



Where Autism
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Moving Forward: A flexible pathway to employment

The Moving Forward project is funded by the Big Lottery Fund until 2017 and provides a flexible and person centred pathway toward employment and related activity for young autistic people aged between 16 and 25 years and living in West Central Scotland.

The project began in 2011 and is delivered by a team of 6 staff from The National Autistic Society Scotland. It aims to develop participants:

- social confidence
- employability
- independent living skills.

By their own admission many younger autistic individuals will not be ready for work when leaving high school or university. The diverse nature of the spectrum means that a variety of methods are required to identify the type of opportunity that is right for each individual, and to best prepare them for a successful transition.

Unlike mainstream employability programmes, Moving Forward offers a range of autism friendly interventions over flexible timescales, and the opportunity to switch between interventions as necessary.

Group work

The Moving Forward project consists of two modules, “Building independence” and “First steps to employment”. The modules are delivered over a number of weeks and in small groups.

Group work reduces the sense of isolation that many autistic people experience by providing an opportunity to meet with and learn from others who have faced similar challenges. With team working being an essential requirement for many modern workplaces, group sessions also provide an ideal grounding for future employment.

Group members are given the opportunity to discuss and research various careers to help them make informed decisions about the pathway that is right for them.

In these sessions the Moving Forward Team, 50% of whom are themselves autistic, also discuss:

- the positive attributes that autistic people can bring to the workplace and wider society
- the merits of disclosing autism to an employer and how to do so effectively
- some of the issues that can arise within employment, and advice on developing a range of coping techniques

By ensuring participants have an awareness of strategies that may be helpful to them as individuals, we are increasing each young person's confidence in their own ability to cope with situations as they arise.

Practical experience

Work placements provide an opportunity for young autistic people to try their preferred area of employment within an autism friendly environment. Placements also allow individuals a chance to test coping strategies in real situations and provide the Moving Forward team with a very useful insight as to whether further reasonable adjustments may be necessary for future work opportunities.

Prior to the commencement of placements, and always with the consent of the individual, the project team will deliver an autism awareness training session to line managers and immediate colleagues. These sessions are key to ensuring that all parties are best prepared and that the experience is a positive one for all those involved.

One of the main reasons behind the success of the project has been our links with local companies and organisations. Many of these links have developed often as a result of a personal connection that a senior member of staff in these organisations has with autism. However over the course of the project it has become easier to develop links as the awareness of autism and acceptance of typical autistic traits has increased.

Job search

Young autistic people who feel ready to look for work are supported to identify and apply for suitable opportunities. Those who feel that voluntary work, training, or further education is the right choice for them at this point receive similar assistance.

The team ensure that individuals are fully aware of all relevant information before applying for any opportunity. Project staff also liaise with employers to ensure that the young people we support have clarity around the recruitment process. If appropriate we will recommend any necessary reasonable adjustments to employers for online assessments and interviews.

Mentoring

For some young people a longer period of one-on-one support is required. Every year there are at least 30 people supported by one of our Volunteer Mentors.

Often we see examples of young people who read a job description and know that they can do all that is being asked. They apply and get the job, but they weren't prepared for how closely they would be working with their new colleagues.

Each young person in a situation like this one would be paired with an individual mentor whom they would meet with on a weekly basis. Meetings can take place in a variety of locations.

Sometimes they will take place in a quiet coffee shop and allow for time to chat about the issues the person is facing. At other times it may be that the young person will go to the cinema with their mentor to help them de-stress and enable them to feel rested enough to face the challenges that employment presents.

A flexible approach

Some of the people we support make use of each intervention on offer, while others may only require job search support or some group work. The correct pathway is determined through a combination of our application form and an initial informal chat that each young person will have with a member of staff.

It is important that projects such as this one are not rigid in their delivery. The model that we employ is one of flexibility and understanding. It has supported over 500 young people, 60% of whom have gone on to positive destinations such as work, volunteering or higher education.

Case study

David achieved a degree in Design Engineering in 2013. He was keen to develop a career in product design but lacked the confidence to pursue employment opportunities. David joined the Moving Forward project during 2015 and took part in group based training aimed at building his social confidence.

As it was also important for David to find the right setting to get some practical work experience, the team identified a placement opportunity with MAKLAB, a creative space and 3D printing lab. David began his placement there in August 2015. Feeling very much at home within this space and keen to continue attending beyond the duration of his placement, David became a volunteer with MAKLAB in December 2015. To date, David has designed a board game that helps children learn addition and subtraction, extendable garden shears and a multi-function pen. He is currently developing a tool book!

The team have also assisted David to build his independent travel skills to and from the studio and are currently looking into suitable opportunities to help David convert his practical experience into paid employment.

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Further information

[The Moving Forward project](#)

[Support for employers](#)