



## A Potential Diamond

*A new mentoring scheme in the Gatwick Diamond area to support unemployed people with learning disabilities or Asperger's Syndrome with their job search activities.*

by Richard Lamplough, Wont Ever Be Ltd.

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## Links on You Tube to support this report

[Blake Edwards' video CV](#)  
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**Please note:** all surnames of the young people taking part in A Potential Diamond have been changed apart those of Blake and Sean who have given permission for their real names to be given.



# a potential diamond

[apotentialdiamond.org](http://apotentialdiamond.org) (website coming soon)

## A Potential Diamond

*A new mentoring scheme in the Gatwick Diamond area to support unemployed people with learning disabilities or Asperger's Syndrome with their job search activities.*

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## Background

Only 7% of people with learning disabilities have any sort of paid employment.

In a perfect world, when any young person with additional needs leaves college there would be a place for them at a local specialist support agency who could pick up on the good work the college started and bridge the gap between college and paid employment.

But we don't live in a perfect world.

The truth is, in 2013, if you are a college leaver with learning disabilities or autism and you are eligible for adult care services you **might** be able to receive job search support from a specialist agency funded by your local authority. But this service might be many miles away from where you live and chances the agency will be over-subscribed and have huge waiting lists.

Or it might be that you are considered "too able" to get help from the specialist support

agency funded by your local authority. If this is the case, like other young people, you will be required to attend Jobcentre Plus where you will be referred either to the *Work Programme* or *Work Choice*. Whilst you would hope this is a good thing, it's widely acknowledged that these schemes are yet to prove they are providing an effective service for disabled people.

But let's not get swamped in this negative thinking - I want to step back in time a little.

Years ago there were no such things as *specialist* support agencies and precious few government-sponsored programmes, and yet some people with learning disabilities or autism got jobs. **How did this happen?**

They got their jobs through what could be called *natural support*. Somebody I know, Kevin, got his job this way at a large London hotel in the early 1980s. A neighbour also worked at the hotel, knew the hotel needed staff, knew Kevin very well and knew he was hard-working, enthusiastic and reliable.

The neighbour helped Kevin with the application form and took him along to a group interview. It made no difference to the hotel that Kevin's literacy skills were virtually non-existent. He was employed to carry out manual work. Writing wasn't his strong point but manual work was. His managers knew this and when he was required to fill in paperwork the personnel department helped him.

Kevin still works in this hotel.

For some people with learning disabilities or autism, finding *natural support* through extended family, friends and neighbours to help them with their job search in the way that Kevin got help is possible. For other people, finding **any** natural support might be very challenging. **A Potential Diamond** is designed for these people.

## Summary

**A Potential Diamond** is an initiative that matches up learning disabled or autistic job seekers with *job search mentors* at local employers. The support each one receives won't quite be *natural*, as described in Kevin's story on the previous page, but it will be as close as it can be.



The first six months of the project have been used as a pilot and the work has taken place, predominantly, in Crawley. For this time I have funded the initiative myself, drawing on advice from Central Sussex College, West Sussex County Council, Gatwick Diamond Business and training consultancy Paradigm.

I am confident that the results achieved in 2013 and 2014 will show potential investors that the initiative can be extended to the entire Gatwick Diamond area linking in approximately 15 colleges and, potentially, hundreds of job seekers and mentors. Who knows, from this stage perhaps we can look at running the scheme nationally.

At the time of writing (July 2013), I have just completed working with a group of students with learning disabilities or Asperger's Syndrome at Central Sussex College, Crawley. My original plan was to make video CVs for as many of them as possible. Video CVs are an innovative type of CV ideal for bringing out the strengths and personalities of people with learning disabilities. From my initial class of ten, **five** have now left college and I am still working with four of them.

Whilst it's these four young people that are my focus through the summer, I want to extend the scheme to more students and more colleges from September. When my new students meet me for the first time they will, most likely, be slightly confused as to my role. I will explain to them that I am **not** a college tutor, I am **not** a Job Centre Plus employee and I do **not** work for a specialist support agency. So who, or what, am I?

This question proved slightly problematic to my Crawley students and whilst I can't be totally sure they all understood the concept of a *natural supporter*, I was happy enough to be described by one of them as "That slightly crazy bloke who's helping us make video CVs so we can get a job."

A pretty good description, all in all.

## My approach to employers

The number of students I work with this year and next will determine how many mentors I need. Currently, I am networking with employers in the Gatwick Diamond area to see if they are willing to put forward one of their employees who might be interested in becoming a mentor. In time, this person will take over my role as the *natural supporter* but he or she will only be working with one person as opposed to five.

