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**ROBERT'S CENTRE - BOOST PROJECT**

**EVALUATION REPORT**

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## 1. Introduction: Setting the scene

This evaluation, requested by the Blagrove Trust, ascertains the progress of a pilot project after its first year. The project is designed to provide additional life skills training to young people in care and also support them when they leave care until they are 25 years old. The evaluation will inform further funding for years two and three of the pilot programme. This pilot, delivered by the Roberts Centre and called **BOOST** (with the subtitle: '*something that helps to improve, strengthen, or encourage somebody*'), was designed to improve the life chances and outcomes for those who are moving towards or have recently left care. The purpose of Boost is to provide bespoke one-to-one life skills sessions (e.g. in relation to managing money, cooking, form filling etc, with a view to improving their confidence, expanding, and developing skills and reducing isolation) to young people from 16 years old and then proactively maintain support until they are 25 years old. Some of this is done through the use of what is referred to as the Boost 'Workbook', which contains advice and practical activities in relation to managing money, being a good neighbour, independent living and emotional health.

Much has been done to improve the outcomes and life chances of Looked after Children, but there is still more that needs to be done. Boost is a part of six national pilots which are DfE funded as part of the New Belongings scheme. The Portsmouth City Council representative and external stakeholder explained Boost is aiming to gain the gold standard for support so it needs to meet the aims of the New Belongings scheme. It aims to get its gold standard by working alongside other organisations. Essentially, this programme is designed to explore how services for care leavers can be fully integrated and easily accessed and responds to a call from the Care Leavers Foundation: *The Care Leavers' Foundation calls for more to be done to tackle the rising numbers of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs)*.

From a wider research perspective, although there is a growing body of research focussing on children and young people in state care, there are two areas that remain under-developed, namely research that draws attention to the lived experiences of young people, e.g. in relation to the various transitions they go through, and the development of conceptual frameworks that centralises their perspectives to support the development of practice (Eronen, 2011; Mayock et al, 2011; Winter, 2014). Not only that, integrated working in young people's services is often complex, and models of integration tend to take a functional approach, seeing expert systems as vehicles for an evidence-based technocratic response to multiple problems, which may be restricting professional expertise when it is needed the most (Hood, 2014). Focusing on developments in England in relation to children and families, Rogowski (2011) argues that, although what remains is a limited version of social work's possibilities, there remains scope for a radical/critical practice that involves working alongside users on the problems they face. As such, perspectives of young people in Care and beyond (i.e. after they have left care) are key. It could be argued that the support and resources embedded in professional and social networks may be especially important for youth aging out of child welfare custody (Blakeslee, 2011).

## **2. Aims and Outcomes**

The aim of this evaluation is to provide an overall view of Boost's progress, both in terms of perspectives of the care leavers themselves, as well as the overall management of the programme with a view to ensuring any learning at this point can be captured and embedded in practice for the ensuing years.

**Quantitative and qualitative approaches to data analysis were used, with a view to analysing data from a number of sources:**

- Interviews with young people (aged between 16-25)
- Analysis of the Roberts Centre data base and questionnaires provided to participants.
- Interview with key staff involved
- Interview with Local Authority Representative (external stakeholder)

**Findings and recommendations are guided by the following Key Performance Indicators (KPI's):**

1. 50% of young people who were NEET at referral stage are actively accessing training, volunteering or employment
2. 80% of young people already actively accessing employment, volunteering or employment at referral stage remain so
3. 90% of young people referred to the service are regularly engaged with the Boost Service
4. 90% of engaged young people complete all four levels of the Boost workbook to independence.
5. 90% of engaged young people are managing their physical and mental health needs
6. 95% of engaged young people live in safe and suitable accommodation that meets their needs
7. 90% of engaged young people consistently show positive progress on the Bromford assessment scale over the time of engagement in living skills and substance misuse
8. 80% of Boost Young people report that they have learnt skills which will help them live independently
9. 100% of Boost young people feel more confident knowing there is someone they can turn to for support and advice

## **3. Participant profile**

Data was collected through interviews with 10 young people who were participating in Boost at the time of the study. As such, this was a purposive sample (25% of all young people currently attending Boost). Participants were selected by us, not the Roberts Centre; considering that the goal of the present study was to evaluate the internal management and the relationship with stakeholders, it was more appropriate for us to select the participants at random from the data base. We selected the participants, and they were contacted by their Boost worker. We had access to the Roberts Centre data base and presented questionnaires to the young people involved in the project prior to interviews with a view to discussing their responses.

