

**P-04-577 Reinstate Funding to the Real Opportunities Project –
Correspondence from the Petitioner to the Committee, 20.11.14**

Hi Kayleigh

Many thanks for the attached, and apologies that this reply is after your set deadline. Unfortunately I have been having issues with logging in to my email and EE have had issues with their mobile towers in the area which has prevented me sending emails on my phone. Thankfully after a long wait they have been able to fix it and I hope we are not too late to reply.

Please can you thank the Petitions Committee for their kind words regarding our hard work in providing proposals to support young people with learning difficulties across Wales.

We have extended 2 invitations to Jane Hutt to meet with us & discuss our proposal. We have also advised her that the Children's Commissioner for Wales's office have indicated they would be happy to comment on our proposal if she wishes to contact them. Keith Towler & his Policy Team have both visited our club recently and have asked to be kept in the loop with our progress. I trust she has received our invites but we have had no response?

Jane's reply directing us to the Caerphilly Council switchboard is a little disappointing and in truth appears to suggest a lack of engagement. The Mix Committee, Peer Mentors & a high percentage of club members & families are already "plugged in" to the Real Opportunities additional funding process which we fully support. Consequently we are aware that whilst the project has been widely viewed as a success, the WEFO funding renewal process is complex and lengthy with no guarantees of success or timescales for implementation. Our concern in raising this petition was that if the project ceased without some additional resource contingency whilst new funding was sought then vulnerable families would suffer.

Sadly that is exactly what has happened. The Real Opportunities Project closed in August 2014 with no additional interim support. Across Wales, many skilled staff who have built valuable relationships with learning disabled young people and their families, schools, colleges & employers have been made redundant. The families who had come to rely on this support are now suffering as a result of this service closure. With each passing day the return on the significant investment already

provided by WEFO in Wales is unravelling. This cannot be good value in social or financial terms. It is unacceptable to pin the responsibility for the support of our disabled friends and their families in Wales on the hope of a future European funding application.

Our proposal is intended to share how our own experience of a learning disabled Youth Club environment brings together the benefits of Real Opportunities type transition support and the key principles of The Children Commissioners 2014 Full Lives Short Breaks Report. Our proposals are scale-able, sustainable and value for money. We believe this essential support can be provided for approximately the same cost as the Match funded element previously required to support the WEFO Real Opportunities programme. It is therefore not dependent on additional WEFO money or timescales.

We are anxious not to duplicate resources and mindful of Jane's comments The Mix Committee have this week spoken with the Project leader of the Real Opportunities WEFO funding application. We have sent her copies of our proposals & again offered our full support if we can help in any way with the application process. We have clarified how our model builds on the existing work of the Real Opportunities project and

- Provides the preferred Short Break opportunities identified by young disabled people themselves in the Children's Commissioners Full Lives Short Breaks Report
- Delivers these Short Break opportunities at a fraction of the cost of residential support, allowing the majority of young people and their families to benefit before they reach "critical" or "substantial" need.
- Provides a base for the delivery of transition focussed life skills & independence training through activities such as travel training, Agored certification, 1 page profiles, CV preparation and interview support. An environment preparing young people for independence, education and employment rather than dependency.
- Restores the Peer Mentor programme allowing young people to develop their own social responsibilities through supporting their learning disabled friends at school, and into the wider community.

Additionally Tyler Payne, the other named Petitioner has been invited to present at the Senedd on 11th December 2014 as part of the Real Opportunities evaluation process. Tyler is 17 & has been a Peer Mentor with Real Opportunities for the past 3 years. Tyler's brother Bradley is a participant in the Real Opportunities programme. He is autistic & has a learning delay and will also be presenting to explain how the project has influenced their family life. Bradley is a member of The Mix where Tyler & I are Peer Mentors.

We would once again like to invite Jane, members of her team & indeed interested members of the Petitions Committee to meet with Tyler & Bradley on the 11th December. We would welcome an opportunity to discuss how our petition proposals integrate with both the new WEFO application and the Full Lives Short Break recommendations whilst enabling Welsh local authorities to act now to support our learning disabled friends and their families. We are sure our proposals can be improved with engagement from Jane's team and welcome any further advice from members of the Petitions Committee & their colleagues.

Warm Regards

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