I want the relationship between the two to be as relaxed, informal and "non-professional" as possible. Having said that, I appreciate the mentors will need some initial guidance (I prefer this word to *training*) so I will run a day's workshop looking at issues such as:

- What are learning disabilities?
- What is autism?
- What are the key issues faced by people with learning disabilities and autism?
- What boundaries need to be set when mentoring somebody with learning disabilities or autism?
- How does somebody with learning disabilities or autism cope with benefit issues and how can Jobcentre Plus help with this?
- What specialist support agencies might be able to provide additional support and how does the young person access these?

The start point will be the mentor meeting the young person for the first time. The long term goal is that through the scheme the mentor will help the young person secure a job interview with a local employer that, ultimately, will lead to the offer of a paid job.

Each mentor will find the natural pace for the relationship to work best. For the first meeting the mentor and young person will get together, probably in a local cafe, and won't even talk about job search activities. Instead, they'll find common interests to chat about... the football over the weekend, the latest high street fashions, or the most recent episode of *Britain's Got Talent*.

By the third meeting I envisage the best location will be the offices of the mentor's employer. This will give the young person a chance to see a *working office* in action and to soak up an atmosphere of **real** work. The two will sit together, sharing a PC to do the job search, with the mentor helping make those all-important phone calls to try to secure job interviews.

### **What commitment is needed by the mentor's employer?**

Initially, I need employers to release their employee for the *Guidance Day*. Whilst I haven't set in stone the time commitment after this, I believe, for the scheme to be effective, the mentor needs to spend an average of **three hours a fortnight** working with the young person; I will, of course, agree a *realistic* time scale with the host employer for the duration of the scheme. This is likely to be a minimum of three months and a maximum of a year.

### **What will employers gain from A Potential Diamond?**

I have worked with people with learning disabilities and autism for twenty years and every day I learn something new.

I have become a better listener. When I have guided someone to make informed choices my thinking has become more *strategic* and more focused. When I've needed to explain things with perfect clarity, not only have I needed to check the person has understood what I've said, I've needed to find strategies (without patronising them) to ask them to show me **how** and **what** they've understood.



Working with people with learning disabilities and autism has made me a more *balanced* person, a better manager, a better negotiator and a more skilful strategic planner. These are the sort of benefits I will expect the mentors to soak up and apply to their working lives. What employer wouldn't want this from their staff?

### **What to do if you're interested**

I would like to hear from you if:

- Your organisation is based in the Gatwick Diamond area and you have an employee who you think would like to become a mentor.
- You are, or are not, based in the Gatwick Diamond area, you endorse the ethos behind the scheme and can pass this information on to business colleagues or friends in the Gatwick Diamond area.
- You live or work in the Gatwick Diamond area and would like to become a mentor.
- You like the ethos behind the scheme, cannot help directly at this point but would like to be kept informed on progress.
- You believe your organisation might be able to help fund the initiative or support the project in kind with business advice, website design or marketing expertise.

**The following pages detail activity from early March to late July 2013.**

*As well as running A Potential Diamond, Richard Lamplough manages the **South East Employment Network** sponsored by various local authorities and **Aspirations For Life** in partnership with Paradigm.*

*He can be contacted by calling 077389 41415 or emailing info@wonteverbe.co.uk*



## **My project objectives from early March to late July 2013 were:**

- that I worked with approximately 10 students with learning disabilities or Asperger's Syndrome, due to leave college in the Summer of 2013,
- that I got to know them as individuals, and be viewed as their **mentor** rather than a college member of staff or employment support professional,
- that I ran video workshops with the aim of making *video CVs* for as many of them as possible,
- that the students fully participated in the video workshops, led the way in making their own CVs, used the equipment and learnt about filming and editing techniques,
- that I met their parents, again in my role as mentor, to see if I could find some *natural* mentoring support for each student in the period as they left college, signed up with Job Centre Plus and began to look for paid work,

*(natural mentoring support covers people such as siblings/cousins, family friends, neighbours or local business people who know the family)*

- that for those where there was no natural mentoring support I create some by finding mentors from within the local business community,
- that these *natural mentors* and *business mentors* take over my mentoring role, help the young people create some structure to their lives and support them to apply for jobs,
- that the mentors organise voluntary placements with local businesses for those young people not ready for paid work, monitor these and use them as a springboard to help them apply for paid work when the time is right,
- that I'm always on hand to support the mentors with any issues,
- that I promote the initiative as much as possible within the Gatwick Diamond area and investigate how I might attract funding to make the project sustainable in the future.

## **Time spent on project**

4 hours meeting time with Nigel Colgate, head of department at Central Sussex College, over the length of the project working on the practicalities of the scheme.

