

Assessment Report

Wealden Works

ASSESSMENT INFORMATION	
Assessment Type	Accreditation review
Assessor's Decision	Standard Met
Assessor's Name	Kevin Smith
Evidence Gathering/Assessment Date/s	24/3/2025
Client ID and Assessment Reference	C35276 PN202853
Accreditation Review to be conducted by	22/3/2028

METHODOLOGY	
Evidence gathering	On-site
Staff interviews	2
Recipient interviews	7
Partner interviews	3
Document review	Website, Destinations spreadsheet, sample ILPs and reviews, Quality Policy, GDPR Complaint Policy, induction checklist, other policies (in folder), feedback folder

About the organisation

Wealden Works is a registered charity that formed in 2017 although prior to that was performing similar work under previous guises in the Wealden town of Heathfield, East Sussex. The provider offers a rural employability programme for young people aged 15 – 24, Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) across the locality sandwiched between the North and South Downs, an area of affluence but with challenges of transport and opportunity for young people attempting to access a livelihood. Its stated purpose is '*bridging the gap between education and employment*'.

Since 2024 the small organisation has operated from refurbished shop front premises close to the High Street and the consensus is that this development represents an upgraded setting. A large open plan room greets visitors entering

Wealden Works with tables occupying the middle where participants sit for structured activities. There is also comfortable seating around the room and laptops available for young people to use for job search and other uses. Towards the rear is a shared office and amenities. In its new premises the service is more visible and accessible.

There are currently two staff members (Operations Manager and Project Co-ordinate) who collaborate in the delivery of the service. They have attempted to recruit a third team member but have yet to find a suitable candidate. At present, the charity is without contracted delivery and relying on bid applications, grants and donations to sustain the service. Governance is provided by a Board of Trustees made up of representatives from stakeholders in the local community.

The Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)

IAG is embedded into the employability programmes run by Wealden Works with holistic support, advocacy and brokerage as part of the delivery. Four 6-week structured employability programmes a year, in which young people attend for group sessions 3 mornings a week, with IAG input throughout and after the end of the group sessions. The service is explained to young people informally when they first attend and the offer of advice and guidance is made on a mostly verbal basis although the website describes its links with employers and who the service is for: 'Our main aim is to provide professional career advice and personal guidance to create positive pathways for young people'. Policies refer to its adherence to the principles of IAG contained in the **matrix** Standard.

The initial IAG occurs at the start of the programme which explores the young person's goals and aspirations with a clear emphasis placed upon expectations and assessment of prior experience. This is summarised in an ILP, and guidance is given around the options available such as customer service and horticulture. Level 3 First Aid at Work qualifications are offered through an online provider as standard. Among young people interviewed there are various routes into Wealden Works – through family members who recommend the service, local schools, and the Job Centre is an import source of referrals. Participants represent all social backgrounds, with some having studies to degree level and achieved impressive academic qualifications. However, all struggle with finding meaningful employment especially in the local area. Wealden Works with any young person up to and including the age of 24 who is currently NEET. Among the barriers to employment recorded by Wealden Works are homelessness, home schooling, school exclusion, drug misuse, bereavement, autism, rural isolation and particularly, mental health issues. Staff can refer young people to an external counsellor who they can also confer with in the event of Safeguarding concerns.

Over the three mornings each week that young people attend groups at Wealden aspects of employability are presented and discussed, with participants able to apply their learning to their own situation. Feedback is given on their c.v.s. All said they

found the course content stimulating and relevant. Individual advice and guidance can be requested while in the group sessions, with young people able to call in during the afternoon to meet staff individually. Midway through the 6 weeks the ILP is reviewed, and participants are asked if their goals have changed and support needs met. Employer representatives visit to give talks to the groups and visits are made to their places of work. These can lead to work experience and may also be the informal start of a selection process if the employer has vacancies to fill.

After completing the 6- week course there is the option of further support for up to a year afterwards, through one-to-one advice and guidance and communicating job opportunities. For many, the course itself is enough, but others can go round in circles or become stuck in their lives, and this is when the continued connection with Wealden Works is most fruitful. Staff broker links to employers and provide aftercare support to help with transition into the workplace and sustained employment. For all the young people interviewed the goal is to gain meaningful employment with prospects, although some will take part-time jobs while continuing further studies. Staff are clear they are not about persuading young people to take just any job if not in their longer-term interests.

The difference the IAG makes to recipients and the overall impact

The Business Plan is currently being re-written to assist with fundraising and features ambitious growth targets to expand the service and staff, dependent on successful bids (one major opportunity is pending). The Plan states ‘The aim of Wealden Works is to help young people to develop the sense of responsibility and self-discipline they need to help them deal with the barriers that prevent them from getting employment’. Wealden Works provides IAG to both participants and employers to support a successful transition to employment. Employers refer to a basic impediment to recruiting and retaining young people which is that young people too often show a lack of commitment to a job. The basic life skills and attitude of regular and punctual attendance can be a challenge. Wealden Works staff are aware of these issues and therefore works to build the motivation of young people. Interviewees confirmed that effective input is given to improve their motivation.

Staff have a whiteboard in the office on which every young person without a destination is listed. Progress and outcomes are monitored using a spreadsheet and the data summarised in reports to the Board and published in the annual charitable report along with the accounts. Pie Charts are used to represent the profile of service users and outcomes for 2023-24. Most young people are at the lower end of the age range, between 16 – 21, and males outnumber female participants. Wealden Works has close links with a local secondary school which is acutely aware of the limitations of its rural location for young people seeking to move into work. The expertise of Wealden Works staff in employability complements the school’s own careers guidance and provides a vital dimension to deepening the knowledge of school

leavers to support their progression. “They show exemplary professionalism and provide a brilliant bridge from school into the world of work.”

