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# Fight for a Better LifeL’image contient peut-être : 1 personne, debout

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# Product of a Postcode

Product of a Postcode is a charitable organisation (number 1157899) established in 2014. Its charitable objects are to help young people build on and achieve their ambitions and educate them to pursue positive life paths. We exist to address the needs of young people in London specifically working with young people in schools, those at risk of social exclusion and ex-offenders.

# Executive Summary

In Winter 2016, Product of a Postcode ran ‘Fight for a Better Life’, a pilot employability intervention for ten local young people who had not been in education, employment or training (NEET) for more than a year. As a result of the programme and the support given alongside it, 60% of the participants lost their NEET status after completion. Four of the participants received job offers and two went back to education.

Alongside these outcomes, the charity demonstrated a revolutionary and innovative approach to employability programmes that is scalable and replicable across other environments. We suggest that our approach to mentoring be rolled out across England and Wales as a national intervention in informal education and youth unemployment. We will be running another iteration of the programme from September 2017 until November 2017 and are at the time of writing (in May 2017) finalising partners and funding arrangements.

# Responding to local need

Gary Hutton is the Chief Executive of Product of a Postcode. He has given inspirational talks to young people modelled on his eponymous book, [Product of a Postcode](http://bit.ly/garyhutton) across London since 2014. Gary’s main talk focuses on mentoring and advice to unravel misconceptions that students can face in the transition between primary and secondary education.

Through direct engagement with secondary school children, Gary found evidence of a need for life skills advice and pastoral support that did not patronise young people, but instead built upon their existing life experiences to provide bridges to meaningful employment opportunities. In designing talks and workshops that would provide such advice, Gary ensured that he represented the full reality of the criminal justice system to deter young people from engaging with activities that could place them within it. The Fight for a Better Life pilot programme was a direct response to these needs in East London, the area in which Gary’s talks identified the most frequent and intense need.

Our approach was unique because young people from economically deprived backgrounds often do not receive advice from people that have lived through the circumstances that they are dealing with. They need unique role models that understand their situations in order to provide a more relevant standard of advice. Gary has a unique credibility that other speakers cannot muster, allowing our charity to work with young people that others could not.

# Arriving at Fight for a Better Life

Gary’s education talks have seen him engage with a wide variety of young people in precarious life situations. These environments included Young Offenders Institutions, Adult Detention Centres and Pupil Referral Units. Part of the talks involved Gary creating a dialogue with the young people where he would ask for their opinions. Through this approach, he was able to glean a number of interventions that would make a difference to the education and employment prospects of ‘hard-to-reach’ young people.

The feedback that he received illustrated four clear themes that went on to inform the content of Fight for a Better Life. The four criteria below will be referenced throughout this section:

1. Realistic careers and employability advice delivered with **candid, frank honesty** about the likelihood of a job applicant in their circumstances and with their background obtaining the desired employment.
2. **A clear route for their progression.** More tangible support than advice would often be required for young people that had undergone more severe hardship. They requested actual liaison between professionals to help them navigate a path from unemployment to work.
3. **Practical solutions to overcoming difficult life circumstances** with concrete experiential examples would be necessary for young people whose primary needs were not being met.
4. Any intervention would have to be **interactive and engaging** to ensure success.

Product of a Postcode set up a fund called ‘Dreams and Passions’ to help underprivileged young people achieve their potential by awarding them with small grants to undertake life changing opportunities. Examples of the paraphernalia bought from the proceeds of this fund include the purchasing of businesswear for interviews and compulsory equipment for university courses. This programme still functions, but the team acknowledged that a more proactive intervention was required in order to give young people that would not have been able to **secure** work opportunities a chance to do so.

