

‘At your own pace’

A research study looking at the experiences of adults moving from a process of rehabilitation into education, training and employment.



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on behalf of Back on Track

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Back on Track provides education, mentoring and support to enable adults who are going through a process of rehabilitation in Greater Manchester. Registered charity in England and Wales no. 1017467 and a company limited by guarantee no. 2735484.

Summary

Purpose of the study

This study looks at the experience of thirty adults who were coming out of some kind of rehabilitation process. The aim was to identify common barriers which hold this group back from education training and employment, and critical success factors for engagement. The participants were all recovering from either drug /alcohol misuse, mental health problems, homelessness or offending. Most were interviewed at the point of first engaging with the service at Back on Track in Manchester.

Findings

The participants often described poor early educational experiences. The majority left school with no qualifications, often with some experience of offending, and those who moved into employment largely entered into largely insecure manual work. Half of the participants had done no training since leaving school. Those who had found school to be a negative experience often struggled in 'classroom' environments. Mental health problems or drug / alcohol issues could make it equally difficult for people to engage in learning. When participants were able to gain qualifications they believed that the stigma of past problems would work against them in the job market.

The participants stressed that they needed stabilisation of background problems (accommodation, drug or alcohol issues, mental illness) before they could focus on training and employment. They wanted some continuity of support and to be able to talk to staff about how wider difficulties were impacting on their learning. They stressed the importance of the 'atmosphere' of the service: it needed to be welcoming, non-patronising and non-institutional, a contrast to their school experience. All the participants, even those with higher qualifications, were experiencing difficulties which made their learning journeys uneven and there was a need for one to one support, often over an extended period of time. A fear of failing was a recurrent theme.

Participants who had been engaged in learning for a few months described very positive change as a result. They had developed new skills, experienced increased confidence and many were making longer term plans. Their learning had led to new social networks and they wanted to 'give back' in some way. However, they had very realistic attitudes towards 'recovery' the time needed to become genuinely ready.

Implications

...for Back on Track and similar providers:

- Learners with one of these support needs often face multiple difficulties; staff need to maintain skills to work sympathetically across a range of issues
- 'Atmosphere' is crucially important to service users and needs conscious fostering
- Personalised support (regular one-to-ones) needs a medium-term duration
- Immediate and tangible success in learning is important at the early stages; recording of achievement needs to take account of portability and continuity issues.

...for wider provision

- Some adults face a longer journey towards training and employment. Programmes which require short term achievement of hard outcomes (e.g. within a year)
- Personalised support in education training and employment provision is often one-off or short-term. A longer duration (e.g. mentoring) is needed to enable this particular target group to achieve success, and should be supported by funding.

1 Introduction

1.1 About Back on Track

Back on Track is a voluntary sector agency, originally established in 1977, which provides learning opportunities for adults who have faced problems such as homelessness, substance misuse, mental ill health or offending. Back on Track is based in Greater Manchester and offers a wide range of courses as well as providing mobile resources and tutors to run sessions in hostels, probation offices and day centres. The organisation has evolved over the years, but continues to offer a fresh start and support to help people into mainstream opportunities such as training, volunteering and employment.

Back on Track aims to provide a service which is flexible and responsive to the individual learner. The way in which learning is delivered reflects the value base of the organisation which is about working collaboratively to provide a respectful, non-threatening learning environment which aims to empower the user. Service users are given an informal 'assessment' in the form of a one-to-one interview in order to identify their learning interests and needs. Learning is not provided as part of any post-offending plan and there is no compulsion to attend the sessions. Sessions are run by a member of staff, who is usually supported by volunteers, and ratios of learners to staff/volunteers are high, with one support staff to every 3-5 learners. Learners can take breaks during the sessions and may take time out from the service if necessary, returning when they feel able to re-engage. Many access the service through partner organisations, as Back on Track run a range of taster sessions at hostels, probation and day centres where users can have a taste of learning and think about engaging more formally.

Multi-agency working has been key to success and the report highlights how engagement with a range of services helped to support learning at Back on Track. Many of the participants were now engaged in a range of informal and formal learning through their supported accommodation and were at various stages in their learning journeys.

1.2 Policy background

New Labour's social exclusion agenda highlighted the ways in which issues such as crime or long term unemployment emerge from complex and inter-related factors. Policy recognises that issues such as drug or alcohol misuse, homelessness, mental health issues or offending can only be addressed through a range of measures implemented by multiple agencies working in partnership. Within this agenda education is seen as a key element of any policy designed to address social exclusion. Poor early experiences of education, and a subsequent lack of qualifications, were one of several factors which contributed to later unemployment, risk of offending and social exclusion (SEU, 2005).

This focus has resulted in a growing body of evidence about the educational needs of people who missed out on early education. We know that learning in this context can only be effective in making change if it is linked with work around compounding issues like employment or accommodation and it should be needs-based and draw on a wide range of teaching and delivery modes (Schuller & Watson, 2009). For those who have been excluded from education, 'lifelong learning' has to be something which recognises potentially difficult transitions, such as leaving prison or institutional care. It is recognised that it should be locally available, flexible and acknowledge diverse learning trajectories (Schuller, 2009). For these learners it is important that provision is

personalised, providing motivation and encouragement and recognizing diverse needs and starting points (Brynnner, 2009). The benefits of learning are wider than those of 'employability' as research has demonstrated that higher qualifications are associated with greater happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem and reduced depression. Yet, for this to happen, the learning has to be appropriate for the learner. It also has to be a good experience to be effective (Sabates & Hammond, 2008).

The service provision at Back on Track is shaped by awareness of this knowledge base. Training and resources are personalised, provided locally to the learner and delivered through a wide range of partnerships and recognising the need for support across a range of issues. Yet much of the research on educational provision has focused on learning in custody (Home Office, 2008) and there is a need for a greater understanding of the needs of disadvantaged learners in community based settings (Chitty, 2008).

In response to this Back on Track carried out a needs analysis in 2009 to review the goals and needs that their service users had recorded. As part of this analysis, interviews were also carried out with referral partners about their expectations of Back on Track provision. The organisation used this analysis to build a 'needs model' which has informed service provision across the organisation. In 2010, when NIACE launched a national research project to examine the experiences of people not in education, employment and training, Back on Track used the opportunity to build on the 2009 needs analysis by carrying out 30 in-depth interviews with service users about their experiences of learning. The aim of this research was to contribute to the wider NIACE project, but also to develop a more local, in-depth knowledge base about the needs of these learners. Back on Track wished to 'hear' a stronger voice from service users about the barriers to engagement and the mechanisms that succeeded in engaging their users in learning. All the interviews were carried out with adults who were recovering from a period of significant disruption, due to problems with substance misuse, offending behaviour, homelessness, or mental illness.