## 4. Research findings

Below are findings identified by Roberts Centre staff in relation to the Boost KPIs and participant satisfaction (section 4.1 and 4.2 respectively), followed by findings from interviews and questionnaires with young people and a member of staff (section 4.3). The findings are placed alongside the KPIs to identify strengths and offer recommendations for further development (section 4.4).

### 4.1 Robert's Centre findings in relation to KPIs

- 58.3% of young people who were NEET at referral stage have actively accessed training, volunteering or employment (target met 50%) – **KPI1**.
- 80.64% of young people already actively accessing employment, volunteering or training at referral stage have remained so (target met 80%) – **KPI2**.
- 85% of young people referred to the Boost service have been regularly engaged with the Boost service (target unmet 90%) – **KPI3**.
- 34 out of 40 young people are actively engaged at the end of Q2 (30<sup>th</sup> May 14) This figure does not reflect those young people who are new, closed or on hold. 6 are being actively pursued around engagement and 5 have recently been closed. 17 new cases have been referred but are not being actioned currently which is why the target of 45 is currently not being met. Instructions to close cases were given from the social worker for various reasons.
- 78.4% of engaged young people are managing their physical and mental health needs. (target 90% unmet). Bromford scores show Physical Health = 87.5% and Mental Health = 69.3% - **KPI5 & KPI7**.
- 100% of engaged young people are living in safe and suitable accommodation that meets their needs (target 90% met) – **KPI6**.
- 61% of engaged young people are now engaging with the new Boost Workbook, which has four levels: Money, Living Skills, Health & Wellbeing, Housing & Community, Employment & Training – **KPI4**.

### 4.2 Robert's Centre findings - Boost satisfaction survey (KPI 8 & KPI 9)

Eight young people participated in a survey exploring their satisfaction with the Boost project carried out by the Robert's Centre. The survey asked participants to respond to a range of satisfaction statements using a Likert scale where 1=always, 2=almost always, 3=sometimes, 4=rarely, 5=never (see appendix 2 for full table of findings).

Statements included:

- Boost staff speak to me with respect
- Boost keyworker completes assessments with me and we agree actions together
- Being supported by Boost makes me feel more confident
- Boost has helped me learn or improve my life skills
- Staff respond to concerns I have. If they don't have answers, they try to find them elsewhere

Out of the eight participants, seven were consistently positive (ticking mostly 1=always), whereas one participant was fairly negative (ticking boxes at the other end of the spectrum).

### **4.3 Interviews and Questionnaires with young people and staff member**

The following findings are gathered from interviews and questionnaires, which explored KPIs 2, 3,4,5,8 and 9 and also the participants' views in relation to strengths of the Boost programme and their recommendations for improvement. The time span for participating in Boost was between 5 months and a year, although three participants did not give a time frame.

#### **KPI 2: Accessing training, volunteering or employment**

The participants indicated that the Boost programme helps them access jobs, training and/or voluntary work, subsequently supporting independent living:

*I think they are trying to help young people to be more independent and, erm, maybe they know what to do during their life and help them manage the money. To be independent basically, like, basic needs that you need to live on your own and be healthy and get a job and all that stuff.*

Three participants said Boost has directly helped them get a job, training or voluntary work, two were neutral and two either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Some participants said they already had jobs prior to attending Boost though. The staff member indicated in her interview that an individual approach is needed here:

*And we always base the activities on what kind of young person we have. Like you might get someone who is shy, who doesn't want to go to the 'Go for it Centre', because they just want to deal with you. In that case you might want to ring ahead and see if you can book a room instead of sitting there in the communal area.*

#### **KPI 3: Engagement with Boost**

Participants indicated that they engaged regularly with Boost, from once every fortnight to three times per week:

*I'm now twenty one and haven't had any help from them (social services) with like the housing situation. I'm in a quite a bad housing situation at the moment. In Boost they meet up with you every week, if not twice a week.*

*She (the Boost worker) will do any time for me. So she will come round late if I want her to come round and stuff like that. And that is quite useful for me when I've got so much stuff to do.*

*I currently see my Boost worker about three times per week.*

In relation to engagement with the Boost service the member of staff said:

*We offer at the moment fortnightly visits and are hoping that when the two members of staff start, we will be able to get weekly visits. We also do monthly visits and telephone calls and it's all very much needs led (...) the young person might want a weekly visit (...) a Boost worker once every three weeks, or (...) a telephone call just to see how they are doing.*

#### KPI 4: Completion of workbook modules

According to the member of staff interviewed:

*The other side of the project is that we have got a workbook that we use that has, erm five different modules of independence, and they are: money skills, living skills erm, health and wellbeing, housing and community, and education.*

There was some variation in how the young people talked about this, with some participants indicating that they were working through some of the modules, and others (the majority) suggesting that they were not very familiar with the workbook and/or hadn't worked through any specific modules yet. However, some young people had only participated in Boost for a couple of months.

*Because I have only recently joined and housing has been more of a situation, we have looked at the book, but it hasn't really been a big thing at the moment, but I think we are starting it next week (young person has been participating in Boost for three months).*

*I haven't done any modules. I haven't really started the book (participant has been part of Boost for about a year)*

*I kind of started when the modules were being changed or something. So we kind of worked through what I would need, so when I'm really bad, I'm just going to move back and start from the beginning (participant has been with Boost for about four months).*

*I think we've done bits and pieces, but we haven't started fully yet, just because it's just come out and er, I obviously, having X [Boost worker] is currently you know training people, and I've had to see X [previous Boost worker], er once or twice, you know to make sure that I see someone once per week. Erm, but yeah, no, I know that we are starting the book. I know that we are starting on, I think we are starting on, er, money and, you know that kind of stuff (participant has been with Boost for over a year).*

This was also supported by the data from the questionnaires. Here, half of the participants indicated that they had completed money skills either as a primary skill or alongside other skills. Other skills learned were cooking, life skills, health and (self) management. In addition to this, half of the participants did not state what skill units they were completing and one young person was unsure what skill unit he/she was completing.

#### KPI 5: Managing physical and mental health needs

Participants gave quite mixed responses in their discussions about their own physical and mental health needs and what role (if any) Boost does and could play here. Some indicated that they have other sources of support when it comes to dealing with stress and wellbeing (e.g. social workers, counsellors, school, friends), whereas others indicated that they don't need any help in this area. In addition to this, some of the participants indicated that their Boost worker has supported them in fulfilling their physical and mental health needs.



*Before I came to the Boost project, I already had a counsellor. I used to go to see a counsellor, so she helps me with that. So I don't really bring it up with my Boost worker.*

*I don't need help with that, I just need help with sorting out money and stuff.*

*The Boost project has helped me manage my emotions and mental health. They know how to talk to me and stuff that calm me and stuff.*

*They gave me the motivation to sort of say well if you do it referring to cooking and physical health] it won't be so bad, you know. It gave me a lot of sort of, yeah, trying to give me a lot of positives, and I can be quite difficult sometimes you know, like anyone can. It's a bit like 'yeah, but I can't be bothered with it'*

With regard to the questionnaires, about half of the participants indicated that the programme has helped them manage their emotions, mental health and stress, whilst at the same time half disagreed with this. One respondent said the Boost staff are very caring when it comes to his mental health, but ticked the neutral box when asked if Boost helped him/her manage stress. Moreover, the participants who don't think Boost has helped them manage their emotions and mental health, also said money is the most important skill they have had help with. According to the Boost worker interviewed:

*Mental health is very difficult because there is... There is a gap between before eighteen and afterwards, and that is one thing I put in for the targets for erm, for Boost for the next six months to do lots more training for myself and the next keyworkers in mental health, yeah.*

#### KPI 8: Skills learned

The young people indicated that the Boost project has been especially helpful in supporting them with money issues, healthy eating (e.g. through cooking classes), going to the doctor, housing and social skills. Here, skills are learned through working through them, sometimes with the Boost worker quite literally by their side. Support with money management and savings was consistently highlighted as the most significant contribution of Boost enabling them to become more independent and confident:

