now a great wee worker. The work experience placement said they would employ him in a heartbeat in the workplace, so he’s building up skills and creating networks.

Mentor A, Borders College

Food poverty remains a challenge and through the programme innovative approaches to tackling this issue have been implanted. These approaches include providing breakfast to all students to remove any stigma around food poverty.

“ The reality in the Borders is that if you’re in somewhere like Eyemouth, you’re talking a 7 a.m. start for the bus, so some of the students haven’t managed to eat anything before starting college. So we have a wee pack with oats and things for breakfast. We have that readily available to all students across our campuses.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

Mentors have also been instrumental in linking up with local agencies and in one instance with local retailers to provide practical and cost-effective solutions.

“ Susan is full of innovative ideas and will take come up with an idea and run with it. Some ideas work and some don’t, but you can imagine that resources are tight ... Susan went round local shops and supermarkets looking to see if they would donate some resources, and from that we were donated items to allow us to put together lunch packs for students, students really appreciated having access to these.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College



Success factor: Providing practical resources and support

The project was keen not only to address food poverty but to provide workable solutions in response to the broader impact of financial barriers faced by learners. Practical resources to support learners with their studies were funded by the project and distributed directly to learners.

“ Things, even like a stationery pack, can make such a difference. Students were all working remotely and we were thinking what could we do to prepare them for College ... as we couldn't see them face to face due to lockdown ... we ordered in ... pens, pencils, folders, post-it notes, diaries ... just a basic stationery pack which was issued to all Borders Young Talent students at that time, and we also looked at for those in most need of basic equipment ... who needed a chair, a desk, a dongle, a laptop. What did they need to start their learning journey? We got items ordered and delivered directly to their houses mitigating any risk for them having to travel to come and collect these.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

The person-centred approach adopted by BYT meant that building a sense of value for individuals led to more innovative ways to support learners and foster positive interactions. The project delivered gifts to learners and through the mentoring process, tailored approaches to promote positive engagement could be implemented.

“ We were still in lockdown at Christmas, so we thought putting together wellbeing gifts, a wee pick me up really with some sweets, bubble bath ... as some of the students wouldn't have something under the tree and we just wanted to make sure that they had something to open. It was just a wee thing, but for some of these students it meant quite a lot for them. Mentors take students for McDonalds, I like to take them to Costa for a hot chocolate ... no matter what it is it makes the world of difference because it's about them and what they like ... and we're not just sitting in an office.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College





Success Factor: Laying the groundwork for sustainable futures

The mentoring sessions open up space for reflection on future plans within a safe a supportive environment. Learners have trust in the process and have been encouraged to reflect on their own individual goals and aspirations. Where issues were identified with course choices or progress for example, the mentors could identify and support positive alternatives as a means of ensuring continuing engagement with learning.

“ I let them know I’m there to support them if there’s anything getting in the way of the learning that they’ve signed up to do. If something isn’t right with the course, I’ll work with the tutors to see if we can find something that is right, or maybe they’ll come back another year. They’re good with that ... happy with that ... and they know I’m quite easy going.

Mentor B, Borders College

“ It can go from someone who has maybe applied for the wrong course in the beginning. We had someone who wanted to animal care ... but they worked on a farm at the weekend, and just by chatting it was actually agriculture that they wanted to be in and that’s a good way of setting them up for success. Listening and making sure they are on the right course. Knowing more about them helps.

Mentor A, Borders College

Exploring alternatives was found to have not only helped young people to ‘stay the course’ but in some cases, was seen to have raised aspirations higher, with learners showing more self-confidence and autonomy in decision making around the routes into employment.

“ An example is of one learner who came to us from school with high levels of non-attendance and non-engagement. They’ve come here and their attendance and engagement has been fab. They initially started out on a college course in painting and decorating ... but once their routines were established, they saw themselves doing well and found space for their thought processes, they have actually gone on to realise that they don’t want to be a painter and are looking at psychology. Their aspirations are now different, and we can react to those situations, and we know what they are capable of and what will keep them motivated. We can then signpost and guide them.

Mentor A, Borders College

“ Moving the young people into education, is giving them the opportunity for them to earn. They’ll all tell you they want a job to earn money ... maybe be a plumber or that ... but they don’t necessarily think it in detail and that the apprenticeship might actually be 4 years. So, it’s about explaining that you don’t just start right away as a plumber and helping them understand the process. Understand how to split the practical with the bookwork.

Mentor B, Borders College



The BYT targeted approach to developing resilience, capacity building and increased motivation has repositioned learners within a space where they are able to see the value in the continuation of their studies and identify transferable skills. Linkage between the College and external local agencies, such as Cheviot Youth, who themselves aim to 'facilitate the growth of young people from dependency to one of interdependence' offers a foundation for learners to build from as they transition onto self-sufficiency and employment.

“ We’re also very good in terms of meta skills and tapping into other external agencies. We have a young man just now, who has moved into his own tenancy, supporting him with cookery skills, money matters etc. ... and we’ve got him engaged with Cheviot Youth, and that’s another support for him. It additional scaffolding. We always encourage things like part time jobs to help with routines. There’s no set thing, but the main thing has been communication and being able to cope with change.

Mentor A, Borders College

Barriers/challenges

The geographical location of the College means that that staff are working with a diverse and widely distributed student population. Travel distance between local towns and the College can be marked and internet service is often patchy with connectivity issues and has proved a challenge in creating workable solutions. The project has evolved to meet these challenges, with the approach to mentor recruitment being one example of tailoring the approach to meet the specific needs of the local area. It was also expressed that more could be done to engage within the wider college environment to support vulnerable learners. Knowledge exchange and link up with college staff and employers was offered as one solution which could be of benefit.

“ It’s important we get guidance staff and tutors to explain the units and what they will be learning or what they need, that would help. They don’t always understand. For example motor engineering ... students are expecting to come in and use hand tools but as technology changes they now need computer skills due to the diagnostics ... and we need to make sure they are equipped for future employment needs.

Mentor B, Borders College

Next steps

The Borders Young Talent project has been granted additional funding from The Robertson Trust and plans to continue the programme for a further 2 years. This continued funding will help in exploring how the project can be sustained through partnership working and external funding opportunities. A multi-agency approach to sustainability could not only benefit the future of the project via continued financial support, but also consolidates the project ethos of generating person centred wraparound support to ensure positive outcomes for learners.

“ It’s great The Robertson Trust have given us a further 2 years of funding to allow us the opportunity to establish a sustainable funding source which is the hardest thing for us. We hope that the outcomes we are experiencing allows the Scottish Funding Council and the government to see that there is a need for and a massive value in mentoring.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

The project coordinator is also working to embed the learning gained from the programme to embed new practices which have worked well within the project and could benefit the wider student cohort.

“ I have been encouraging the team to use the youth work approach we have in BYT in other areas of the College. Rather than just sitting in an office and expecting students to come to you ... go to the student. There is real value in asking them for a coffee or meeting them in a public place. There’s no more of ‘we can only meet you in the office’. The pandemic pushed us to think about how we could operate our support service in the College and realign our service to be even more inclusive and I find this approach works. It’s now embedded in the wellbeing service at the College. I’m meeting a student in a local café to do her SAAS application, who I probably wouldn’t have been able to see if I didn’t go to them. I think, where there’s poverty, or care experience or whatever, you try and strip as much of those barriers away as possible. If that means we need to go to them, then that’s what we do.

Jen MacKenzie, Borders College