2. Methods

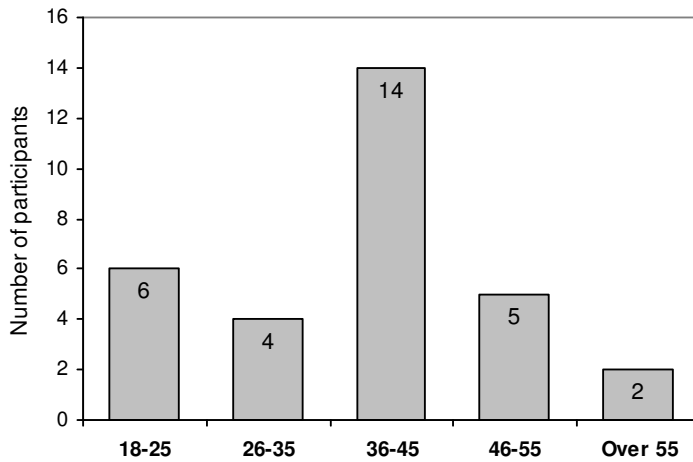
In depth, face to face, interviews were carried out by Back on Track staff, with thirty service users between March and April 2010. Twenty-four of the users were new to the service and were interviewed at the start of their involvement with Back on Track; six had been using the service for some time. Potential participants were asked if they wanted to take part in the research either at initial interview for the Back on Track service, or when contacted through outreach work in other services. They were given full information about the purpose and scope of the research and gave written consent to participate. None of the respondents were in education or employment at the time of the research.

The participants were asked about their experience of education at school, since leaving and their attitudes to learning now. An independent researcher was appointed to analyse the interviews and identify the difficulties that the users were experiencing in relation to engaging in learning and how those might be overcome. The experience of those new to the service and those who had been learning with Back on Track for some time are compared in the analysis, but it is important to remember that many participants had begun to access learning through their supported accommodation and for many the referral to Back on Track was a continuation of that process.

3. Profile of Participants

Thirty service users took part in the research, the majority of these were male (25), and women are slightly under-represented in the sample in comparison to the general profile of Back on Track users. Six users were longer term users with Back on Track; however others had engaged in learning through other services and were at various stages in terms of their learning.

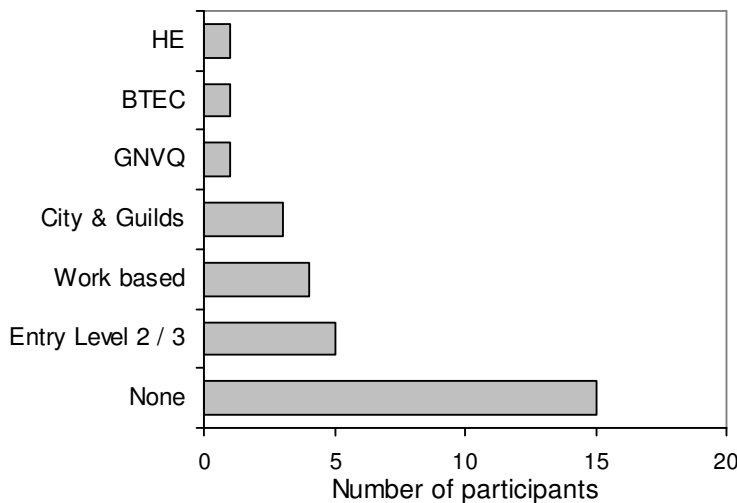
Fig. 1 Age of Participants



The largest age group was the 46-55 range, although the researchers spoke to both younger and older service users. The oldest participant was 67 and the youngest was 19. The six longer term Back on Track users had a narrower age range – between 36 and 52.

Those who took part often had a negative experience of pre-16 education and had not achieved at school. Only six of the participants had a positive experience at school and only one of the participants had stayed at school post 16. The majority of participants described a range of poor school experiences, such as bullying, poor support, behavioural or learning difficulties and some had experienced pressures at home, such as abuse, which were sometimes acted out in the school environment. Despite this, eleven of the participants felt that there were individuals or teachers who had they had been able to relate to and had tried to offer support. These difficulties meant that the majority (20) had left school with no qualifications and of those who did achieve some GCSE / CSE qualifications most had achieved few passes and at lower grades.

Fig. 2 Post - 16 engagement in learning



Fifteen of the participants had done no training or education since leaving school, of the rest, the majority had participated in largely work based, basic skills or vocational training which either did not lead to a qualification or they often did not complete any

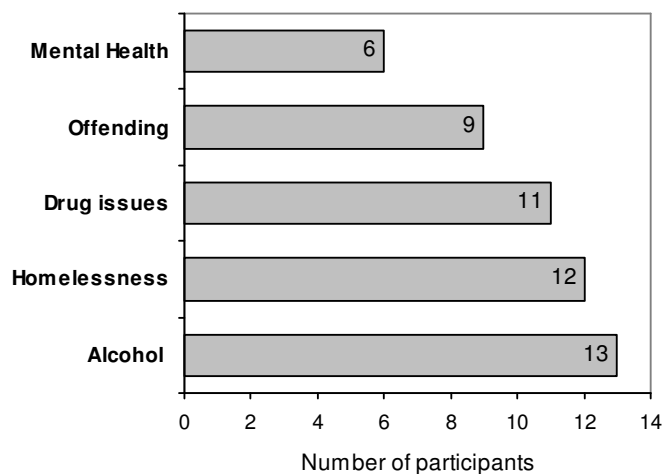
assessment. Three had achieved a City and Guilds qualification, one a BTEC and one had carried on into higher education and achieved a degree.

There was a strong relationship between achieving qualifications at school and engaging in later learning. Of the twenty who had no school based qualifications, only six had engaged in any further learning. Conversely of the ten who had gained qualifications at school, nine had engaged in further learning. Of the six longer term Back on Track users, four had school based qualifications and had engaged in further learning. The numbers in the samples are small, but they indicate that it may have proved easier for Back on Track to engage with those who had had some success in learning at an earlier stage and this bears further investigation.

The majority of participants were living in supported / hotel accommodation (13) or in an alcohol/drug rehabilitation unit (5). At the time of interview twelve were living in their own, independent accommodation, but many of these had been through supported accommodation before achieving independence.

As would be expected, these participants were dealing with a range of issues such as drug or alcohol use, had experienced mental health difficulties or had recently been released from prison (see fig.3). These issues were self - identified by the users and the information only reflects the issues that participants were prepared to discuss in interview.

Fig. 3 Issues raised by participants in interview



Five of the participants also had experience of the care system and two had been in the armed forces.

Their poor educational experience and low level of qualification on leaving school meant that their work experience was often fragmented and they had been concentrated in manual / casual occupations where training opportunities were scarce and security of employment low. The male participants largely saw themselves as stronger in terms of practical skills and ability and aspired to vocational and practical, rather than academic, learning. At the time of interview all the participants were unemployed and many were in receipt of sickness /disability benefit.

The participants were dealing with complex and multiple issues, often living in temporary accommodation, in recovery from addiction or experiencing mental health problems, which inevitably at times affected their capacity to engage in learning. Yet, despite their early experiences and present difficulties most of the participants had a positive attitude towards learning and wanted to engage with the opportunities that

were being offered by services. In the next sections we examine the participants attitudes to learning, the difficulties they experienced in engaging with learning and their aspirations for the future and the benefits learning could bring.