4 hours working with tutors over the length of the project (including filming one of them).

33 hours working with the students spread over 11 days. My sessions took place most Fridays from 15.03.13 to 28.06.13 (term times only). The first session would be 9.10am to 10.15am and the second session 10.45am to 12noon

Whilst Nigel and I talked about the possibility of running additional sessions on Friday afternoons this didn't end up happening but I did, from time to time, spend break times with the students in the café area talking about their video CVs

40 hours administration including telephone and email conversations with colleagues, employers, other professionals and parents.

20 hours at networking events with local employers.

5 hours meeting support professionals in West Sussex.

6 hours meeting parents.

30 hours working on the videos themselves (mainly Blake Edwards' video CV) at my office.

*The only time element not included above is my travel time. I live in Wandsworth, South West London, and driving to Crawley takes about an hour and fifteen minutes in moderate traffic conditions.*

To make best use of my time, (and travel time) whenever possible I would spend the whole day in West Sussex. A typical day might look like:

7.45am:	<i>leave home,</i>
9am to 12noon:	<i>run sessions with students,</i>
12noon to 12.30pm:	<i>travel to employers' networking lunch,</i>
12.30pm to 2.15pm:	<i>networking lunch,</i>
2.15pm to 3pm:	<i>travel to a parent's house.</i>
3pm to 4pm:	<i>meeting with parent and student,</i>
4pm to 5.15pm:	<i>travel time back home,</i>
5.15 to 6.15:	<i>project administration.</i>

## Project Report

In mid March the college identified 12 students who might be interested in taking part in the scheme: Blake Edwards, Jay Leveson, Richard Osborne, Sean O'Brien, Ben Fai Lieukheer, Anhar Awan, Hetal Shaikh, Guy Stocker, Max Waugh, Tim Gray, Aiden Mayfield and Alex MacPherson.

Regretfully, Aiden and Alex showed no interest whatsoever in the project despite my considerable support to get them involved and dropped out after two sessions each. It's possible Aiden's issues revolved around his Asperger's; he found the change in routine too hard to handle.

This left me with 10 students all of whom enjoyed the sessions very much. It soon became apparent to me that it was over-ambitious to expect to make video CVs for all of them. This was due to the fact that there were too many students for the time needed and also for some *personality reasons*. What I mean by this is that making an effective CV for somebody who is very quiet and withdrawn, whilst not impossible, will take about three times as long as it takes to make one for someone with an outgoing personality.

As I filmed them the students I began to appreciate how difficult it was for most of them to understand the overall *context* of the link between college and paid work. Following school (compulsory for them, like all of us, of course) Central Sussex College was **done** to them. They probably didn't choose to go there; they were told that's where they would be for two or three years. Now, they presumed employment, if they were lucky, would be **done** to them too, probably shelf-stacking. Some understood that a period with a specialist support agency might be **done** to them as well, in that period after college but before getting paid work.

There are so many things that students **without** learning disabilities take for granted at college that most young people with learning disabilities rarely imagine. Here are just three examples:

*They can choose what sort of college courses they take in preparation for what sort of career choices they make when they leave college two or three years later.*

*They have the communication skills and travelling skills to keep in touch and meet up with college friends in the evenings, at weekends, and during holidays.*

*They recognise that when they leave college they don't, necessarily, have to look for work immediately. They might, for example, want to go travelling for six months or a year.*

This last point had significant resonance for me. When I explained to the students the concept of a *gap-year* travelling they looked at me as if I had come from another planet. Only one of them had been to Europe and this was on a family holiday. Most of them had never been outside Sussex except for a few school trips to London.

"If you went travelling for six months, you would probably need some support." I said. "Any ideas who you'd ask to go with you?"

My question was met with blank faces. Finally, Richard said: "Maybe, my brother?"

"Good choice." I replied.



*Jay, Anhar, Max, Hetal and Tim.*

When I started the course almost all the ten students were convinced that they would be leaving college in the summer. But half way through the project some told me that they would be staying on; this would have been their choice, their parents' choice, or both. At this point Nigel and I made the decision to cut the attendees down to five; to work with only those who **definitely** would be leaving. These were: Blake, Jay, Richard, Sean and Ben.

Telling the five students who weren't leaving college that they had to return to what they normally did on a Friday morning wasn't very easy and there's no doubt the sessions that morning felt a little *flat*. But I always made a point of chatting to those no longer taking part at coffee breaks and they most still felt involved. Some of them even made guest appearances in cameo roles on Blake's video CV. I also assured them that if I continued with the project for the 2013/2014 year and that if they were leaving in the summer of 2014 I could make video CVs with them too.