*I think the only thing I wasn't really confident about when I moved out, I was sort of intimidated by the bills and things... how to contact companies and know the different contracts, monthly, weekly. My old Boost worker took me out to the Bank like, and was getting me to talk little bits. Not constantly, just little bits. And then she will talk for a little bit and then she will get me to do some.*

*We've done some talking about health and wellbeing, like how to eat healthily and make sure I'm not, like, you know, not only eating junk, you know, some basic, like how to cook basic stuff. Because, what we did was, I had one session so far in cooking and I did cook at home and it helped me. We go to the shop together and buy food, and then cook together.*

*I used to never go to the doctors on my own. I've never called doctors and I just do my own thing. But she has helped me to go back to the doctors and now she is trying to get me to the dentist.*

These comments are echoed in the questionnaire data; money skills are clearly rated as the most important benefit of Boost, with 80% placing money skills as either the first or second most important skill they have learned. The next most frequently cited skills learned are Living skills and Housing and Community, with half of the respondents either completely agreeing or agreeing they have learned these skills.

In addition to this, 50% of the participants said they strongly agreed or agreed that the Boost project has helped them develop relationships (such as with doctors). 20% indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement. This may be due to the participants needing support in priority areas relating to money and employment and training rather than developing relationships.

In sum, the most important skill most participants said Boost has helped them gain is dealing with money issues; life and living skills, and managing appointments and self-management were the next most important. The Boost worker also outlined some specific activities and training provided through the Boost programme, which supported the learning of these priority skills. The statement made by the Boost worker below indicate that the activities offer a framework of questions and exercises, which are adapted and made personal through discussions with the young person in order to meet their specific needs:

*...we do a cooking session... we have a five a day diary that we give out to the young person and then we ask them to track, you know... Do they understand what five-a-day means. You know, have they thought about if they are eating enough fruits and vegetables.*

#### KPI 9: Confidence gained

The findings strongly indicate that the Boost project, and staff within this, play a significant role in building the young peoples' confidence, not just in relation to helping them with essential skills and tasks, but also by being there for them when needed:

*It was mainly my confidence when talking to other people, like banks, doctors, like that. I never really had confidence to do it. So they helped to build my confidence.*

*The most important thing that I have learnt from Boost is how to be independent.*

*I think it has made me more confident because she is just confirming that I know it (with reference to skills for living independently) more than I thought I did.*

This is summarised neatly by a participant in the metaphor below:

*Say, if you take someone who... I think the easiest thing to say is, who works, erm, in like a chip shop or something and, say they are labelled as fry cook, you know, say, but say all they did was just cook the food. It's a bit like, they are never going to get very far, you know, they are never going to be the best person in there, and it's a bit like, but say, they cooked the food and they also helped clear up, and maybe they helped to clean, make some of the chips, and maybe they helped someone out on the cash register. They are going to be a lot more of a team worker. And that is what I mean with er the Boost workers, it's a bit like they, they, of course they have got their job to do and follow it to the letter, you know, but they are willing to sort of be your friend as well.*

## 5. Strengths & Areas for Improvement

### Strengths identified

Key strengths emerge when analysing the findings in relation to the KPIs. These were also identified by participants when they were asked to comment on the strengths of Boost in relation to the support it offers them in relation to becoming independent and gaining employment or training.

*KPI 9: Young people feel more confident knowing there is someone they can turn to for support and advice.*

The relational approach adopted by Boost staff is highly valued by many of the participants who otherwise (from the participants' perspectives – see KPI 3 findings) had not felt supported in this way. This approach to learning helps reduce stress many young people encounter when taking steps to become independent

*Basically, she did what everyone else wasn't doing. She just listened and said that everything else will be fine. She said 'relax' and everything, to try my best to relax, when people stress me out.*

This approach enables Boost staff to identify individual needs through first establishing trusting relationships where informal discussion is central. For example, sitting and chatting to the young person and listening to their issues, cooking with them and taking them to the bank.