Hard outcomes of EET destinations provide the main measurable impact for the work of Wealden Works. With a target of 80% positive outcomes the levels of progression have slightly lowered since the pandemic. Of 40 young people participating in the programme over the last year, 67% have progressed into work or education (including apprenticeships and volunteering). Of the remaining third some have left the local area, suffer illness or become uncontactable and it is believed that few return to NEET status. For some young people finding a successful destination can take time, more than a year. About half of the positive outcomes involve employment destinations. The breakdown in destinations is similar to that in the 2023-24 annual report, although the overall level of positive outcomes was 71%, possibly attributable to the young people still being worked with to find a destination in the current year.

Participants are not necessarily thinking in terms of one occupation to be set for life and therefore their transferable skills and assets take on greater importance. Driving lessons is one of the skills that Wealden Works helps to arrange, and vital in a rural environment. When young people are shortlisted for an interview and if they start employment the support continues to help with settling into work. Even when employment does not work out for a young person, employers credit the efforts made by Wealden Work to give support – “They don’t close the door or give up on anyone.” The Job Centre commented on the positive feedback received from young people that they refer, and Work Coaches notice the change in attitude following the course, who also liaise directly with Wealden Works staff.

The website contains success stories showing the progress made by young people who have entered employment. Feedback obtained from participants at the end of the programme often refers to the benefit of meeting other young people at Wealden Work and working with staff who listen to them. Wealden Works thus contributes to the wellbeing of young people who can struggle with the first steps into finding a livelihood.

What is working particularly well

A number of strengths/areas that are working particularly well were identified during the assessment, which are detailed below. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- The person-centred aspect of the Wealden Works service was praised by many of those interviewed, with staff demonstrating an ethos of commitment to the needs of young people. The long-serving staff members provide continuity through the changes and challenges that have faced the service. [2.4]

- Wealden Works cultivates links with employers which is particularly valued by the DWP and other stakeholders. Staff broker real opportunities for young people with employers looking to fill vacancies. They would like the service to expand its capacity but understand this is relating to the funding limitations that exist for the charity. [2.8]
- The service is open to all young people, whatever their background – and it was remarkable that interviews included those who have graduated with impressive academic credentials and yet have found themselves lacking the employability skills necessary to access employment. It is a free service at the point of delivery and staff give as much time to young people as possible within their resources. [3.2]
- The service has earned a strong local reputation through its contribution to the local community in Heathfield over many years, enjoying the support of local politicians and celebrity ambassadors. [2.7]

Development suggestions

Development suggestions are offered in the spirit of continuous improvement and a way for an Assessor to add value e.g. where the service is of a high quality, development areas are offered to help the service be even better than it already is, or to give insight into practices seen elsewhere. There is no correlation between the number of strengths and development suggestions. Where development areas are greater in number this is not intended to indicate that the information, advice and guidance service is in any way lacking. These will form the basis for discussion at the Continuous Improvement Checks (CIC) conducted twelve and twenty-four months from the date of this Assessment, along with any other notable developments. The numbers in brackets refer to the element and criteria of the **matrix** Standard.

- Young people receive a verbal explanation of the service when they first attend and start the 6-week course and during interviews demonstrated a clear understanding of the advice and guidance on offer. There is also support information provided on the website and in various policies. However, it would help for Wealden Works to develop either an IAG Policy or 'Statement of Service' that gives a clear account of what can be provided, its purpose and ethos, as well as any limits to the support offered. It might help to map the advice and guidance to the participant journey through the programme – initial IAG, on-course reviews, and follow-up. [3.1]
- The ILP establishes the individual goals for the young person and specific barriers, and this is reviewed at mid-term and feedback surveyed at the end. All participants say they leave the service with an understanding of what they want to do but in the interests of documentation it may help Wealden Works to

add a basic next steps plan that can be shared with the young person. [4.5]

- Staff follow-up with young people by phone in an informal way, some requiring more contact than others. Young people thought it could be helpful to be more proactive and structured around follow-up IAG sessions e.g. by arranging appointments for those without destinations to come into Wealden Works for a one-to-one to discuss progress. [4.6]
- In the view of staff, everyone leaves with some kind of outcome from the service and young people – whether they have yet to find employment or still looking – also expressed that Wealden Works helps their motivation and morale. Soft outcomes such as improved confidence and awareness of employment options are relevant and some attempt to include these in reporting would be advantageous, either through asking specific feedback questions, or revisiting the Outcomes Star that was previously in use. [5.2]
- Staff monitor the hard outcome destinations of young people, and these are reported as part of the charitable annual accounts. It might be useful to make reporting part of the formal quarterly reports to the Board, to monitor trends and the profile of young people using the service, and help Wealden Works be ready for contractual funding when it materializes. [7.1, 7.2]
- Both team members have been ambitiously studying IAG to Level 6 degree level. However, they also have to multi-task to maintain delivery and sustainability of the service which comes before their own professional development and have had to request an extension to allow them to finish the qualification beyond the allocated time. It is worth finishing the course to provide a deeper understanding of IAG (even though a Level 3 or 4 would probably suffice). Other skill sets are as relevant, such as the Employability Practitioner qualifications offered by the IEP which were suggested at the last assessment. [2.3, 2.5]

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