For those students staying on my course (the college leavers) letters were sent from the college to their parents introducing them to me, explaining my role and requesting that I come round to meet them. At this meeting I would explain how I could play a role, in supporting their children with their employment aspirations.

Appointments were made with parents of four out of the five, although not without some difficulty. I needed to intervene in the communication between Blake and his mum and Sean and his mum for these meetings to go ahead and had it not been for Nigel's intervention with Jay's mum, this meeting might not ever have taken place. These three families face considerable social disadvantage, as was to become clear to me later.

Ben's parents replied to their letter with a polite turn-down. They thanked us, but said they didn't need to meet me because once he had left college Ben would be going to his local authority's in-house specialist employment support agency for people with learning disabilities.



Ben

Whilst I cannot say for certain, I am pretty confident we were turned down because Ben's parents didn't grasp the *concept* of the offer. I believe that Ben should be able to go to the specialist employment support agency, but why not have the support of a local mentor too? The two aren't mutually exclusive! This is a clear example of services being **done** to people with learning disabilities. I am 95% positive that Ben would not have been given the choice as to whether or not he now goes to the specialist agency.

This particular agency have not visited Central Sussex College in the last year. They have not met Ben there, observed him in structured learning situations or seen him engage with his peers. This, in my opinion, is a chance missed. I believe that across the UK there is still much room for improvement concerning interaction between supported employment agencies and their local colleges.

## **Recommendations for future good practice**

All my students understood that Job Centre Plus was the place where "you get a job". However, none of them understood the *process* of how you move from *support from College* to *support from Job Centre Plus*.

I believe colleges across the country need to take more responsibility for providing more education in this regard and Job Centre Plus need to be more adaptable in the way they process applications for people with additional needs. They also need new accessible publicity so that colleges, people with learning disabilities and their parents/carers can understand how the system works.

It's too late to change the *Journey To Job Centre Plus Experience* for Blake, Sean, Jay, Richard and Ben. However it's an ideal time to change it for students with learning disabilities or autism leaving college in June 2014, backed up in a change in direction from Job Centre Plus.

## **Recommendations for future good practice for colleges**

Colleges throughout the UK need to identify the students enrolled in September 2013 who will definitely (or almost certainly) be leaving in June 2014.

These students need to attend a bespoke course, one session a week, with a title on the lines of *Job Centre Plus Matters*, starting in September and carrying on right up until the end of June.

The early modules of this course need to look at the basics of how young people have *money to live*.

### **Session 1 could be structured:**

- What is child benefit?
- How much child benefit do your parents get to help raise you?
- From this money do they give you any as "pocket money" especially if you're helping with odd jobs around the house?

This session might be contentious for some parents once they find out that the college are telling their children financial details they might have previously kept hidden from them, but it's vital if people with learning disabilities are to understand the overall picture of how they are supported to live. It provides the foundation for them to build their knowledge on how life changes once their child benefit comes to an end.

## **Session 2 could be structured:**

- At the age of 18 or 19 your child benefit stops and, if you have left college, you will be able to claim Job Seeker's Allowance.
- How much is JSA compared to Child Benefit?
- Do you understand the meaning of the title, that it's an **allowance** now that you are **seeking a job?**
- From your JSA do you think it's fair that you should be giving some to your parents as you are still living under their roof and eating food bought and prepared by them?

## **Session 3 could be structured:**

- What or who is your *appointee* if you have one?
- Why is this person (usually a parent) authorised to make your JSA claim on your behalf?
- Why might some Job Centre Plus professionals advise your appointee that *Employment Support Allowance* is a better route for you to go down than the JSA route?
- What is Employment Support Allowance anyway?

This last question pushes me to state a few personal feelings about ESA that I feel have relevance here. There are at least 100 students at Central Sussex College with some, or a mixture, of the following: learning disabilities, physical disabilities, sensory impairments and behavioural conditions such as autism or ADHD. If I asked all these students, including those with very high support needs how they would see their status once they leave college I believe they would all want to be viewed as **Job Seekers**; Job Seekers who get an allowance because they are seeking (and want) a job. To use a cliché: *it does what it says on the tin.*

How do people who claim Employment Support Allowance view themselves? "I'm an Employment Supporter" doesn't really have the directness or clarity of "I'm a Job Seeker" does it?

You might completely disagree with me but when I read official JCP publicity about ESA the words on screen or paper feel a little *hollow*. **My** interpretation of the words is something like this:

*"ESA is for you if both you and we think you're **too disabled** to ever get a proper job. We like the fact that you want to do some sort of paid work, and we can help with something called Permitted Work, but the reality is you're never going to come off benefits."*

I believe that people with very high support needs (usually those furthest away from the employment market) would feel so much more valued if the name of their benefit reflected the fact that they too were *Job Seekers*. I believe the amount of financial support they would get and the amount of human support available to them should rise the higher the support needs they have.