4. Background history

The poor experience of early education reported by many of the participants has to be placed in the context of their childhoods. Many of those who took part had experienced neglect, abuse, bereavement and disruption in their home life, which they felt had influenced their behaviour and their ability to engage in learning-

I've grown up with me dad like were dependent to alcohol at the time and it was struggled upbringing cos he was always like taking all the money for the ale and stuff and me mum had to struggle to bring us up ... I ended up like in and out of different schools and that struggle with me life, with emotions and feelings and all kinds of stuff ...

My childhood was pretty bad, getting beaten up by my mum's boyfriends...I was always beaten up until the age of about 7, you know and then when I found out when I was 7 where my proper dad lived I used to wag it from junior school, third year junior, and go round his...Even mum's boyfriend then, he used to beat her up. It was pretty shit actually

For some family difficulties resulted in placement in foster care or a children's home, where a poor experience of care could compound previous learning issues or behavioural problems. Older users had also experienced a more punitive version of care, when their behaviour had proved too challenging they had been placed in 'approved school', as one participant described –

Well it was just err more of a pleasure really going through approved school and like boys school three meals a day, your dad not beating you up, so the amount of err (pause) violence they used on you yes it was like nothing compared to what your dad did so it was easy really you know what I mean

A significant proportion of participants described this downward trajectory, precipitated by difficulties in their families, prompting poor concentration and behaviour at school, followed by care and / or early offending. Whilst many reported sympathetic and supportive individual teachers the school as an institution was unable to effectively respond to behavioural problems generated in the home, or identify learning difficulties, in a context of limited resources and busy classrooms. As a result many felt they had been 'written off' at an early point in their school life –

when me mam died and that I just I don't know, apparently my behaviour went a little off the wall...an then I went to grammar school an I lasted twenty five days an got suspended then expelled in first year... by that time I been nicked and that by police and that so court and care order...They have schooling in care but it were a joke really...I think they just expected you to go to detention centre, hostel and then prison...

For others, whose family environment was not so clearly abusive, school could be equally demotivating as they could experience casual bullying, struggle with unrecognised learning difficulties or care for family members whilst also trying to achieve in the school environment.

my mother had a really bad accident at work and she ended up being quite sick and her health deteriorated after that with diabetes and heart problems...she had to have a triple bypass surgery and my father fell ill at the same time ... I wanted to be a nurse but I had to put all that aside when my mother fell ill and thentook to the alcohol and depression and alcohol became a big thing in my life.

There were also a substantial proportion of, largely male, participants who stressed their practical rather than academic ability. At school they preferred active subjects such as sports, perhaps because they felt less confident in a purely academic environment. However, the stress on academic success in the school environment left them with the experience of failure. In the next section we will see that for a minority school, and family life had been a positive experience and it was difficulties they experienced in later life that caused them to drop out of employment. The diverse experience of our sample illustrates the need to be aware of the widely differing educational trajectories of older learners and their differing needs.

5. Early experience of education

The difficulties many of the participants experienced at home were often expressed in truancy and poor behaviour. Their absence from school meant they found it difficult to keep up with lessons and they often became increasingly disengaged and 'gave up' on learning –

I was a troublesome child so I was made really to...they handled me like just erm cleaning cupboards out and cleaning grass areas and just sitting at the back of the class and being quiet ... I used to stay off a lot of the time I used to truant very, very often because there was not reason for me being there coz no one was teaching me really anyway ...

This disengagement was echoed in the behaviour of teaching staff who struggled to manage increasingly challenging behaviour. This downward spiral often resulted in exclusion or an early departure from school with no qualifications –

Because the school had had enough of me basically so they said, as it was coming up towards you know when you can leave at a certain time, I think it's Easter or something, do you know what I mean... I wasn't learning anything anyway as, like I said, I was never there.

I couldn't get into another school so just stopped trying and did my own thing...My head teacher was shouting at me and she spat in my face so I spit on her just went mad at her and got kicked out but I was always getting kicked out anyway, I just didn't like it...I didn't like getting told what to do and that.

This quote highlights a sense of rebellion expressed by many of the participants, their sense of alienation from an academic school environment made them identify with peers who were offending or using drugs. The use of drugs and / or alcohol at a young age was a recurrent theme.

I was in the top sets for most of it, until I started smoking weed and having the cake while I was going to school or even in school...I wasn't good you know what I mean I had behaviour problems I was always causing trouble.

Like throwing food ...but looking back at it I did deserve it, I mean I was naughty.

Whilst neglect or abuse, poor behaviour and exclusion might be seen as the 'classic' life trajectory for many young people who are 'NEET' and subsequently offend, for others the reasons for their lack of engagement in education could be less apparent.

when we joined up with a grammar school...I found everything changed for me personally.....from not having to wear a uniform... we had to wear a uniform.....I found the teachers more strict and basically the whole schooling system...for me...just didn't work... it was an all boys school and it didn't really work....and the actual mixing part.....it wasn't the same...it should be girls and boys mixing...I found it strange because it used to be all my neighbours and then it changed and people came from outside and all over Manchester...

The transition between primary and secondary schooling is a difficult time for many pupils. For this participant it had been enough to make it difficult to learn and ensure that he left school with no qualifications. The difficulties of 'fitting in' at school had affected the learning of several participants –

because I was a shy person and all that lot and that I didn't settle in as good with the popular people and stuff like that...I got like picked on kind of thing with me name – name calling and stuff and that and... I didn't get physical bullied but like name calling is like mentally bullied and stuff and that made me like find it hard making friends

This participant also had a learning difficulty, which was identified and he was referred to a 'special' school where he was able to make friends. Several participants had experienced learning difficulties, but these had not been identified and as a result had struggled throughout their early schooling -

... homework, never could do that because nobody would help me, I didn't know what to do...I just struggled all my life really with anything to do with writing or reading, all my life, drives me mad actually at times, pisses me off, especially now like, you know what I mean, as I coped, I don't know how I coped over the years really but I'm a grafter at the end of the day just only thing I know how to do is use my hands ...

Well I went to school, but err the education at that time well err I were a bit slow like they didn't try nowt them times, if you were a bit slow they just left you... if you were a bit behind or a bit slow you were just at a standstill really... that why I regret it now cause I struggle well I can just about read I struggle with writing you know writing letters

I just wasn't picking things upand if I could do it then I wouldn't....I basically just got left to my own devices so I didn't learn much...it wasn't the teachers...it was the classroom...I just didn't like being spot lighted....so I stayed on my own at the back and floated through it...

Many of the participants also had a strong sense that education wasn't something they were expected to engage in. The expected trajectory of boys from their backgrounds was to leave school, get a job and earn a living. This message was reinforced through the school, through peer groups and within families and was reflective of the class background of the participants –

all me mates at you know at that I grew up with where I lived they all sort of left school and, regardless of whether they went to uni or whatever, they at least went to Tec an did brick laying ... An I didn't I came out of care and ... I didn't know how to go about it or you know. Or how to go to join college so ... I weren't, I weren't aware of the choices that I have you know, so it were like leave school an try an get a job

...the idea was to get a job and start paying my way in life...to my mother...and...not only that the last couple of years at school I wasn't in very much anyway...so it was better for me to leave at 15 and get a job... in a lot of ways I regret it...

