



In partnership with



## Communities First

### About the organisation

[First Connections](#) works to connect with local businesses on behalf of the five geographical Communities First (CF) clusters, ACE, Barry, BRG, ECLP and [STAR](#) across Cardiff South and the Vale of Glamorgan, five distinct projects that all come under the banner of Communities First, a Welsh government funded anti-poverty programme. The CF project aims to make people more prosperous through reducing inequalities in income and opportunity, support people to get back into learning and improve health and wellbeing.

What Employers Want (WEW) appealed to the STAR cluster as it fits well with what they are trying to achieve for communities through their prosperity objectives. It also coincides closely with the remit of the First Connections Employer Engagement Officer and the STAR CF prosperity team, who undertake similar work with employers, to identify what they need and to support people to develop the relevant skills to match that need. Empowerment is at the heart of STAR's work so staff welcomed the WEW model which gives young people the freedom to shape the project as they choose and provides opportunity to engage directly with employers.

### Delivering the project

The WEW project was led by the First Connections Employer Engagement Officer and the Deputy Cluster Manager for the STAR cluster.

Each cluster was asked to identify two young people who they felt would benefit from the project. This could include new recruits as well as young people already involved with CF employment support services. Ten young people were engaged on the project, including two young people with autism who were interested in getting involved and wanted to explore employer perspectives on disabilities.

Before meeting with the young people, each of the mentors involved in the project came together for initial training and an extra session with project leads to discuss how the project would work in their area.

Following the initial training session, project staff organised a team day where the young people went bowling in the morning and had lunch to get to know each other without any of the advisers or mentors present, before taking part in a project planning session in the afternoon. This activity helped the young people to bond and support each other through the project.

After the first meeting, two of the young people decided, in discussion with their one-to-one mentors, that the project was not right for them as they were too far away from what the support mentors refer to as 'job ready'. They continued to engage with other Communities First work. Another participant left half way through the project for a really positive reason which was that he was offered a job.

Meeting up regularly was sometimes difficult as the participants were spread over a wide area. To overcome this, mentors in each geographical area worked with individual participants to identify the questions they wanted to ask employers. Two of the young people for example, wanted to ask specific questions about disabilities. Over a period of several weeks the group compiled a shared list of about fifteen questions.

The host organisations in each cluster provided a ready-made pool of potential employers to approach for interview although project staff also supported young people to choose and access employers they had a particular interest in. Employers engaged with included an energy company, JEHU construction company, Cardiff City FC Foundation- a charity that works in partnership with Cardiff FC and Cardiff Community Housing Association.

The Employer Engagement Officer also approached the Wales Millennium Centre, an arts Centre in Cardiff with whom she had already made initial links. As a result of their involvement with WEW, the Millennium Centre offered places for some of the young people to get involved in a project to develop their career walk programme creation. Five of the participants worked one day a week with the Centre in addition to their work on WEW.

To support the young people to take part, but also to encourage independence and develop self-confidence, Communities First funded bus and train travel to and from the project.

Most of the young people interviewed employers alone, with a member of the project team sitting in for support. In each case, the young person was introduced to the employer and had a chat before conducting the interview.

Some of the later interviews took place at a job fair event to which Communities First had specifically invited employers who had job opportunities available. This meant that as well as interviewing employers for the What Employers Want research, young people were able to talk to them about actual job opportunities on the same day.

*“...they were able to show that development in confidence, which wasn't there at the start of the project. That development of being able to ask valid and really good questions to an employer, sit there and have a two-way conversation.”* Project lead

## Project staff

Feedback was collected in a variety of formats including both video, if employers were happy to be filmed, and written notes. The young people had a number of creative ideas on how to share their findings including a blog page and a YouTube video, about their involvement in the project, that they could show to potential future employers.

The participants also asked for the Project in a Box end of Learning questionnaires to be reproduced as a simple online survey from which they can produce tables and graphs to illustrate their findings.

## Challenges

The project was delivered during a time of significant upheaval. Soon after WEW began, it was announced that the Communities First project would finish at the end of the financial year due to a change in funding. Inevitably this caused some disruption both to WEW and other projects.

One of the strengths of the project, but also one of the challenges, was the different geographical and organisational areas working together. This, combined with changes to staff in some locations, created problems in getting people together which delayed the start of the project.

Being flexible with the young people, for example ensuring that they could maintain involvement in other projects and activities at the same time, meant project staff accepting that they wouldn't have all of the participants on board all of the time and resulted in the project taking longer than planned.

The project lead acknowledged however, that the time taken enabled them to observe lasting change in the young peoples' development. As the project progressed the young people took more control of the project and were happy to get on with it with minimal support from the project team.

## Benefits - for young people, organisations and employers

Project staff noted that young people have become more independent, and grown in confidence, through their involvement in What Employers Want.

*“..the confidence that young people have shown as part of this is amazing. One girl ...she really would hardly say anything at the beginning. When she came to the [job fair] event ... she was the one leading and walking around going, 'I want to do this and want to do that.'”* Project staff

The gains in confidence for the two participants with autism have been significant and participation in the project has opened up other opportunities. One of these young people has

gone on to successfully complete a confidence building course and the other young person was part of a group selected to meet a government minister on a visit to Communities First.

*“..he was absolutely brilliant with the minister...when he first started working with our mentor, he wouldn't even look him in the eye...The fact that he was able to do that, to me, was massive.”* Project lead

This young man has since gained employment with an IT company.

The project has also helped to allay some of the concerns and alter the preconceptions of some participants about what employers are looking for when they recruit a young person. The response to interview questions on disability issues for example, has reassured the young people involved that disability need not be a barrier to getting a job.

Project staff found that most employers were very positive when approached, particularly when their involvement in the project was presented as an opportunity to build links with the community. Engagement with local people helps businesses to fulfil their corporate responsibility role and supports them to create a sustainable business.

Employers welcomed the opportunity to speak to young people about what they are looking for and fed back that the project had helped them to think from a different point of view. More than one employer offered opportunities to help the young person who had interviewed them to make progress towards employment, for example through offering a work placement or volunteering opportunity.

*“..there is such a difference as well, in different companies and what they look for in an individual, so there isn't one answer. The young people really saw that... that there's not one answer and one person and one way to be.”* Project lead

## Project staff

From an organisational perspective, staff reported that the WEW project has helped to pull staff together from across the clusters to work as a team for the benefit of young people. Involvement in and learning from the project has also helped STAR to take forward its work on employer engagement.

## Success factors

Project staff identified flexibility about how the project was delivered as key to its success. Staff also felt that whilst it was important to stick to the tasks and get the work done this should not restrict participants from getting involved in other activities which may benefit them and bring something extra to the project.

The support provided by individual mentors for young people, alongside their general employability mentoring, was also felt to have benefitted the participants.

## Project resources

STAR Communities First were confident that their staff could deliver the initial training, provided as part of the Project in a Box toolkit, with participants but found it beneficial to have the training delivered by L&W so that mentors on the project team received the training and learned alongside the young people.