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## **Activity Agreement Pilots – trialling different approaches to re-engaging young people not in education, employment or training (NEET): Evaluation of the 2009-10 extension**

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### **Introduction**

Activity Agreements (AA) have been piloted in eight areas of England between April 2006 and are due to end by March 2011 and were designed to help re-engage young people (aged 16 or 17) not in employment, education or training (NEET). Young people (and for a two-year period in some areas, parents) were offered a weekly allowance, in return for agreeing to a plan and completing activities to integrate them back into learning. The Activity Allowance of £30 per week (and for a two-year period in some areas, £20 per week) was payable for up to 20 weeks. A second 12-month extended period of trialling the Activity Agreement began in April 2009 (known as Pilot 3) and was accompanied by the introduction of a new policy model (Model 4). The change to the implementation was designed to increase take-up rates among vulnerable young people who were defined as NEET, as well as to test and develop approaches to support a raised participation age (RPA).

From April 2009, the delivery model was changed to focus on vulnerable young people categorised as NEET, and specifically:

- young Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants who were referred without any waiting time to the AA, although this group did not receive the financial incentive
- vulnerable groups such as young carers, looked-after young people, those working with Youth Offending teams and Social Care teams, and young people with Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities (LDD) amongst others. These vulnerable groups must have worked with another agency or the mainstream Connexions service for five weeks prior to referral to the AA.
- long-term NEET young people who had spent 26 weeks without participating in employment, education or training, and for whom the process of engagement with the AA could take place between weeks 21 and 25 of being NEET.

## Key findings

- The AA tested the effectiveness of offering a combination of measures, namely financial incentives, intensive support and individualised learning to re-engage the NEET group.
- Financial incentives, such as the AA weekly payment made to young people, acted as a **powerful engagement tool**.
- The AA was successful in pioneering innovative and flexible approaches to learning and learning activities. As the AA moved into Pilot 3, the demand for **individualised programmes of learning** appeared to increase, in order to meet the complex needs of vulnerable and long-term inactive groups of young people.
- Due consideration will need to be given within RPA planning to the **high level of competence** among operational staff that is needed to work with the hardest to reach and the hardest to help groups of young people.
- Within Pilot 3, the majority of AA participants had entered via the **six weeks vulnerable category rule**, and a significant number of programme entrants fell into more than one of the approved categories. The shift towards focusing the AA largely on vulnerable groups of young people had led most pilot areas to undertake more in-depth assessments of young people's needs prior to them entering the programme. These assessments focused on their learning abilities and needs, as well as a risk assessment of their behaviour and conduct.
- Young people entering the AA under the **26-week rule** were long-term NEET and were described as being the most difficult group to engage and support, since they were often entrenched in inactivity. While young people in the vulnerable groups category had a specific barrier or barriers to overcome, the long-term NEET group had often tried or rejected all other types of intervention.
- **JSA rules for under 18s** and access to the AA were too dependent upon both local interpretation of JSA entitlement rules and the ability of Jobcentre Plus (JC+) staff and AA managers/advisers to forge local partnership working arrangements. Significant differences existed between local areas in terms of their success in establishing effective and consistent working arrangements.
- Respondents welcomed the flexibility that the **10 per cent rule** offered them, since it provided the opportunity for young people with specific needs who fell outside the prescribed list of vulnerable categories, to access the programme without having to wait a further 20 weeks.

## Methodology

The research consisted of two elements:

- **Implementation studies:** The implementation studies provided a detailed, longitudinal and qualitative account of the perspectives of different stakeholders involved in the delivery of AA. Two roundtable discussions with Connexions advisers and managers who were involved in the delivery of the AA across the lifetime of the pilot were conducted. In addition, between three and seven stakeholders were interviewed in each pilot area (depending on the size and complexity of each pilot), using a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews.