...I don't know because I think its more to with your background and if your father left school at 16 you sort ... transmit down to you you're a working class boy, it just didn't, you know we was never guided to stay on at school or to go to university or anything like that it just wasn't mentioned you just left school, done your exams left school and that was it

The idea in them days was that once you left school you went to work and start bringing in a wage packet. The closest I got to college was when I joined the Merchant Navy.

Perceptions about expected educational trajectories were not limited to social class; one participant felt that race had also played a part in the disengagement of teachers -

I was black so you know...I don't know, just felt like we didn't get a fair deal at the school...It was all right, I just felt like, when it come to learning, I just felt like they didn't really give that hundred percent...Hundred percent in the sense where you didn't, you know, I felt like you didn't you know, I felt like you didn't get the support in the areas where you needed it.

Again there were a minority of participants who had enjoyed their early education and done well, gaining qualifications and moving into employment. They had lost work because of poor mental health in adulthood or other life circumstances. For the majority of participants, however, the legacy of a poor early educational experience was carried into later life.

6. The impact of early education

6.1 Impact on Employment

Leaving school with no qualifications or with poor grades had a great impact on the opportunities open to the participants. A lack of qualifications, often compounded by some experience of offending, meant either unemployment or employment in low paid or casual work –

I was stuck without any qualifications if ever I went for a job interview, I didn't go for many erm you know. I had to tell employers or prospective employers that I'd dropped out of school and it was like a frown, a frownded look off them. Even to this day, even though it was like seventeen years

ago, I don't like having to say that I dropped out of school but unfortunately I did. If I could change it I would but I can't...

I'm a very practical person me, you know, tiling, bricklaying, joining, anything gardening, you know, house refurbishment, all stuff like that. You know I'm pretty clued up on it when it comes to that but again, maths and English hold me back. You know what I mean, it's a big issue.

The majority of the participants had worked in low paid, manual and casual jobs which were largely insecure and had few opportunities for training or development. The insecurity of these jobs meant that they often had a series of short periods of employment in a range of sectors –

I were in there for like three year doing packing and then after that ... I were out of work for a little but, for a couple of month, and then I went into a warehouse job for about a year and a half and then...after that I did like kitchen work ... temporary... and that were only for like six month ... Then I've done building work, outdoor labouring, I've done like a few a few of them temporary basis type of thing for like three to six month. And they were like different firms and I did uh I did like a scheme through uh new deal where like a six month scheme where it were like were like paid option type of thing instead of your benefits and uh that were like landscape gardening type of thing...

The younger participants had experienced equally insecure employment and few had managed to hold employment for any period of time –

I worked erm in customer services advisory when I was sixteen. Selling insurance on the phones. I've done the bins, I've worked in a pizza shop, um also, I've done a lot of jobs here and there, yeah.

Some did manage to obtain more permanent employment, usually those who had gained qualifications at school or college, but several had been made redundant and issues such as drugs or poor mental health had made it difficult for them to hold down a job. It was clear that there were a range of factors that made it difficult for them to stay in work and a lack of qualifications was just one of those factors. People cited, drugs, alcohol, homelessness and an unsettled way of life as reasons for changing work or being out of work, highlighting the need for support from a range of agencies.

6.2 Impact on further training

The fact that a majority of participants had a lack of basic skills limited their ability to engage in work based training and progress within their jobs. Equally, the concentration of the participants in insecure, manual work also limited their access to training, which was often restricted to 'essential' and basic training such as health and safety.

...my mate was learning more because he was more qualified. I was making stuff like mince pies, but I wanted to be trained properly, so I gave it up. I thought well if you're not going to train me properly I'll go and get another job...

I could have progressed a lot more and a lot easier if I had my education...my reading and writing sort of thing....with the firms I work for,

that's always held me back...my reading and writing, so the first stage, if I had of learnt it I would have probably got a lot further.

The same lack of skills and confidence meant that many of the participants had also struggled to engage in training outside of work. These combination of factors resulted in a continuation of the 'life trajectory that had started at school –

I started hanging around with like a group of like three or four brothers ... started getting into drugs with ... with like cannabis to start with and then like started at weekends where I couldn't cope with living at me home with my dad being an alcohol dependant and arguments and all kinds of stuff like that. And I had to move out because I were having clashes with him and always arguing and falling out and stuff... and that's how it escalated over years and moved on from that from cannabis to like smoking heroin and all kinds

The older participants were particularly aware of how their lack of early education, and struggle with learning, had affected their later life chances –

A lot. I think if I'd stuck it out I'd be in university or college or something now. And not a hospital.

you know now even careers people never put that as an option they just push you into dead end jobs really I wish I had done all right because I know I could of done all right actually...I think we left school to young to tell you the truth... I know that now my daughter will have to stay at school until she is 18 and that can only be good thing

Again it is important to remember that whilst this was the experience of the majority of participants, some did take on training though work and were able to progress in their employment, sometimes even without qualifications. However those who did obtain qualifications could face opposition and a lack of support at home which hampered their development

To be honest I was bullied at home not to use it and also I lost my confidence in my own ability to use it then as a result... well I have always been very resentful about it because I enjoyed learning it kept me busy it kept me occupied so yes being honest I have always been very resentful that I didn't use it

Whilst the six longer term users had been more likely to engage in further learning, their experience echoed the other participants in the research. One had gone on to study at HE level, but the rest had poor qualifications and had worked in similarly low grade occupations, with poor access to education and training.

Despite experiencing so many barriers, abusive or unsupportive family contexts, learning difficulties, mental health problems, unsettled lives and later drug or alcohol issues, the participants still saw education as a way to improve their life chances. They had struggled to engage with education, but still had a willingness to consider further learning. This willingness was shot through with a cynicism borne of their experience, they often had little self belief and despite recognition that education was one way out of their situation they believed that they would fail as they had before. The next section focuses on formal learning after school and the issues that made it difficult for the participants to engage with training or education in a further education context.

7. Experiences of further education

Only four of the participants spoke about learning in a college based context, and one had experience of university level education. Ten other participants had been involved in learning after school, but largely through work based provision or through prison / offender learning or community based providers in more informal settings. Fifteen, half the group, had not taken part in any learning since they left school and before their participation at Back on Track or with accommodation based provision.

Only whilst I've been in custody. I've not been to any colleges or further education centres. Erm, maths and English, social life skill courses, erm industrial cleaning. There's a few things really. Skills for life, just stuff they did facilitate in the prison environment.

The quote illustrates the fact that most of the learning involved basic skills, entry level vocational learning and essential work based skills such as health and safety. One participant had trained as a hairdresser and worked in a self employed capacity for many years, but the majority had no formal or professional qualifications.

Well once I did a Health and Safety certificate, that's about it apart from the YTS and college I've not done much...I know how to bake now, I know how to cook, I like that practical stuff.

Also the difficulties people were experiencing in their lives, outlined in the previous section, continued to affect their ability to engage in learning at further education level.

I went to college for a basic skills and did not complete that because ... it were at the time I were having that psychosis with uh ... drug induced stuff and that and I were going just before that and later on in the stage I started like getting anxious and like I couldn't carry on my course

I...started an access course in humanities but I was using methadone then I was on the methadone script and have been there about three month and I really enjoyed it, it were like all right but then I got me script taken off me an it was just one of them you know 'Cant function without this' so I had to go out and do what I had to do to get what I needed you know what I mean so that went right out the window... for me its about trying to find stuff that I like cos you know for twenty six years all I did was take drugs

When participants had been able to complete a course, their unsettled lifestyles and their focus on other more stressful life events meant that qualifications were not a priority and they weren't able to build on learning or use certificates they had obtained to progress in learning or employment.