*They are really organised, when X (Boost worker) comes she will arrange for the next time she is coming out. So obviously we have got that when she is next coming out and everything, so, yeah, it's quite good. She is always on top of everything.*

This approach also affirms the young peoples' strengths and develops their confidence (see KPI 9 findings) to make decisions and talk to a range of new people. In addition, where support offered through Boost extends beyond the age of 21 young people can access support through 'dipping in and out' until they are 25. This provides them with a safety net in the event of issues arising such that they need further support during the transition from dependence to independence. This is an approach valued by the participants.

*KPI 8: Young people report that they have learnt skills which will help them live independently.*

This relational approach also enables Boost staff to carefully prioritise their responses to young peoples' needs, which often addresses other related issues. For example where money or living skills are prioritised this also alleviates stress. Within this relational context the development of skills is subsequently multi-directional. That is, where the needs of the young person are met in order of priorities identified within these relationships these priorities change over time as new ones emerge:

*The Boost is a bit more like a relaxed environment, where I can learn about being independent and learn about living on my own, and savings, and erm, maybe about what I want to do as well.*

As such, the programme has taken a 'priority needs' led approach (see KPI 8 and KPI 2 and Robert's centre data base findings). This approach enables young people to access support when they need it as they make the transition towards independence:

*They can dip in and out of the service... we might work with someone for six months and they might not want to see us for six months. But they've always got that knowledge that they can contact us whenever they want to, you know (Boost staff member).*

Skills learned therefore reflect the immediate needs of the participants at the time but also enables them to be put aside and picked up at a later date if necessary, when the need arises (see KPI 4 findings). This flexible approach makes the skills learned and advice offered to the participants relevant and also interesting (80% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the questionnaire statement that the project is interesting and relevant). Below the staff member provides an example activity, which helps young people learn money skills

*So with money, erm, we have different sessions with money. One of them will be that you do monthly budgets with erm... and compare it to somebody else's. So, in the workbook we have CJ's budgets, which is just a random person.*

By taking a priority needs and relational approach to developing skills and working alongside young people the findings raise the possibility that this subsequently builds young peoples' confidence to access employment, training or voluntary work:

*It was mainly my confidence when talking to other people, like banks, doctors, like that. I never really had confidence to do it. So they helped to build my confidence (participant comment).*

### **Areas for improvement**

Areas for improvement include a re-assessment of the benefits and use of the Boost workbook, more specific and focused support with mental health issues and stress, and working collaboratively with other agencies (including the more effective promotion of the Boost project).

The workbook and modules are presented as playing a key role in the Boost project (KPI 4) with a target of 90% of young people engaged in Boost completing all four levels. However, engagement with and understanding of the Boost workbook varies per client. Some participants were either unsure which modules they had covered, which ones they were currently on, or when they were to start the workbook (see KPI 4 findings). There was also some confusion in relation to each participant's progress in the workbooks. As such, engagement with the Boost workbook could be improved upon.

Where a priority needs approach has been adopted, this could account for some skills becoming overlooked or put to one side, making it difficult for the participants to know what modules they have completed in relation to the workbook. Having said this, the findings suggest that prioritising support to immediate needs when they arise within a supportive relational learning approach does have a positive impact on the immediate outcomes in terms of supporting independent living. For some participants, prioritising their immediate

needs (such as money and living skills) enables secondary needs (such as reducing stress and anxiety) to be met.

What emerges though is a discrepancy between skills development needed and the relevance of completing all four levels of the workbook. The purpose and benefits to the participants of completing all four levels as a KPI is brought into question. Where the training provided by specific modules is seen by the participants as useful for helping them gain employment or living independently, completing the workbook for its own sake seems to have no benefit. Focus on the workbook where the module is not necessarily required by the participant subsequently leads to some confusion.

*At the moment it is too focused, we just basically do only work and stuff all the time. And I just want it just sometimes, to sit with the person and just have a cup of tea, and just watch a movie or something like that. I know there is not enough time, but..*

The workbook and its purpose therefore needs rethinking, as there appears to be a slight discrepancy between the 'needs-led' relational approach and how the workbook is approached and worked through within this.

