



“As strategic leaders and influencers of further education and skills policy, we strongly advocate the active engagement of FE colleges, not just as local providers, but in the policymaking process too, bringing their expertise to ensure that the local context is reflected in the provision offered.”

Frank McLoughlin CBE
Chair, 157 Group

Contact us

The 157 Group Limited
P O Box 58147

London
SW8 9AF

www.157group.co.uk
info@157group.co.uk

Chair

Frank McLoughlin CBE
Principal, City and Islington College

Executive director

Lynne Sedgmore CBE

Our patrons

Sir Andrew Foster
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Ref 157G-052

A Neet way to earn the respect of teenagers who had given up on learning

With no qualifications, no job, no prospects, and no confidence, teenager Kaya Shrewsbury was facing a bleak future – until she discovered a unique project run by West Nottinghamshire College.

Her negative experience of learning and her school days had been marked by poor attendance, poor behaviour and frequent exclusions.

That changed when she was signposted to the Ashfield Project, a centre dedicated to re-engaging and supporting Neets – the term used for young people not in education, employment or training.

Nationally, around one in 10 young people aged between 16 and 18 are classified as Neet. With the Neet rate in Mansfield and Ashfield among the highest in Nottinghamshire, the college has taken a leading role in tackling the problem head-on.

It has developed links with Connexions, youth offending teams, drug and alcohol services, and childhood and adolescent mental health

services locally, to provide support for young people in the two districts.

Kaya was one of 63 students who walked through the doors when the Ashfield Project opened in 2007. She enrolled on a level 1 fashion and design course, and in a few weeks was exceeding all expectations.

She progressed to mainstream provision at the college's site in Mansfield, where she studied a level 2 (GCSE-equivalent) clothing and textiles course. She is now on a level 3 (A-level equivalent) fashion and design course and is planning her next move, deciding between work and university.

She said, “I arrived at Ashfield with nothing, and left with qualifications, confidence and self-esteem. Looking back, it shocks me how much my life

Kaya Shrewsbury



has changed and how different things are. I was surprised by the change in my mindset. I soon found I was enjoying studying and once I was getting good marks and praise, I was so happy that it just spurred me on.

“I achieved a number of small awards during my time at Ashfield, made new friends and began to trust in people more. The best thing was that I began to believe in myself again.”

The college created a vocational curriculum designed to appeal to this cohort of young people, offering interactive media; hairdressing and beauty therapy; childcare; motor vehicle maintenance; and business administration; as well as fashion and clothing.

“These courses lent themselves to workshop-style delivery, enhanced by theory sessions taught in a practical environment,

to give young people a different flavour of what education was actually like,” said Sarah Le-Good, centre manager at the Ashfield Project.

“They have access to the very best equipment. That is not the norm. Generally, more challenging learners get second-rate resources. At Ashfield, we provide fully fitted specialist workshops, treatment rooms, training salons and an Apple Macintosh™ IT suite.

“The pay-off is that we have a centre that young people respect. We don’t have vandalism or graffiti or litter dropped on site.”

The centre has attracted more than 250 learners since opening, most coming with a complex range of issues. These include exclusion from school; home education following severe bullying; homelessness or living in supported accommodation; teenage pregnancy; domestic violence; previous drug and alcohol misuse; and juvenile offending.

In its first year, 49 students successfully completed their programme at Ashfield. The majority progressed to the next level, and three entered employment. The second year was even more successful, with most of the centre’s 99 learners successfully completing their programme and progressing into work or further training at the main college sites. This year, 116 students are set for the same achievement.

Class sizes do not exceed 13 students and the project provides a free bus service and free breakfast. There is a later start time of 09.30 for students with domestic responsibilities, including family or parenting commitments.

Sarah explained that it was not enough to enrol students on a programme and hope for the best. They must be nurtured, encouraged and given the right support. “We select the best teaching staff, keen to work with challenging young people,” she said.

“We also appointed one full-time learner coach to deal with issues inside the college and to ensure the students are academically up-to-date, and two full-time learner support service coordinators (LSSC) to deal with issues outside the college.

“The LSSCs do a lot of work with them around anger management and changing patterns of behaviour. Because of the issues they face outside the college, some students develop behaviour that distracts them from what they need to do. Rather than behaving and achieving, they became angry, abusive and aggressive. We support them to break that cycle.”