- **Case studies:** Three themed case studies built on the strategic overview provided by the implementation studies and focused on:
  - the interaction between AA, JSA and other financial entitlements
  - young people with Learning Disabilities and/or Difficulties (LDD)
  - perceived additional value of the AA.

### **Local management and delivery arrangements**

The targeted nature of the AA in particular on young people from vulnerable groups and JSA recipients led to an increased reliance on referrals from other support agencies, such as YOS (Youth Offending Service), Leaving Care teams, housing departments, teenage pregnancy/ parents support services, Sure Start centres, youth services and social services. All pilot areas reported that this had been achieved by extending and strengthening their links with local support agencies. The degree to which partnership working existed between AA staff and specific support agencies varied both within and between pilot areas and was **heavily dependent upon local collaborative working arrangements**.

### **AA activities**

The focusing of the AA on vulnerable groups, JSA recipients and young people who were long-term NEET, resulted in a shift in the types of activities that young people completed as part of their programmes. The increased personal and social needs of many AA participants led to a greater emphasis on the intensive support offered by PAs, as well as an 'individualisation' of many activities offered to young people.

### **The local stakeholders' perspective**

Pilot 3 had not significantly impacted on local stakeholders, since, in the case of many agencies and providers, a focus on meeting the needs of young people from vulnerable groups had developed through the introduction of Pilot 2/Model 3 delivery. Stakeholders who had become involved in the AA during the course of Pilot 3 were positive about the AA delivery model. Some respondents, in particular providers, would have welcomed stronger links within the 'AA provider group', in order to establish a network to exchange ideas and expertise.

Where stakeholders worked more closely with the AA and understood the entry criteria, intervention at six weeks NEET for vulnerable groups was welcomed. Some concern was expressed about the much later intervention (at 26 weeks NEET) for those young people without previously identified vulnerabilities. Stakeholders felt that young people would become entrenched in inactivity and much harder to help as a result of later intervention.

Providers continued to be positive about the AA offer, and there were numerous examples of how activities had been tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable young people who were NEET. There was a perception that Pilot 3 had supported groups of young people with more complex barriers than were present in previous cohorts. Among providers, there appeared to be an increased focus on providing accreditation to young people for the activities that they had completed.

There was some evidence of increased collaboration having resulted from the introduction of Pilot 3, which built upon links established through Pilot 2/Model 3

delivery. However, some support agencies noted that their working relationships with Connexions could be further strengthened, particularly where there had been changes to staffing within Connexions.

### **Evidence from the themed case studies**

- The evidence suggests that the AA supported **young people with a range of LDDs**. While finding suitable activities had been challenging, it had been possible to establish specialist support in most cases.
- While the desires and ambitions of young people with LDD did not vary greatly from young people participating in earlier AA delivery models, it was apparent that school experiences had often been difficult. The flexibility of the AA and regular reviews with AA advisers appeared to be well structured, which enabled young people with LDD to develop confidence and self-esteem and to cope better with their conditions.
- AA pilot areas welcomed the inclusion of a separate target to include **young people on JSA** within Pilot 3. It was reported that young people on the AA and in receipt of JSA comprised between 7 and 11 per cent of the Pilot 3 AA cohort. Most JSA recipients did not remain on the AA for long periods, with the average length of stay on the programme being approximately 10 weeks.
- The evidence suggested that the focus on vulnerable young people within Pilot 3 made a clearer case for **the additional value of the AA**, through its targeting of specific groups of young people for support. Agencies often viewed the AA as a 'last option' since it did not directly contribute to NEET reduction targets. This acted to ensure that only those who would not readily engage through other means were referred.
- Providing support for transport costs was felt to be a vital element of AA operation. This encouraged young people to use public transport and to travel outside their normal boundaries.
- Accessing literacy and numeracy skills development was a key concern for AA delivery. Whether this was possible at no cost to the pilot was highly variable within and between pilot areas.