The role of Boost in supporting young people with stress and mental health also needs some attention as there were mixed messages from participants as to how much support they need (see KPI 5 findings). Some participants said they needed support whereas others said they were already receiving support elsewhere.

However, there seems to be little evidence of working collaboratively with other agencies by Boost staff other than taking young people to doctors, training or job interviews. The external stakeholder though, in his interview, said Boost aims to get its gold standard by working alongside other organisations. For example where social services have a more relational approach BOOST has a more hands on approach; more informal and flexible. Although the findings from this evaluation illuminate some of its strengths lying in its flexibility and informal approach the findings also illuminate a gap between this support and working alongside other agencies.

Mental health support has been identified as a key priority need for the young people though with a KPI target of 90%. However, the Robert's centre data findings indicate this has not been met with 69.3% of participants managing their own mental health needs.

Although some participants indicated they are having some of their mental health needs met (often in the form of reducing stress) this is significantly managed through prioritising other more pressing skills needs such as managing money or developing living skills (see KPI 8 findings). For example one participant stated:

*Well, I was struggling with money, and, erm, sometimes I have nobody to talk to and stuff, so I was getting, as I was telling X [boost worker] earlier that my hair is falling out and I am getting so much stress in, erm and its hard to handle. You know, like for me to have somebody like X that I can talk to them, even if she comes once every two weeks to see me. She managed to help me out, like we did some courses and everything.*

Perhaps an emphasis should be on more staff training in this area, and working collaboratively with other agencies/disciplines around the young person. However, the Boost worker had recognised this as an area needing further development:

*Mental health is very difficult because there is... There is a gap between before eighteen and afterwards, and that is one thing I put in for the targets for erm, for Boost for the next six months to do lots more training for myself and the next keyworkers in mental health, yeah.*

## 6. Recommendations

- There is a need for integration with wider services. As such, we recommend that the Boost team work more closely with other disciplines (social workers, schools and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), to give a few examples) and external stakeholders with a specific view to coordinate the support and interventions geared towards the young care-leavers.
- The Boost programme is a valuable source of support for young people, and could be more widely recognised as such. We recommend that the project is more widely advertised (as it stands young people have indicated that it is their social workers who make them aware of the programme).
- The highly relational and supportive approach of the Boost programme and the staff involved suggests that the project could be championed in local areas, allowing individual and ongoing relational support. A way forward could be to meet wider calls to develop relational approaches to working with young people in education and care sector.

As one young person indicated:

*They have helped me in a way to at least be a person to talk to, because I've never had anyone to talk to, like, I don't have any friends or anything like that.*

- The Workbook needs some rethinking, as there appears to be a slight discrepancy between the 'needs-led' approach and how the workbook is approached and worked through within this. One way forward could be to work together with a local college, leading to an accreditation of the various modules so that this can help the young people work towards clearly defined goals, as well as gaining NVQ qualification (this is already being done by other local charities, such as Two Saints).
- The role of Boost in supporting young people with stress/MH needs a bit of attention, as there appear to be mixed messages from young people as to how much support is needed here. Perhaps an emphasis should be on more staff training in this area, and working collaboratively with other agencies/disciplines around the young person.
- More funding plays a key role here, as was also highlighted by the member of staff:

*I think that it has the capacity to grow, we need to keep up with the referrals that are coming in. Therefore, we need more staff. Continuously it is going to grow. The amount*

*of people... Of course young people that are in care and they are coming out of care, that is massive. I would like another kitchen. At the Roberts centre we have a kitchen, but we need another cooker, that is something we have got to wait for. You know, for funding for that and, erm I appreciate funding is always one of those things that you have to.. You know, it's like a waiting list, you know.*

## **7. Conclusion**

This evaluation has shown the Boost programme to be a valuable source of support for young care-leavers. The project is sensitively managed, with a focus on the individual needs of the young people involved. Currently, Boost appears to play a key role in supporting young people when it comes to managing basic skills in relation to money management and housing, but there is also scope to take this further to alleviate issues to do with stress and mental health. Staff are caring and dedicated, and the young people have indicated that they appreciate this extra source of support. We would conclude by wishing the Boost programme, workers and participants well and hope this project can continue to play a valuable role in the support of young care-leavers.

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