The Chief Executive created sustainable relationships with local businesses whilst running a previous boxing programme for young people. In light of the charity’s scarce resources, a second, developed iteration of this programme was designed where the participants would spend half of the week in the classroom and half of it in a boxing gym. The programme was designed around the themes that Gary ascertained in his analysis of the issue with young people. This ensured that the voice of the service user shaped Fight for a Better Life:

1. To make the advice pertinent and specific, a range of professions would be represented in a series of educational talks during the course of the programme, giving the participants a range of career options that would allow them to chart their own unique course.
2. To enable the participants to overcome their personal difficulties to attain education and employment opportunities, committee member and registered youth worker Martin Kelly (Programme Manager) supported them in interactions with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Poplar Jobcentre. We created a formal partnership with the charity Fit for Sport in which the programme’s requirements were matched against a Sports Coach role at our partner’s organisation, resulting in actual job interviews for participants.
3. Gary would have one-to-one conversations with the participants to understand the unique situation that each of the young people were in, using a peer-to-peer, non-patronising approach to pastoral advice.
4. A boxing programme was chosen as an engaging activity to sit side-by-side with the classroom-based

The programme was funded out of the charity’s scarce central resources. Many of the elements were provided as gestures of goodwill by organisations that Gary had previously worked with. As such we knew that for the programme to be maximally effective, a small initial sample would be required. Ten participants that had NEET for a continuous period of over a year were invited to join the programme from the Poplar Jobcentre.

# Aims of the programme

## Overall aim- reducing youth unemployment

In light of the evidence that Gary gathered from face-to-face interactions with young people and responding to the local authority statistics that a large percentage of young people in Tower Hamlets are NEET, Product of a Postcode launched Fight for a Better Life (FFaBL). We sought to contribute to local efforts to address unemployment by providing work opportunities for young people whilst encouraging innovative new approaches. Our place within a wider social impact was met by three project outcomes- **1)** providing guaranteed work opportunities, **2)** increasing the employability of local young people and **3)** helping young people to resolve personal circumstances to begin employment or training.

**Specific Aim 1)**- Provide guaranteed work opportunities.

Young people that participated in the entirety of the programme would have the opportunity to sit a guaranteed interview with the programme partner, Fit for Sport. The skills that young people gained during the programme saw them meet the minimum requirements for a Sports Coach role at the organisation. We carefully tailored the creation of our partner’s programme to ensure that the young people involved had a direct route to a job after long-term unemployment.

**Specific Aim 2)**- Increasing the employability of young people within Tower Hamlets.

The skills gained on the course extended far beyond the requirements which were taken into account. Participants received comprehensive CV and interview workshops and presentations by professionals on how to obtain roles in their industries. A wide range of occupations were represented in these talks and they provided information that will allow the participants to explore their next steps.

**Specific Aim 3)**- Helping young people navigate a path from unemployment to further education or work.

The participants had been invited through the relationship that the Chief Executive Gary Hutton has developed with Poplar Jobcentre. As a result of this, at the time of the programme’s start, they were unemployed. Some had been out of work, education or training for considerable lengths of time. Realising what they wanted to do next in their lives and helping them to piece together a route to that opportunity.

# Programme description- classroom elements

Fight for a Better Life was an intense ten week personal development course. A professional boxing coach trained the young people for three days a week in a state-of-the-art, fully functioning boxing facility. The young people would spend the remainder of the week in a classroom-like environment. The programme was spread over a working week to encourage the participants to undertake full attendance in their first job or education environment after the programme.

We ensured that the environment was tailored to the specific needs of the young people that were involved with the programme. In the classroom setting, we chose an open seating arrangement (where participants did not have assigned places) to facilitate a free-flowing forum for discussions, debating and learning.It has been found that informal learning environments are more conducive to the re-engagement of young people that have fallen out of the education system.[[1]](#footnote-0) with this in mind, we delivered the following as part of the classroom based half of the programme:

## Talks and debates

The young people were invited to discuss a topical issue in a debate format as part of the introductory section of each talk. For several participants, this was the first time that they had engaged in such a discussion for a number of years, and they were encouraged to fully articulate their views. More importantly, this allowed the participants to increase their critical thinking and articulation skills. They were introduced to controversial public issues, such as national drugs policy, and were asked to argue their point of view, responding responsibly to one another’s contributions. Our observations were that they showed increasing levels of maturity and those that completed the programme showed a greatly enhanced ability to disagree amicably with others and confidently express themselves.