We had to go through books like putting down what we'd done each day and all that lot...But I didn't end up getting the certificates off them. Whether they've still got them or what, I need to get in touch and find out.

Again issues of unrecognised learning difficulties were raised and seemed to have been even more of a barrier in the context of continuing education. The experience of struggling in the classroom as children was carried into their learning as adults and at this point was often compounded by mental health difficulties or drug or alcohol issues.

I do get frustrated sometimes I get like stressed with it sometimes I get like in English things like can't get my head around this you know what I mean its like eh sweating know what I mean get stressed about it and feel like just sack this but I need to get myself around erm that sort of situation like slow down a bit... I speak to myself ... I need to face it know what I mean so I do like ride it out many times I've felt like walking away, I always feel better when I don't ...

It was clear that the issues that had prevented many of the participants succeeding at school were continuing to sabotage later engagement and this created a reinforcing cycle where many of the participants developed entrenched drug or alcohol habits, became persistent re-offenders and / or experienced deteriorating mental health.

It's had a big impact on my mental status...not reading and writing properly...its no excuse. I could have went out and went to night college because they have centres all over now...I don't know why I've not really bothered to go through the door but...I did at one stage...that's going back about 10 years ago....when I went in but something...I can't....I don't know how to put it....something cropped up...but I could have phoned them to let them know ...but my mind was so hazy...coming and going from different flats, I had to postpone it but I'm more settled now

Doing nothing. I've been suffering with depression and anxiety at the moment. So I haven't been doing nothing....

Poor mental health was a real barrier to engagement in learning, even for those who had gained qualifications. It interfered with concentration, caused disruption in learning and often made it hard for potential learners to mix with other students.

like I say I have done a degree and I have done lots of qualifications, I never used to find it hard to concentrate but for some reason since I have had my breakdown I suffer with depression I find it hard to concentrate sometimes and not as easy to pick things up as I used to...

Participants often expressed a profound discomfort with the learning environment, being 'on the spot', having to perform was a highly stressful experience and brought back memories of failure and humiliation.

...Even when I was in college, the teacher, he knew I was lacking in confidence in the classroom, around others, because I couldn't open my mouth, you know, I found my words get all mumbled up and that. I always fucking hated that, the written work side of it which you have to do twice a week, I struggled on that but he put me out on the workshop front on the floor like and I was like laughing, you know what I mean, give me a job and I'm away...

Many also found it hard to manage the 'classroom' environment and the kind of behavioural issues that had dogged them at school continued into further education.

Yeah, it was just my temper, he just accused me of, well, some lad bought some cannabis into the place that we used to meet in Old Trafford and then it stunk the whole place out and apparently I got the blame for it and I kicked off with the tutor and I shouldn't have lost my temper with him and he just had a go and said don't come back.

The classroom environment was stressful in a variety of ways for many of the participants. What could manifest itself as difficult behaviour was sometimes a response to what they saw as a difficult social situation. Some participants had struggled in groups and found larger classes difficult environments to master. One participant referred to his lack of 'social skills' and others said they felt 'shy', if they also had learning difficulties or compounding problems the classroom environment could become something that they avoided if at all possible.

Lastly, even when participants were able to successfully engage in learning and achieve a qualification, they also had to overcome the stigma attached to many of their life experiences, such as drug use or experience of prison –

It's just the environment where it was achieved. I don't feel really comfortable if I was to speak...if I was to tell prospective employers, 'oh I got the qualifications in bloody prison', you know, it's like there's a stigma attached.

Their experience of further and continuing education was shaped by earlier school achievement, which tended to place them in lower paid, insecure manual employment. Earlier, unrecognised difficulties continued to have an influence and caused them to either avoid learning situations or created difficulties for them in the classroom. Issues such as poor mental health, alcohol or drug use meant that many had other priorities than education and tended to create unsettled lifestyles which did not easily 'fit' the structured routine of college life.

Despite these difficulties many of the participants had begun to engage in learning, through more specialist provision including Back on Track, and the next section explores the kind of support that was effective in facilitating their learning. Where possible the experience of the longer term users at Back on Track is highlighted.

8. What makes 'supportive' adult learning?

I was just a rebel - you know what I mean - against all education, it was no good to me, I never had it so why would anybody want to give it me?

The above quote expresses well the kind of ambivalence that many of the participants felt about education. They felt excluded from learning and so often rejected it as an option yet, particularly as they got older, they recognised that it could be a way out of an unsettled and often damaging way of life. However, understandably the participants stressed the need for some kind of stability as a pre-condition for engaging in learning. Learners needed stable accommodation, preferably their own home, the treatment of drug or alcohol issues, preferably being 'clean' and the stabilisation of any mental health issues, particularly psychosis -

Well I am just taking all the support I can get from places like yours ... Now that I've got all my addictions out the way and controlled and now its just moving things forward now its my time... my way of like getting myself clean first before I can move on – now I can take the juicy bits that I couldn't take before because my mind was all over the place with my addictions and now its – its ready to take all this and now am looking forward to it its like err not as a test but as an enjoyment now that's the way my mind has changed –

as before I was scared to death of it, you know thinking I was an idiot and this, that and the other...

Users were unable to take up support if their lives were chaotic, dominated by the need to find drugs and / or by continually having to find a place to sleep. Again this highlights the need for a multi-agency approach where learners are given support to detox or supported in accommodation before they learn, and then given continuity of support throughout the learning. The following feedback concerns both Back on Track and other agencies such as the Community Alcohol Team, various accommodation providers and detox services.

8.1 Successful features of support

What was most marked about the feedback from service users was their focus in terms of the kinds of support that had helped them to engage in learning. Whilst educationalists might be interested in teaching methods, study skills techniques or learning styles, the service users stressed more general features of services that had helped them to engage. They were concerned with the 'atmosphere' of a service, if they felt comfortable and welcomed, feeling safe and that they were not going to be patronised or humiliated. Both new users and those who had been learning at Back on Track for some time stressed this aspect of a learning environment, the ethos of the organisation was therefore key to successful engagement. It was important to set the right tone from the outset and make service users feel comfortable on first contact -

I like coming to [Back on Track] staff are all right you know what I mean and volunteers are good so in that direction it's good ... the staff are good make you feel welcome really you know what I mean they're helpful

*... was a bit scared I didn't know, it's a long time since I'd been to school and it was nothing like school I quite enjoyed it so I came back...It's really laidback, and you can get on and go at your own pace and if you need help its always available...its all done at a pace to suit me...I'm not in too deep, I don't struggle with it...I think you are treated more like a person than erm just sat there you know – people do actually speak to you in a reasonable tone - reasonable ha ha *laughing* cos nobody's made me come, here I've come on my own choice you're not made to come by parents and teachers...*

...to learn in a relaxed environment where the staff were aware of the fact that you might have problems that made it you know more easy to come and learn here ... I just find the Centre the staff seem to be more relaxed and more understanding of the people that come here because I think they are aware that people have got problems whereas that's not really, I don't think you get that sort of emphasis at school, I just find the staff really understanding.