I am sure, by now, you understand where I am driving at with my *Job Centre Plus Matters* course idea. There's so much ground to cover you wouldn't run short of module ideas. The session where students would attempt to fill in a mock JSA form on line would probably need to be spread over two weeks at least.

## **What other recommendations can I make to colleges?**

My work during the three months at Central Sussex leaves me in no doubt that there is a role for a college staff member (or even better, a semi-independent person like me) to act as an informal link between college and the young person living at home.

This needs to happen in the young person's last year at college. So, if we had our time again at Central Sussex College and we were running the *Job Centre Plus Matters* course from the Autumn term I would spend about one afternoon/evening every three weeks making home visits.

In this time I would get to know the young person's parents and get a feel of the home situation. Moreover, I would soon get an idea of whether or not there was a person within the extended family, or perhaps a neighbour or friend who could become the young person's mentor when college came to an end.

I spent time visiting the parents of Richard, Sean, Blake and Jay in late May and early June. I say "parents", plural: in fact, the birth fathers of Sean, Blake and Jay don't live in the family home so I didn't meet any of these people.

Richard is the only one of my students who lives with both his mum and his dad. He also has two younger sisters and an older brother at university. It became clear to me instantly that Richard's parents needed practically no support from me whatsoever, save a clear explanation of the way the "system" would click into place for Richard when he left college, some help with Richard's paper CV, a possible strategy for approaching employers with it in due course, and a few follow-up phone calls to ensure all was going well.

The home lives of Blake, Sean, and Jay couldn't be more different to Richard's. All three live in Council houses some considerable distance from the nearest town or village.

Sean is, perhaps the most isolated. He has no siblings and lives with his mum in a small house about two miles outside East Grinstead. If I had made a home visit to Sean in a *link* role, say, in September 2013 I would have ascertained immediately that the fact that his local authority pays for a cab every day to take him to college and back isn't helpful in the long term. It makes him less independent, not more.



*Sean*

Sean can travel independently on some routes but he needs to be shown how. Had I met Sean in September 2013, and had I had the power to do so, I would have put a travel training programme in place for him immediately, taking advantage of the light evenings we still have in September and early October.

Blake's home life is interesting. Whilst his mother is his next of kin and legal guardian, the **easiest** route to engage with Blake's family is via his half-brother Jon, whose full-time job involves working with disadvantaged young people in the Crawley area.

*Blake*



Since Blake has left college I have needed to meet up with him on at least two occasions and by liaising with Jon first these meetings have always gone ahead as planned. This link with Jon is something that the college wouldn't have been expected to know about, but I am sure they would have found it very useful over the last year.

Not only can a link person establish a solid relationship with the young person's family, they can help explore what natural support is there to help the young person access statutory services and community opportunities. Jay has a good relationship with a youth worker at Henfield Youth Club. Is there any way she could give Jay a lift to the Horsham Job Centre Plus once a fortnight after he has left college?

### **Recommendations for future good practice for Job Centre Plus**

15 years ago **anybody** supporting someone with a learning disability could phone their local Job Centre directly. They could be put straight through to a Disability Employment Adviser who could make an appointment within a week for an introductory chat with the person in question and set them off on the job seeking *journey*. Every part of the service seemed more **personal** than it is today.

These days it seems that every enquiry needs to be channelled via a national JCP enquiry-line where the very first message you hear is a voice on a machine. I don't believe this is very user-friendly for people with learning disabilities or autism. I would love to be proved wrong but I don't believe there is any accessible information published by Job Centre Plus explaining to people with learning disabilities how they make a claim for JSA.

I want to talk specifically about my experience with JCP as I attempted to help Blake, Sean, Jay and Richard to make their JSA claims on line.

I started by phoning the national JCP enquiry-line. When I finally got through to a real person she was very helpful but it became clear to me she didn't have the flexibility to deal with the nature of my call.

I changed tack and phoned a senior JCP manager I know working in West Sussex; a woman I have met at various networking meetings over the years. I explained the situation clearly to her and within an hour I was phoned back by a very helpful person at Horsham Job Centre.

I explained to this person that Blake, Sean and Jay do not have access to the internet at home and even if they did, family support to fill in the JSA claim would be limited. I said that as their mentor, with considerable experience of the welfare to work sector, I felt I was the ideal person to help them make their claim and then advise them on their next steps.