They would then hear from a variety of speakers on the skills required for a job in their field and the journeys that they underwent to achieve their current positions. The speakers were specifically chosen for their ability to relate to the life experiences of the audience. After their talks, the participants were then able to question the presenters. The speakers included:

* **Marc Bannerman. A working-class actor from East London.**
* **Nabil Elouahabi. A working-class actor from west London.** He was the first Moroccan to feature in a British soap (Eastenders).He reflected on the need and potential for greater diversity in British films and television. He emphasised the importance of resilience in the face of adversity.
* **A psychiatric nurse.** She spoke about the role and gave advice on spotting and supporting those with mental health difficulties.
* **A soldier.** Relayed his experiences following two tours in Afghanistan and spoke about how this prompted him to train to be a paramedic.

## Employment preparedness workshops

A series of workshops were hosted by local businesses to help the young people become ‘job ready’.

* **Dean Horridge. Chief Executive of Fit For Sport**. A presentation was given by our main partner to help the young people involved understand the requirements of the trainee scheme that they would be interviewing for at the end of the programme.
* **A professional trainer.** He ran a workshop on self-presentation and public speaking teaching the participants about different communication registers.
* **A HR Manager.** She assisted with CV writing and job interviews.

## Individual mentoring

Gary spent time providing one-to-one mentoring to the participants. These personal sessions would see him provide advice about how to overcome hurdles that they faced and were completely confidential. The Programme Manager led one-to-one sessions in listening and communication skills.

# Programme description- physical elements

## Boxing programme

The participants were taught by professional coach Edmond Duberry who trained them in basic boxing skills. They also undertook posture, cardio and bodyweight training over the course of ten weeks. The cross-cutting benefits of Edmund’s work include improved perseverance, discipline and motivation, as well as the much increased fitness and physical health which will be explored in the Evaluation section.

## Outdoor training sessions

The boxing sessions were interspersed by outdoor activities to help broaden the horizons of the young people and to provide opportunities for developing new interests.

**Whitechapel tour.** The young people were taken on local walks through Tower Hamlets in order to understand the area better. They were taken on a historic tour of Whitechapel.

**Shadwell Basin Outdoor Activity Centre.** Over the course of two days, the participants undertook a ‘High ropes and indoor climbing wall, outdoor climbing challenge’.This course involved teamwork, leadership and problem solving exercises. After an initial attempt at the exercise, the young people would be shown **how to teach** the activity to a child on a summer camp. This “Train-the-trainer” portion of the activity further prepared them for the world of work.

# Programme description- advice and support

Our CEO and Charity Co-ordinator had a series of meetings with Poplar Jobcentre Managers and Work Coach teams. We were allocated space in the Jobcentre to recruit individual young people for the programme. We attended the Jobcentre daily for two weeks and spoke to as many 18 – 24 year olds as we could. The Co-ordinator attended two Work Coach team meetings and agreed a referral, recording and reporting process for attendees. Once a number of young people had been recruited to the programme from the Jobcentre, we produced individual letters for each participant and their Work Coach detailing the dates and times they would be required to attend the Programme.

Jobcentre staff agreed to make appointments outside of these hours. We were allocated a weekly slot in the Jobcentre training suite to assist our young people as they designed resumes and practised their interview technique. Jobcentre staff were kept informed of their attendance and progress. This mutual awareness and support contributed greatly to a productive working relationship between the young people, the Jobcentre and Product of a Postcode.

# Evaluation

## From aims to outcomes

We delivered the pilot programme to ten participants. The programme was successful in achieving one of our three specific aims for each participant. We also achieved a number of unexpected positive outcomes that will be detailed below.

**Specific Aim 1)**- Provide guaranteed work opportunities.

The content of the programme was specifically selected to enable participants to demonstrate the minimum requirements of a Sports Coach role at Fit For Sport. Three job interviews were secured with our delivery partner Fit For Sport.

* Two out of three participants were successful at this interview.
* The unsuccessful participant has now begun an apprenticeship with a local partner organisation.