Reviews and case conferences are held regularly with support services such as Connexions and youth offending teams, with the young person staying at the centre of that process.

“A lot of our students are looked after and in the care of the local authority, so we work with their care providers, foster parents and their social workers,” said Sarah.

“The impact is threefold: firstly on the young person, who starts to become engaged and interested in their learning; secondly, their behaviour changes inside and outside college and they tend to be less angry, aggressive and challenging at home.

“The third impact is on the wider community. The centre is situated near to housing and we have a group of young people on our site who are well received by the local community, who know and understand what we are doing.

“We talk with the students about social responsibility and volunteering. They have worked with the local council and at the local park in planting trees and helping to prepare the bowling green. Ten young people gave up their Easter holiday to do that, with staff working alongside them.

“We have just taken over a small strip of land adjacent to our site, where we are looking to create a community garden. We plan to grow vegetables on raised beds, which we will donate to the community.”

Sarah said other colleges and local authorities provided similar programmes to Ashfield, but not in stand-alone centres.

“We have been asked about inclusion, but unless somebody is ready to be included, they will opt out. What Ashfield provides is getting young people ready to be included and progress.”

The driving force behind the Ashfield Project, located in the former coal-mining community of Sutton-in-Ashfield, is West Nottinghamshire College’s principal and chief executive, Asha Khemka OBE.

She is now trying to obtain funding to open a Neet centre in Mansfield, just a few miles away, which would offer a complementary curriculum in areas not delivered at Ashfield, such as catering and hospitality, sport, and construction. A site has been earmarked and the centre will cost around £750,000 to establish.

Asha is determined to support young people in the two towns where the predominantly white, working class communities have been hit hard by the collapse of the mining, textile and manufacturing industries. Just 4 per cent of local people have ethnic minority backgrounds.

To support this work, Asha set up the Inspire and Achieve Foundation, which aims to organise volunteering, mentoring, work-shadowing and university student-shadowing schemes, and to develop a programme of overseas placements to broaden the horizons of young people.



Asha Khemka OBE

Asha said, “The UK is facing a very serious issue of teenagers with poor skills, low aspirations and no prospects of employment; particularly in communities that continually suffer from unemployment and poverty.

“I set up Inspire and Achieve to raise the aspirations of teenagers from regeneration areas and help them discover their true potential. By reaching out to these young people, we can restore their self-belief, help them overcome obstacles and break the cycle of disadvantage.

“My ultimate aim is to further reduce the number of Neets and provide the life-enhancing opportunities these young people so richly deserve.”

Leadership of locality

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on locality in government policy and on the need for public services to be integrated at a local level and adapted to suit their local context.

Members of the 157 Group, 28 of the largest and most influential further education colleges in England, play a leading role in delivering further education in their localities.

Since colleges represent by far the largest concentration of frontline professional expertise in relation to further education in any locality, they are well-placed to help shape provision to meet the needs of individuals, local employers and all sections of the community, using their skills and experience to find solutions for their area that reflect national priorities.

Large colleges are accustomed to working with universities, voluntary organisations, local authorities and other bodies to help ensure that their local communities have access to the high-quality education and training they need.

Their leadership role could be formalised to ensure that providers are fully engaged with, and influence, regional and sectoral planning processes.

Working with partners and relevant bodies, colleges have a valuable role to play in:

- collaborative planning and delivery to optimise provision in curriculum areas and geographic locations, taking local priorities and circumstances into account
- minimising administration costs so that most of the funding reaches the front line for services that benefit local learners, businesses and the economy
- exerting influence to ensure that funding reflects learner choice, and a robust system provides accountability for public funds
- helping to assess and articulate future demand.

This case study is one of six showing examples of how 157 Group member colleges are leading the provision of education and training for young people and adults of all ages in their locality.

The 157 Group policy paper, *Learning and skills needs local leadership*, is available to download in PDF format from the 157 Group website: www.157group.co.uk

About the 157 Group

The 157 Group was formed in 2006 in response to paragraph 157 of Sir Andrew Foster's report on the future of further education colleges, in which he argued that principals of large successful colleges should play a greater role in policymaking.

157 Group members

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- Birmingham Metropolitan College
- Bournemouth and Poole College
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- City and Islington College
- City of Bristol College
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Sarah Le-Good, centre manager, West Nottinghamshire College's Ashfield Project