The JCP adviser agreed with me. Within 20 minutes of our initial chat he called me back to say he had arranged a day and time for me to bring in my four young people to the Horsham Job Centre Plus office. Four computers would be reserved for us and a Job Centre Plus member of staff would be on hand to assist me in supporting them to make their JSA claims.

He also assured me that I could put my mobile telephone number on their claim forms. This would mean I would be informed of their work-focussed interview date and location. This was crucial for me. It meant I could attend their work-focussed interviews and ensure they totally understood the process from there on, whether or not they were referred to the *Work Programme* and subject to any further referrals to Work Programme sub-contractors.

This last point was particularly important to me because I could see, first hand, the quality of service the *Work Programme* offered and whether or not the providers were flexible enough to be able to take on board they very individual support needs of Blake, Sean, Jay and Richard.

Whilst I was heartened by Job Centre Plus' response I recognise that it only happened because I was able to pull a few strings via my networking connections. This doesn't seem fair to me. How many people with learning disabilities or autism are being let down all over the UK because neither they, nor their supporters, have the connections to create the flexibility I requested?

There is a solution to this, and it's relatively simple in my opinion. Each sizeable Job Centre Plus office should appoint one of their staff to be a link person between JCP and the colleges in their area. If there's a *link person* at the college using the model I proposed earlier then the two *link people* link up. If there isn't, that's not a problem; the JCP person simply phones up each college and asks to be put through to the head of learning for students with additional needs.

From this point the connection is made and the two organisations can work in partnership.

The natural progression from this is the JCP link person taking the time to visit each college at least once a year and introduce himself or herself to the students due to leave at the end of the year. As far as I know some Disability Employment Advisers already do this and whilst I applaud the action, I have two small reservations about it.

Firstly, I'm not sure how much *formal process* is involved; if this had happened with my four students in this report I would have wanted to the Crawley DEA to recognise that Sean, for example, came under his patch (East Grinstead residents need to go to Crawley Job Centre) and fix up a date for him to visit the Job Centre in early July to start the JCP ball rolling.

Secondly, the title *Disability Employment Adviser* sits uncomfortably with many students with mild learning disabilities, ADHD or Asperger's Syndrome. They don't see themselves as **disabled** and would therefore baulk at being told they need to see any sort of *Disability Adviser*. A better title, for me, would be something like *Job Centre Plus Link Adviser*. This gives the students the message that the adviser is a link between the college and the Job Centre, no more and no less.

Once the young person is being guided by Job Centre Plus, of course, it might become clear that he or she **does** need the support of a DEA. But I'm wary of making generalisations before the guidance starts in earnest. Blake, for example, has Asperger's Syndrome but he doesn't, in my opinion, need to see a DEA. As long as the adviser has a basic understanding of Asperger's Syndrome and recognises that each person with Asperger's has their own set of life circumstances, beliefs, talents, aspirations and challenges, all of which become clearer as you get to know them as individuals, then they would probably get on with Blake famously.

I want to return to the day arranged for me by the helpful staff at the Horsham Job Centre Plus office. I wish the story had a happy ending; unfortunately it doesn't.

Having made the JSA claims in what we thought was the right way for Blake, Sean and Jay (Richard's mum had come with him to help him with his claim) I received two phone calls from JCP a few days later, within an hour of each other. They concerned Sean and Blake, but their outcomes were identical. I will explain what happened with Sean's.

The adviser asked to speak to Sean. I said I was his mentor and had been advised that I could take details down on his behalf. I assumed the call was to tell me the date and time of Sean's work-focussed interview and at which Job Centre it would be held. I was to be disappointed. The adviser explained to me that Sean's records indicated he had an appointee (his mother). The adviser also explained that Sean's child benefit would stop on September 2nd. From here, our conversation continued, as I recall, like this:

"I know," I replied. "Sean's mum has already told me that his child benefit is stopping. But Horsham JCP staff have advised me I can still support him to make his JSA claim. He will probably get what they called a *nil letter*, but that's fine as his JSA will start when his child benefit stops. What's important for Sean is that he gets on the system as soon as possible so that he can receive support from JCP staff to look for work and access what Job Centre Plus has to offer him."

"I'm afraid it doesn't work like that," continued the adviser. "Because Sean has an appointee, his mother, only **she** can make a telephone claim on his behalf for JSA and she can only do this from September 2nd."

"What's Sean meant to do for the next two months then?" I asked. "How can he access services offered by Job Centre Plus?"

"He can still come into the Job Centre," replied the adviser. "He can look for jobs on our machines; it's just we wouldn't be able to devote any time to help him."

"Sean has learning disabilities," I said. "He would struggle enough simply to get to the Job Centre. How on earth could he be expected to look and apply for jobs without some help from your staff?"