The thing is the people here are not patronising.....not like just pull yourself together...they understand that its more that...long hard struggle.....well...I want to go back into further education....give myself more windows of opportunity...so I don't have to go back into warehouses.....I'll have more opportunities.....as long as you have that level of education you can get places.....the worst scenario would be returning back to alcohol...

Whilst being welcoming, 'laidback' and having an awareness of the issues that users might bring was one element of that ethos, the participants highlighted several

elements in the way learning was provided that were key to helping them have a good learning experience, one which made them want to come back.

8.2 Hearing the service user

Participants felt that one of the most useful features of support, whether from the learning centre or other agencies, was the ability of workers to listen and actually hear what they were saying. Being able to express some of the difficulties they were experiencing, and how that might impact on their ability to engage in learning, was an important factor in facilitating engagement -

if you're feeling down or you need to like discuss things with him and to like stuff like that and you chat about all type of stuff like, you just discuss it with him or if you have any issues or problems then yeah you bring it up with him and then sort it all out and stuff and he'll support you and that...because I never had that in the past anyway and so it helps, yeah.

its more talking....if I've got a problem she will sit down and talk it through with you...if I think I need a drink she will ask do I really need a drink or is there something else wrong.....and there is also the other people I live with.....they have all had their own separate problems and different reason why we are there ... these people seem, to help.

Equally, if participants were able to develop more long term, stable relationships with teaching staff, or wider support staff, it helped in providing continuity. For users who had poor experience of both family, care and later services, being able to trust staff was an important factor.

I don't ring me worker from Blackburn but I'd ring one that I had when I was in Manchester cause I know her a lot better and she's worked with us for along time, Yeah there's that trust there you know what I mean so so that's cool and erm you know its about for me anyway cant speak for anyone else but you know I know I've got to do stuff for me recovery every day cause I've got part of my head that wants to take me out and you know back into that madness...

The most important thing for the users was that services could listen and respond to the needs of service users –

I'd say, to be honest with you I'd have a good talk with them first, you know, what are their interests, what do they like doing anyway. There's no point going somewhere for the sake of it where you aren't getting anything out of it, you know what I mean...I'd ask somebody, what are you interests, what do you want to do and then help them to go that way then, lead them down that right road.

8.3 Building on small successes

As many of the participants had been out of education for many years, it was important to take their lead in terms of a starting point. Even with those students who were more confident and had higher qualifications, life events had often worked to lower their confidence and self-esteem and it was important to be student focused from the outset. This often meant starting with basics and building very slowly, working at the students pace and ensuring that the experience was enjoyable.

Oh aye, I know how to use a computer now, you know, I can now look at a computer and click on something and I aint got a clue what I've got to be doing ... but I do understand a bit, you know what I mean. When I did it a few years ago here, doing a short course on computers, you know, that gave me a load of confidence, how to use it like, using the mouse and that.

Learners had sometimes been through a service, dropped out, and then returned when they felt more stable. Their learning trajectories were not even or predictable and it could take several attempts to make change. When they did engage, there was a need for one to one attention and support to ensure that students did feel comfortable and were not left to 'struggle' in the class, repeating old experiences.

you got more one to one... that's what it is, you get more one to one where you can say, whereas like in school it was different like its you just can't "can you help me all the time cos

*It's because you take the time and trouble and have one-to-ones. I went to *** and they didn't do that ... I'm not saying they have to but it helps an understanding of where a person is coming from...its hard for a lot of people to talk about their problems.*

Many of the participants stressed the important of starting slowly. They were very aware of previous failure and wanted to avoid putting pressure on themselves that they felt they would be unable to handle.

I've always been pretty keen to learn and you know like a say my hobbies are like world affairs and things like that. But it's just like my self esteem because I've spent a hell of a long time in prison and you know I'm still getting used to the outside world really. So I just have to take each day as it comes and take it slow.

its useful its there its there every single day if you want it, well its just that some days I just cant be doing with it I just cant make it know what I mean sometimes I feel like its should I go there or should not be going there ... each day I come here I do feel like you know I've learnt a little bit more than I did the day before Yeah I just wanted to learn a bit better about computers and maybe get a bit more education in my maths and English which I wasn't very good at school so this was a good place to come really where you feel a bit confident

Pressure to 'succeed' was perceived negatively and participants wanted to be able to take the learning at their own pace and to be able to use the service flexibly, not attending if they were having a particularly bad time or had something else they had to deal with. It was important that the learning was also informal, and carried out at the student's pace, as the more formal classroom environment of school had been alienating for most of the participants –

...it was more like oh my god what's it going to be like ...but when I came in it was brilliant...its not a massive classroom like school, its more friendly and easy going which for me it turned out perfect because if I was in a classroom in that like a school setting I probably wouldn't have stuck it out but as it isn't its brilliant...when you're not in a classroom full of loads of people I don't feel intimidated or anything here..Its just like...easier and

friendly ... whereas here you work at your pace and you're not pushed in any way to better anyone else...you just pick it up at your own pace.

Learning had to be structured enough to provide regular and planned sessions for some, yet enable students to take 'breaks'. The learning had to be part of a gradual process of stabilisation, providing a safe space where there were boundaries in terms of appropriate behaviour, attendance and learning, yet also flexible enough to allow for the needs of students outside the learning environment.

8.4 Multi-agency support

It is widely recognised that many adults who are not in education, employment or training face multiple and complex issues and need support from a range of agencies. The experience of the participants in the research reinforced this and drew on a wide range of support from a wide range of agencies.

I get 100% support from the...unit and I get a lot of support at the house... obviously they want to educate you on alcohol and get you to stop needing alcohol but I think, its like at the unit now, they are introducing you to places like this to try and get you educated and back into work.... as you know I am doing computer course with you which I think is great and I've got an English course with Bev ...overall the lot of it's brilliant and the support here is absolutely good... well I asked my CAT worker because I wanted to do voluntary work and further my education...catch up from what I missed in school...and that's why she put me onto here...its just you get a lot of support here as well..

The above quote illustrates how, when support was give from a range of sources, focusing on different needs, yet co-ordinated, some service users felt able to progress beyond basic skills. Having workers from different agencies supporting one user presents a challenge to agencies, but it had benefits to users. Having access to a range of workers provided a knowledge base which users could draw on, helping them find out about services and access resources they hadn't been aware of.

Yeah, we can go on the internet at Acorn or I could speak to Gordon who came up with the idea of [Back on Track] yesterday which I was pleased about, so there's plenty of options for getting advice

It was actually the rehab which encouraged me to get out a bit more. I think if they hadn't encouraged me then I wouldn't have bothered but I wouldn't have known about you... I wouldn't have looked into this myself

With support from agencies, many had already begun to engage with learning before they came to Back on Track, but alongside this, motivation to actually engage with these services was a huge issue for many of the participants, whose experience of education had been consistent failure. Having a range of workers to provide encouragement, motivation and challenge was often effective -

I have CAT worker, that's a Community Alcohol Team worker. I see her once a month and she's very supportive towards me...you are actually given a key worker, all the support workers, whether it's the housing support works or the key support workers, they are all there for you and if you have any problems they notice, if you have on a different way and they will take you to one side and talk to you and straighten you out. At first, I

was a bit frightened about the prospect of moving on and getting my own flat again and that I'd go downhill but I know the support is still going to be there. It will be a safety net which is always going to be there for me and I knowI've got a nice safety net.