**Specific Aim 2)**- Increasing the employability of young people within Tower Hamlets.

Using the skills from the programme, one participant began a job in retail during the life of the programme. The initiative that regular attendance of the course, the improved physical and mental health and skills training gave him has also benefited his homelife, where he has reported a repaired relationship with his mother.

**Specific Aim 3)**- Helping young people navigate a path from unemployment to further education or work.

This aim was also met.

* Two participants returned to education.
* The participants that were unsuccessful reported an increase in their confidence to find work, and greater receptivity towards formal education.

## Evaluation Conclusion

Fight for a Better Life was highly successful in achieving its aims and a significant difference was made in the lives of each participant. As a result of our work sixty percent of the participants went back into employment, education or training during the life of the project. This is particularly impressive when viewed in light of their particular situations; each of them had been NEET for a year. This success rate shows that the approach to mentoring and employability advice the Fight for a Better Life piloted is a cost-effective and replicable means of resolving this pressing social issue.

## Other outcomes

**Physical health improvements**

* Though this was not formally assessed, the participants increased their fitness and physical health considerably throughout the programme. One participant noted that he lost six stone over the course of the ten week programme.
* One observation that our trained youth worker made was that there was an increase in the participants’ personal hygiene. This is a key area of self-awareness that will help them to become more employable **and** assist in building relationships with others.

**Pro-social modelling**

* The attendance and punctuality aspects deserve special attention. At the start of the programme, the attendance of three participants was markedly unsatisfactory. This rapidly improved and there was an average of more than 90% attendance for the rest of the programme across the board. The final week of the programme saw full attendance.
* There were **no** unexplained absences. One participant managed her perfect attendance record despite complex childcare commitments during the school holidays.
* Young people whose lives were characterised by precarity and disorder were able to work as a cohesive team unit throughout the life of the programme. Occasional misunderstandings were resolved by a combination of their internal social order and light intervention by Product of a Postcode Staff.

# Testimonials from participants

## Quotes

“Being on this course has made me realise that it’s never impossible to do something if you put your mind to it and it has also helped me bring out the confidence that I knew I had.”

“I would highly recommend any young person to try this course and see how life changing this can actually be and how the benefits of it can benefit you throughout your life.”

“Gary and Ronnie have helped a lot throughout the process and are easy to relate to.”

“I have progressed hugely as a person and my thought process has changed hugely. Even outside this course feel mentally and physically fitter, which is nothing but positivity.”

“Also little things like Tesco providing us with free fruit and other food has helped because I now eat fruit at home and this has definitely played a part in my new healthy diet.”

“Throughout my time attending Product of a Postcode course [sic] I have learnt a lot about myself amongst other things. I have become more comfortable and confident talking in groups and discussing all types of different subjects.”

## Participant spotlight

Russell[[2]](#footnote-1) was one of our participants. Before the programme, he had served a term of imprisonment for a major indictable offence. A number of job opportunities that he had pursued had been unsuccessful due to his criminal record.

Though our partner Fit for Sport attempted to fit him within their criteria, the gravity of his conviction meant that he was barred from working with children. After a long period out of employment, he is now conducting an apprenticeship to become an electrician. He had this to say about the programme:

“During the whole course I have [sic] learnt so much about myself and the strengths I have. Gary and Ronnie have helped me and the group develop and fulfil our potential, by helping us push ourselves out of our comfort zones. I managed to have the privilege to talk to a class of secondary school pupils which was a brilliant experience. The subject was based on the importance of education and it felt like I was talking to a younger me.

Boxing has helped my self-discipline and I feel so much better about myself. We also had a psychiatric nurse come in and highlight the dangers of substance misuse which was a real eye opener. We did many workshops on life, finance, fame, fortune, and workshops on ourselves. We have an end-of-year party for the kids where we will be dressed up as superheroes and I am looking forward to the kids’ faces when they receive their presents.

# Lessons Learnt- areas to retain

The internal success of Fight for a Better Life was changing the lives of ten young people from underserved communities. As detailed above, we uniquely formed the programme using input from the participants and young people in disadvantaged situations. Its external success is that it modelled an innovative novel approach to intervention in youth unemployability.