"I'm sorry," said the adviser. "There's nothing more we can do until September, he could try the Careers Service in the meantime."

Blake and Jay's stories were pretty much identical. I acknowledge that the whole issue of the role of an appointee was new to me (perhaps I should have known about it), but I felt rather *short-changed* in what information had been given to me by various Job Centre Plus staff on a national and local level. I'd had a round journey of 90 miles picking up Sean from East Grinstead, Blake from Cuckfield, Jay from Henfield, taking them to Horsham Job Centre and then running them all home again. Now, it appears, I needn't have bothered. My personal inconvenience is completely insignificant, however, set against the wider message of what this particular piece of red tape says to hundreds of people with learning disabilities or autism throughout the UK. Put simply it says: "*We won't do anything to support you to get a job for two months.*" This is ridiculous, shocking and discriminatory.

I have no idea how to change this state of affairs; unlike my suggestion a few pages back nothing could be done on a local level; this has to be changed nationally; but one thing is clear to me: it **must** be changed.

## Summaries of the current situation for Blake, Sean, Jay and Richard

### Blake Edwards

Blake's video CV was put on You Tube on 11th July. As of 24th July it has had over 350 views. Not only has the concept of video CVs been widely applauded, people are enthusing about Blake's skills, determination and lively personality that come shining through.

We have already had a provisional offer of two months paid data-entry work for Blake. There are a few complications because the employer would like Blake to work *remotely*, so at the moment I am researching where I can find some desk space for him in the Haywards Heath area. I will continue to mentor Blake throughout this period and beyond.

On July 16th I was contacted by The Clear Company who work with organisations across the UK to improve their diversity in recruitment and talent management. Through this connection, the film was showcased at the Minister for Disabled People's first Disability Confident Employer's Summit on July 18th. Many large national employers attended this event so I am hoping, at the very least, it will lead to some employer partnerships that might generate mentors for the future.

I am trying to create a small circle of support for Blake. His brother Jon and I would be the nucleus but there are other people who play role too including his GP and NHS mental health counsellor. They are based a few minutes' drive away at a surgery in Cuckfield and I have popped in there and left my card and followed this up with an email. In the email I requested that Blake's GP write him a letter enabling him to get a free bus pass; travelling independently on the buses and trains needs to be a priority for Blake in my opinion.

Travelling independently is definitely possible for Blake but one reason why it's never happened in the past is because Blake's mum has always been concerned that he would get on the wrong bus and then not have enough money to get the right one and find his way home. The GP and her colleague haven't returned my email as yet, but I hope to establish contact with them soon.

*Asperger's Voices*, a small advocacy group for people with Asperger's Syndrome based in Burgess Hill have also been in touch with me. They have said that Blake is very welcome to attend their next monthly meeting which I will suggest to him. It's possible that he will bond with other people with Asperger's at the group.

There is no doubt Blake will miss his friends at Central Sussex College. Whilst he has good relationships with them during college hours no attempt has ever been made to meet up with them at evenings and weekends. (This is a very common issue for people with learning disabilities across the UK.) Blake has always struggled with mobile phones, for a variety of reasons, and therefore can't communicate with his friends using this method. And whilst he's highly proficient at sending emails, he's unsure how to do this to make informal arrangements with friends.

Blake has given me a list of the friends he would like to keep in touch with so I will see what I can do to facilitate this.

### **Sean O'Brien**

Sean's video CV is not complete yet, but he will have a *video profile* by the end of July. At the moment I am using my contacts to try to find a mentor who lives or works in East Grinstead. This is essential if Sean is to gain the skills to travel independently from his house to East Grinstead town centre.

Once he can do this journey, many more opportunities will open up to him; an obvious way forward will be to find some sort of work placement to fill the time before he can make his JSA claim. This work placement could carry on, of course, once he starts claiming JSA but it would not be *a placement for placements sake*; Sean is definitely capable of carrying out paid work and this would be our objective.

I have a good relationship with Sean's mum and will work with her on issues around Sean's benefits but, ideally, I need a mentor to take over these duties from me. Sean is in significant danger of becoming socially isolated.

The locations of Sean's home, Blake's home and Jay's home make it very difficult for them to meet up with each other, or with other friends they have made at College. This highlights a need for the local authority to work together with the college and the voluntary sector to see what youth club or clubs could be created, designed specifically for young people with similar abilities and similar limitations with their travel skills.

When I worked in Wandsworth this was easy because, geographically, we were supporting people who always lived within 8 miles of each other. But West Sussex is a large county. Sean lives in East Grinstead. The idea of him being able to meet up with Jay at Henfield Youth Club would be a non-starter.