This was a recurrent theme in the interviews, both from new users and more long term users of the service, the fear of falling back, of failing again. When support was provided across a range of issues, participants often felt able to make change and take steps towards qualifications or employment as the 'safety net' was there to prevent them failing. Again, their engagement with services was often complex and intermittent, learners could be involved with several agencies and move between agencies for support, but it was important that services could link together effectively to enable that engagement -

I know I can go and talk to her if I need help and anything which takes me away into further education ...I've got so much support I feel like a delicate plant with all canes tied around it so it can grow.

9. Change through learning

9.1 Increased skills

The six participants who had been learning with Back on Track for some time described some clear change as a result of their learning, they were able to develop and learn new skills -

I've learnt more here in English in a couple of weeks ... I write a lot of capital letters and I've learnt to stop and think, learnt to stop more and read cos I read things like dead fast I don't kind of look at the actual word sometimes I make a word up that sounds a bit like it but now I'm looking at words and I'm kind of picturing them so I can spell them next time... I've made progress like I know I can write a sentence better than I could

....a lot of my problems was with my writing and spelling but now I've had help with that....it was the main thing holding me back...

9.2 Increasing confidence and self esteem

The six longer term users had also experienced change in the way they perceived themselves and reported increased self-esteem. This greater confidence made it easier for them to learn, which in turn resulted in increased confidence creating a 'virtuous cycle' which acted in opposition to the downward spiral they had previously experienced in relation to learning -

I'm a lot better now that I was twelve or fourteen months ago before I come to [Back on Track]. I feel a little bit more confident ... more confidence than I had before I started ... Yeah it makes me want to learn a little bit more cos its like em set me on a road to em and maybe to get something more

it's helped my self-esteem and confidence ... it is knowing that there is somewhere that you can go and can learn at your own pace and there are

always people there to help you. In the wider sense it has given me confidence to go for a job

Well before I came here there's no way I'd even thought about going to college - I thought colleges were like school and now I've found out they're not and I'm looking forward to doing some more courses in September... well I'm still deciding what to do at college...so I don't know about a job yet...If you get the qualifications you get more chance of getting a job...they don't just give you a job.

Again, the users stressed the importance of the 'atmosphere' of Back on Track, its informality and the attitudes of staff, in building self-esteem –

Being in the classroom has improved my confidence I normally keep myself to myself but now I'm more outgoing and I don't mind being around people...so yea I suppose ... its just how the staff are...because they are more like friends than teacher where as at school it was more like yes sir no sir...whereas the staff here are just like down to earth and jus like the rest of us....make you feel. ..comfortable so that's about it really ...

The longer term users also echoed earlier comments about the incremental nature of change, they recognised that it would take time and valued small improvements in skill or, as the second quote illustrates, simply the ability to keep to a routine –

*... just to learn really everyday, to learn each day I come here I do feel like I've learnt a little bit more than I did the day before ...I just wanted to learn a bit better about computers and maybe get a bit more education in my maths and English which I wasn't very good at school so this was a good place to come really where you feel a bit confident
I mean one good example is just getting back into a routine which has nothing to do with learning but just coming here and other things like going on the internet using the emails. I'm wanting to buy a computer myself now.*

9.3 New social networks

For some of the six longer term users, coming to group sessions had also provided welcome social contact and the opportunity to develop social networks -

I thought it was a good idea because I wasn't doing enough with my time and it seemed like a good idea to get out and meet people and mix and it seemed like a good centre because it encouraged you to meet other people

Meeting people through their learning not only lessened social isolation, it also enabled them to begin to build different social networks, ones which weren't necessarily linked to old behaviours around drug use or offending and which motivated them to come to sessions and learn -

I feel more outgoing. Not getting low as much, and getting up and getting out... getting out and doing something... I mean I got positive about the book I was writing and that has made me feel really good about myself like

I can do something... learning new skills and meeting new people as well...because like I said I've only done a couple of classes and they are all different ... I think I need to make friends because there is a lot inside me that I cant talk to my husband about. Sometimes you need a friend because I've lost touch and a lot of my friends have got married and have families and I've lost touch so know it's like starting all over again and making new friends.

10. Looking to the future?

For the six longer term users at Back on Track, learning in an environment which was accepting, and that designed the learning around the student, had enabled them to think differently about their future. Most were interested in gaining qualifications and had thought about some options for employment –

I want to take other courses ...I m wanting to learn now...I don't know if it because I've stopped drinking or because of how friendly and relaxed it is here...I do look forward to coming...so my future is going to be a lot brighter because I'll be picking things up and learning things. ...so I can see a bright future because I know I'm going to learn it here. ..hopefully moving on...getting another job

If I pass my courses and if I like put em on a CV well then it will make me better ... there's no point me saying to people 'oh I've done this computer course I know I can do that' but when you have to go for a job and things they need everything on paper ... it makes me want to learn a little bit more cos its like set me on a road to ... maybe to get something more. I mean I feel to myself I still got 20 years of work left in me, I aint that old, I have crossed a lot of demons in the past and I've got through quite a few of them and I feel I'm getting better, just takes a bit more time...

All of the longer term learners at Back on Track felt they had more options for the future and wanted the skills and qualifications they had gained to lead into volunteering or work and were beginning to make plans for the future. The idea of 'giving back' recurred amongst the longer term Back on Track users and reflects a focus in the organisation on volunteering and working for others –

I'm more determined to give back something, to leave something, know that I've achieved something as well by giving it back...I'd like to help younger people as I think some of them seem lost...like at the hostel, I see young people and they should have a future and I'll put them against the students I looked after and I can see the difference and I'd like to show these others that it's there for you, that they can be like these students...You can learn... It is there and they can do it.

However, this sense of planning for the future wasn't confined to the Back on Track users, some of the participants had accessed learning at other providers, through rehab, in community based settings and in their accommodation. Their learning had similarly encouraged them to think more positively about the future and think through their options and what they would need to do in order to achieve their goals–

...my ultimate ambition is to work with young offenders. To try and nip them in the bud before they go off the rails. Working with young people is

something that really appeals to me... Well, yeah we are looking into it and you know, I just need to get a few things in place first and wait until my supervision finishes obviously it all has to be CRB checked ... my probation officer has been great, he's going to champion my cause so to speak ... you know I'll have to do work and courses at college for it.

The future is to me I want to work with kids ... the bad kids - well not the bad kids you know the hard of - difficult learning kids who you know get them before they turn to drugs and ... you know I can stop them before they get that chair and throw it through the window. I know how they felt coz I was that boy I was the boy doing all that I was ... the aggressive boy all my life you know what I mean that's all I have ever known is aggressive and violence... so I want to teach the kids and I know its gonna be 3 or 4 years down the line but am gonna have to train all my mind and get my skills up and running before I can actually do that so I don't – I know its gonna be a long, long time but I am totally on track to doing that...