In constantly aiming to improve such interventions, we have identified a number of items of best practice that will be retained in the next iteration.

## Group size

For the next iteration, we will maintain the same group size. Ten participants will be matched to five mentors for in-depth personal mentoring. Each mentor will work with two participants over the course of the programme. The mentors will then feed back issues to the Programme Manager who will action changes to the programme where a majority of the participants seek a particular change. They will be accessible by their mentees at all times and will be contactable out of hours to resolve problems that they face in engaging with the programme. The Programme Manager will deal with any personal problems that present barriers to participants engaging with the programme confidentially.

## Collaborative design

Every single day there was learning and reflective evaluation to influence the programme as it went along. Mentors will sit down with the young people and ask them how each day of the programme has progressed.

# Lessons Learnt- areas to develop

This evaluation is a reflective piece and we have reviewed the programme in its entirety to realise where expectations deviated from what was eventually delivered. This will aid us in a realistic appraisal of what is necessary to make the next iteration of the programme an even greater success.

## Intervening in participants’ educational attainment

It became apparent during the course of the programme that the educational elements of the programme posed participation barriers for young people that had left the education system in their formative years. One participant was not forthcoming about their lack of numeracy or literacy ability and would have greatly benefited from suitably (and sensitively) introduced assessment to enable the programme leaders to set the minimum literacy requirements to her level.

We will hold assessments based on national examination papers in the first week of the next iteration of the programme, consulting education specialists, and will work with each young person for 30 minutes every day to raise their ability level in the areas of weakness that reveal themselves. This will be approached with the necessary sensitivity. To achieve this purpose, we will introduce a Learning Mentor to supervise and co-ordinate this new educational strand, providing realistic goals for each participant based on their academic achievements to date and their performance in the initial assessment.

## Staff structure

A scheme of delegation has been drafted with a staff structure featuring relationships of line management and accountability. The Programme Manager Martin Kelly will lead the next iteration of the programme. Two lead mentors, Ronnie Buttery and Gary Hutton will report to him. Two sub-mentors, Norman and Paulette, will report to them. They will be paid a subsistence allowance to enable them to give their full contribution. They will have a closer relationship with the participants, and will be able to provide a more comprehensive package of support; for example mentors will travel to the location of the young people's’ job interviews.

## Contents of the programme

The contents of the programme will be refined for maximum impact and to add new dimensions to the programme in the next iteration. There will be:

* Even more opportunities for young people to feed back about the programme
* Advertising and on-boarding information for the programme so that the young people can prepare before the programme begins, as well as a briefing about the expectations that we will have of them.
* Additional workshops. A businessperson will talk in the next programme to explore entrepreneurship. Fit for Sport will deliver workshops using their staff training modules around wellbeing, first aid and diet.

## Ongoing communication and support

Fight for a Better Life relies on the creation of relationships of trust between disaffected young people and our staff. The enhanced staff structure will be used to facilitate this deeper level of mentoring, and will be complemented by post-programme opportunities for further communication and support:

* An alumni service featuring ad-hoc advice rendered from mentor to mentee after the programme, especially for any young person that is unable to complete the programme.
* Drop-in sessions where where they could touch base with us on occasion.
* Signposting to relevant community organisations that the young people exhibit an interest in working with. Community volunteering and active citizenship will feature as strong themes of the second programme’s educational methods.

## Closing remarks

Product of a Postcode has achieved remarkable outcomes for its beneficiaries within Tower Hamlets. If given funding to operate across London, Fight for a Better Life would continue to decrease youth unemployment by 60% in each context that it operates within. The governance structures, expertise of advisors and track record of the charity’s leaders point to an organisation that will make a meaningful and strategic improvement to the lives of every young Londoner that is able to take part in our programme..

We invite the reader to engage with our work and to support our thought leadership on youth employability.

Yours faithfully,

Michael Abiodun Olatokun FRSA- Chair, Product of a Postcode and author of this report.

1. NFER Report, pg5. Accessed 30/3/2017: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RSRN01/RSRN01.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Names have been anonymised for the privacy of our participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)