



‘At your own pace’

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



Dr Meg Allen
on behalf of
Back on Track
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Executive summary

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'... [I] 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 laid back, 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..'

Introduction

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 had held them 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.

The study was undertaken by Back on Track, a voluntary sector agency which provides learning opportunities for adults who are going through a process of rehabilitation or resettlement. Back on Track works in Greater Manchester. The research was carried out between March and April 2010. Twenty-four of the users were interviewed at the start of their involvement with Back on Track; six had been attending courses at Back on Track for several months. The analysis and report were undertaken by an independent researcher, Dr Meg Allen.

Back on Track's aim for this research was to gain a deeper understanding and fresh perspective on the experiences of our service users. In particular, we wanted to listen to our service users' needs 'in their own words'. What is it that they enjoy? What makes them come back again after a first experience of a service?

This study will inform future planning of Back on Track's services. We also wish to share the findings with other agencies involved in commissioning or providing relevant services (rehabilitation services or education training and employment.) The report is being published at a time when funding for public services is being considerably constrained. This report serves as a fresh reminder for organisations such as Back on Track to be driven primarily by people's needs, even in a time of funding constraints.

For a copy of the full report please visit our website
www.backontrackmanchester.org.uk or call 0161 834 1661.

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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.

Findings

All the interviewees had experienced difficulties such as drug or alcohol use, mental health problems or homelessness. They often described poor early educational experiences, such as bullying, behavioural or learning difficulties, abuse or neglect. Schools were often unable to respond to these issues and many of the participants felt they had been 'written off' in terms of education. All had experienced difficulties in later life, such as mental health problems, long-term unemployment or homelessness.

The majority had left school with no qualifications, often with some experience of offending, and those who gained employment did so in insecure manual work. This offered little opportunity for further training and half of the participants had done none since leaving school. There was a strong relationship between achieving qualifications at school and engagement in later learning. Those who had found school to be negative struggled in 'classroom' environments. Mental health problems or drug/ alcohol issues could make it equally difficult for people to engage in learning. Those who had been able to gain qualifications often believed that the stigma of drug use or a history of offending might work against them in the job market.

The participants stressed that they needed stabilisation (in terms of accommodation, drug or alcohol issues and mental health issues) before they could focus on learning or employment. They valued support workers and 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.

... 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.

Many had been out of education for many years and it was important to work at their pace and ensure that the experience was enjoyable. The learning had to be in a safe space where there were boundaries in terms of behaviour and learning, yet also flexible to allow for their wider needs..

... 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 your not pushed in any way to better anyone else...you just pick it up at your own pace.

All the participants, even those with higher qualifications, were experiencing difficulties which made their learning trajectories 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 and all the participants needed to make change slowly and incrementally.

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.

Those who had been involved in learning for some time described very positive changes as a result of their learning. They had been able to develop new skills, experienced increased self-esteem and confidence and many were making longer term plans in terms of education, volunteering and employment.

... knowing that there's somewhere 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

For some their learning had also facilitated the development of new social networks and they stressed wanting to give back in the form of volunteering. However, they 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.

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 users 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.