However, many of the participants had more modest ambitions that recognised the challenges that faced them in moving forwards -

To get computer literate, that's a priority, definitely, yeah... I have a massive fear of computers and you know, I can't get my head round it but I'm sure if from what I've seen here today and yourself, you seem a decent and good tutor, so I think I'll be OK. Just getting over that first little hurdle

....I just take one day at a time....I don't think about the future as such because at the moment I can only see from day to day... if I can learn the basics I would go on the computer at home more and try and learn more at home on my own computer...well I think if I learn more I think I will be more outgoing and could speak proper,....speak more to people...I think it would give me a bit more confidence I like to learn computers because in it's own way it is a skill and I think if I become good enough then I would probably try and progress more onto a different course and take it further on...you know...to my future....but at the moment I have to learn the basics first...so I don't make any plans...until I see how I go at the moment.

For those who had experienced issues in later life, such as redundancy, health problems or homelessness, the journey would be equally long. Despite having higher qualifications, or having held down a job for many years, recovery took time. The majority had very realistic attitudes towards 'recovery' and recognised that it could take some time to make real change, especially if they were dealing with addiction. There was still an understandable fear of relapse and many stressed the importance of taking change a small step at a time –

... slowly, slowly learning at it and slowly working towards it by just doing like substance misuse courses, mental health awareness courses, because I was going to go on a mental health awareness course one time but I didn't get around to going on it so could do like short courses like that ... and then I could like start like doing social work level one, to start from like doing little courses and then like start getting into voluntary work with like a support group ...And just work my way bit by bit up towards it and just gain all the qualifications as time goes by... if I put too much pressure on myself by running too many courses at once, that'd probably hold me back so I'd have to take it slowly and do one course at a time, depending on like how

tense a courses are, or how long they're for... but I don't wanna like end up like putting too much pressure on myself.

For some the idea of volunteering or employment was some way in the future, or limited by disability or sickness –

just a matter of...what I would be good at anymore because I don't know....I'm under a psychiatrist...a mental health psychiatrist and a psychologist as well. So there all helping...so all these people looking after me who are saying there is no way you can go back to work.

...yeah I'd absolutely try and get back into work but at the moment it's just impossible for me to get back into work.... I attend certain clinics at the hospitals...I go to drop in centres during the day... I don't walk at night so I don't feel safe out at night...so basically I just stay in the house and watch TV.

Again looking to the future was also very much dependant on the resolution of practical issues, several participants highlighted the need for their own accommodation if they were to work, not only because of the prohibitive charges associated with living in hostel accommodation, but also because stability in their own home was also seen as a pre-condition to being able to hold down a job –

Get stable accommodation, my own property, and then get a job and take further training to doing something I want a career in CE... I think it's more important to get my accommodation first that's stable and not have to worry about that.

Despite the support they were being given, people recognised that the responsibility for change lay with them. When asked what would stop them making change several participants answered that the only block was themselves, they felt that their own motivation and confidence were lacking and might result in them repeating the failures of the past.

11. Discussion

The interviews highlighted commonality in the experience of many of the users, who were dealing with poor early experiences of education compounded by drug / alcohol problems, mental ill-health and offending. However, there was also diversity in the group and a small number had achieved good qualifications and worked in stable employment until they experienced difficulties at a later stage in their lives. Some were also living in, and successfully managing, their own accommodation and also had responsibility for children.

Despite the diversity of the group, all were in agreement about the features of a service that could successfully engage them in learning. It needed to be welcoming and make them feel comfortable, very unlike the formal and institutional setting of the classroom. The staff needed to be able to listen and be aware of the wider issues in users' lives that could impact on their learning. In recognition of such issues, learners also had to be able to take breaks, both within the sessions and from the sessions themselves if their outside lives demanded it. They needed to be able to move in and out of the service and to be able to work at their own pace whilst in the service. The interviews highlighted the long term and uneven nature of the journey they had embarked on and they stressed the need for small, incremental change over a period of time.

These interviews challenged the notion of 'recovery' as a simplistic and linear process. Education is often seen as a process of logical progression from one level or qualification to the next, in an even course throughout life. The fact that the learning of these users did not follow that pattern highlighted the reality of learning for many people. Rather than perceiving this trajectory as failure, it was important that service providers saw it as part of a process. Progress would not be even or predictable, but if services provided the right conditions, learning took place and users did make change across a range of issues.

12. Implications

For Back on Track and similar providers...

- *Complex and multiple needs* - Whilst funding streams and statutory services often address a specific target group, such as drug misusers, many users face a combination of barriers (e.g. mental illness as well as offending as well as housing problems). It is important that Back on Track continues to maintain professional expertise across these areas (rather than just one area) in order to work effectively with individuals who do not fit into a 'box'.
- *Support for 'life narratives'* - When moving into other forms of education, or into employment, service user need to present their life histories and qualifications in a positive way. Back on Track can help support this through practice interviews, support in writing personal statements, thinking skills input.
- *Importance of 'atmosphere'* - The fact that Back on Track was very different from the school environment and was friendly and comfortable was constantly stressed as a key to engagement. This 'atmosphere' needs to be consciously fostered and communicated throughout the service.
- *Links with providers of rehabilitation services* - Most service users came through accommodation or support services where they had named key workers, who were crucial to a successful referral to training. Back on Track needs to ensure that they continue to engage with rehabilitation services, including a strategy for engaging those using services that do not use a key-working approach.
- *'Personalised' support needs to be medium-term* – The interviewees stress the need for one-to-one help and encouragement over a longer time period, as their circumstances, needs and aspirations change. Back on Track currently uses a 'key worker' approach for a duration of up to three years. In spite of a climate of diminishing funding we need to find ways to maintain this 'longer journey' approach and if possible, to enhance it.
- *Recognising achievement* - Service users at early stages of their engagement in education training and employment want to see 'quick wins' – clear tangible successes. Back on Track could usefully review how it enables tangible and immediate learner achievement. In addition, service users often reported losing track of piecemeal qualifications/ achievements from the past. Back on Track could review how it enables effective recording of achievement (e.g. certificate availability and portability, records of achievement).

For wider policy and provision...

- *Length of individual journeys* - The participants stressed that it was taking time and small incremental steps to make change in their lives. For many, the forward journey was uneven and included some moves into and out of learning. However, many funding programmes operate on the assumption that hard outcomes such as employment need to be achieved within a short timescale (e.g. one year). As a result, some mainstream programmes will not work with adults whose support needs are more complex and they remain in a cycle of social exclusion.
- *Duration of 'personalised' support* – Many programmes offer a one-off personalised assessment/action planning session, or up to three sessions if you're lucky. Few education training and employment services offer this personalised one-to-one support on an ongoing basis in the medium term (e.g. for a duration of more than a year) – which is highlighted by interviewees as crucial. This medium term one-to-one work is resource intensive, and some commissioners are turning to volunteer mentor schemes to fill the gap. Whether provided by paid staff or volunteer mentors, these medium term relationships for support and encouragement need to be a funding priority for commissioners that seek to bring about change for adults with multiple support needs.

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