### **Conclusions and looking forward to the RPA<sup>1</sup>**

The delivery of AA Pilot 3 built upon the knowledge, skills and experience that had developed since the initiative's inception in 2006. By focusing AA delivery on young people in vulnerable groups, those in receipt of JSA and young people who were long-term NEET, this delivery model had:

- concentrated resources on those most in need
- simplified entry points and entry criteria
- strengthened links between AA delivery and other support agencies, thereby engendering inter-agency working, and promoted the sharing of resources, including data sharing

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<sup>1</sup> The Raising of the Participation Age (RPA) policy will require all young people in England to remain in some form of accredited education or training to the age of 17 by 2013 and to the age of 18 by 2015.

- recognised that huge variation exists within and between localities with regard to young people's entitlement to and receipt of benefit, and in terms of how programmes such as the AA were received by JC+ staff
- identified that vulnerable young people cannot be classified as a homogeneous group, as they comprise a number of sub-groups, which often have differing needs
- created an increasingly 'individualised' initiative, which recognised that young people in vulnerable groups require an intensive and personal approach to re-engagement.

The piloting of AA, including Pilot 3, highlighted some key issues which will need to be addressed in order to accommodate the needs of young people in the NEET group, including vulnerable young people, within RPA planning.

### **Financial incentives**

The AA payment comprised two components: firstly, the weekly payment that was made to the young person, who had successfully completed their activities, and secondly, a Discretionary Fund (DF), which was managed by pilot managers and advisers to purchase provision, equipment and transport costs, dependent upon individual needs. Financial incentives also supported mapping and tracking of young people within the NEET group. Findings from the AA evaluation suggested that introducing means-testing would be detrimental to the engagement of vulnerable groups, since an EMA-style application procedure lacks the immediate responsiveness which an AA-style allowance offered.

The **interaction between any proposed post-16 education and training allowance** and other **benefit entitlements** should to be fully explored. The AA evaluation highlighted glaring inconsistencies in the application of regulations with regard to young people's ability to claim benefits, in particular Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA) and Income Support (IS).

### **Individualised approach to learning**

The evaluation evidence highlighted that post-RPA there would be a continued demand for a programme such as the AA, which would be required for young people who failed to 'fit into' the mainstream offer. Aligned to this issue is how a programme such as the AA would fit into **foundation learning**. Concerns surrounded the funding of provision, which appeared to relegate programmes such as the AA to pre-vocational programmes, regardless of a young person's needs.

Finally, valuable lessons were felt to have been learnt from the AA approach to brokering provision. This was considered to be important not only for the RPA agenda but for the **commissioning role** that local authorities assumed for post-16 education and training from April 2010.

## Intensive support

It was widely reported that AA advisers<sup>2</sup> needed additional skills and competences to those demonstrated by PAs in mainstream Connexion Services. These included highly developed counselling skills, the ability to manage financial and management information (MI) data requirements, and brokering and negotiating skills (in order to fulfil the requirement of brokering provision to meet individual needs). It was also felt that, given the nature of the target groups in Pilot 3, the demands made on AA advisers had extended their role in terms of offering intensive support to young people and offering an increasingly 'individualised' approach.

## Being called 'NEET'

Evidence from the evaluation of the AA pilots would suggest that measures need to be in place which:

- **define vulnerable groups** (including long-term inactive young people) within the NEET population
- offer **intensive personalised programmes**, which include a financial incentive to secure their engagement and participation, impartial personal support and tailored learning over a specified period of time
- **facilitate access** to mainstream education, employment and training options.

As well as targeting this option at 16- and 17-year-olds, due consideration needs to be given to the growing volume of **18-year-olds** who increasingly fall into the NEET category. Finally, the needs of **young people who drop out** of education, employment or training warrant attention, as they may comprise a significant proportion of the RPA population who will require on-going monitoring and support.

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<sup>2</sup> Pilot areas recruited staff as dedicated personal advisers (PAs) or key workers (KWs) to work with young people.

### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>  
Further information about this research can be obtained from Susanna Greenwood  
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.