### **Jay Leveson**

Jay is a very quiet young man and, with the best will in the world, is not as well suited to a video CV as Blake and Sean. However, I have completed a short video profile for him and will be using this to try to secure him a work placement.

Like Sean, Jay's house is in a slightly isolated area - it's just outside Henfield. Unlike Sean, Jay has, as far as I know, at least four siblings (he shares a bedroom with two of his brothers) and there's a certain *buzz* about his home life and life on his council estate. In its own way this is quite a good thing for him but it also has its dangers. Jay is vulnerable to being drawn into petty crime with other young people without learning disabilities and the longer he has no worthwhile structure to his life the more likely this is to happen.



*Jay*

I am hoping that Evonprint, a sizeable commercial printer based in Small Dole, a few miles from Henfield, will offer Jay a work placement. I have been in touch with them; it helps that I am one of their clients and know their MD quite well. Jay's aunt works there already and could give Jay a lift there each day.

I have also been in touch with Debbie Slaughter; a West Sussex County Council employee and the head of Henfield Youth Club. I think she will prove to be invaluable in supporting Jay, especially around Job Centre Plus issues. As in the case of the other young people, Jay's child benefit stops on September 2nd, and it's only on this date that his mother can make a telephone claim to help him apply for JSA.

Like Sean, I feel that Jay desperately needs a mentor. It's possible that an Evonprint employee could fill this role but, almost certainly, that would rely on Evonprint offering him a work placement and I don't know if this is going to happen yet.

## **Richard Osborne**

Richard is as quiet as Jay and therefore wouldn't wear the video CV hat very comfortably. Like Blake, Sean and Jay he has the potential to become an excellent employee for an employer who needs somebody hard-working, reliable and trust-worthy.

Richard has an elder brother and two younger sisters and his parents are very supportive of him. For the last couple of years, he has been doing some paid work in a restaurant in Storrington at the weekends. He's a kitchen porter there and his employer values his contribution very much. Richard also helps out at a local stables (the owner is a friend of his parents). He is paid an hourly rate for this, and even though it's just for one or two hours a week it's ideal to keep him busy, motivated and give his weeks some structure.



*Richard*

Richard doesn't need a mentor with the same urgency as Sean and Jay, although if one was to come forward from the Storrington area I would welcome this.

At the moment I am still Richard's mentor, but sharing the duties with his mum. She has helped him make his JSA claim and attended his work-focussed interview with him. As important, or even more important, she is seeing if she can secure a few more paid hours work for him at the restaurant and the stables.

I am helping complete Richard's paper CV and speak to his mum regularly, particularly if she's unsure about any Job Centre Plus issues. Long term, Richard is interested in working in social care – he's very patient and kind and has an ideal temperament for this line of work. His mum will draw up a list of care homes within a reasonable radius from his house and we will send his CV to all of them. I am confident something will come up for him and be on hand, if needed, to help him secure paid work or a placement that might lead to paid work.

## **The way forward from here**

I believe this report shows that *A Potential Diamond* has potential as an innovative and viable way forward of supporting people with learning disabilities and Asperger's Syndrome into paid work once they leave college.

Whilst I can feel proud of what I have achieved so far, I acknowledge that where the initiative has fallen short is in the area of attracting mentors from within the business community. Whilst everyone I have chatted to has thought it's a great idea nobody has actually *signed on the dotted line*.

I believe, however, it's only a matter of time before I build up a bank of mentors. The simple fact is that because all my work to date has been unfunded I have not been able to put sufficient time into marketing the initiative. I have, instead, put my priorities into giving direct support to Blake, Sean, Jay and Richard and focused on building a solid base for the project that can be built upon in the future/.

I am confident that Central Sussex College will want to continue with the project from the new September term and I will be talking to them during August to see how my time can be funded. Another college in Sussex have also got in touch with me and there's a good chance I will be starting the project there too.

I have connections at colleges throughout the South East and will be sending this report to all of them. Whilst I recognise the austere times the sector faces, I firmly believe that *A Potential Diamond* has the potential to save the Government money in the long term. The more people with learning disabilities and Asperger's Syndrome who have paid jobs the more money the Government saves in paying out welfare benefits.

I am severely limited as to what funding I can apply for from charitable trusts simply because my company Wont Ever Be Ltd. is not a charity itself.

The avenue I haven't gone down to date, but will do in the near future, is to approach the private sector. If I can find one or two large companies, almost certainly with a presence in the Gatwick Diamond area, to put some of their finance, their business know-how and their marketing expertise into the initiative then I believe it would only be a matter of time before we achieved some stunning results.

- *Richard Lamplough, 24th July 2013*