

## Make a difference to the career chances of young people in your area

When I look back over the last 15 years of my life I feel incredibly lucky. The number of young people (ages 16 -24) not in education or training at the end of 2010 was over 15% and anecdotally we probably all know of young people leaving school or University and struggling to find opportunities despite qualifications.

The Career Academy is one of the ways that the Management Team in Finance and Legal Services at Coventry City Council are working to support one school in Coventry. Most of the 16-19 year olds are studying business related courses. CIPFA accountants, both qualified and training, have a lot to offer as part of the programme through mentor support and also work placements. Chris West explains more below.

**Lisa Commane**

**President – CIPFA Midlands**

Last year, I was approached by a colleague who had been asked to generate support for a new Career Academy based at Lyng Hall School – a large secondary in a relatively deprived area of the City. The aims of the charity immediately struck a chord with me.



Career Academies UK leads and supports a movement of 120 schools and colleges and over 900 employers to raise the aspirations of 16 to 19-year-olds predominately in areas of social need. Students follow a rigorous two-year enrichment programme alongside a curriculum equivalent to

at least three A levels, enabling students to progress to higher education or the world of work. Nearly 85% of Career Academy students progress to university, often the first in their family, or into employment. Finance and business are the most popular areas for study with 64% of students choosing this option in 2010.

Although I'm an accountant, I spent nine years of my career in Coventry as Assistant Director of Education.. I have always been passionate about helping young people to achieve their potential and could really see how those targeted for the programme might benefit. As a father of two teenage sons, I could also see an opportunity to support some young people who may not have had the advantages that my own sons enjoy.

I have always tried to push the importance of learning and professional development, and getting involved seemed a natural extension to this. We routinely offer short term work experience placements, normally to pupils in year 10 and these invariably go well. Far from being a burden they have a strong motivating impact on staff. The Career Academy offered a chance to build on this through internships, and to use staff as mentors to the students.

Helping young people to achieve their potential fits completely with the role of a local Council that is also the Education Authority, so I was always assured of support from Councillors and the Chief Executive.

I raised the idea with my management team and was greeted with great enthusiasm. When we sought buy-in at a wider briefing of managers, I got the same response and was amazed by the number of people contacting me to get involved. I had a real sense that at a time when many of my staff are identifying and implementing spending cuts involvement in the programme offered a new and uplifting strand of activity, where people could use their skills in a positive and rewarding way.

The Lyng Hall Career Academy has completed its first year with eight students. We have provided four mentors, senior staff time to deliver lessons, and five summer internships. I have chaired the Local Advisory Board, and tried to get other colleagues involved both in Lyng Hall and other local Career Academies. I was also able to source some free laptops, and arrange a visit to see the business operation at the Ricoh Arena.

We have all enjoyed getting involved with the students, and were really impressed with them when they were on their internships. I really believe that our involvement will be of great help and support to them individually and to the wider school.

I have also noticed what a positive impact it has had on our department. The enthusiasm and commitment has astounded me, not just from mentors and internship supervisors, but from those in human resources and administration (especially my PA) who have pulled out the stops to make the programme work effectively. I think there has been as much learning and development for my self and my staff as there has been for the young people – this programme takes us out of our comfort zone. As someone well used to public speaking, addressing 40 6<sup>th</sup> formers on their home territory made me more nervous than I have felt for a long time!

We are now into the second year and although it is still early days, it feels like a win:win for all involved. In some strange but uplifting way, the challenges of the times seem to make my staff want to get involved at exactly the point when some additional support will be so crucial to young people in our city.

Anyone interested in finding out more about supporting their local Career Academy please contact [Alison.jack@careeracademies.org.uk](mailto:Alison.jack@careeracademies.org.uk)

**Chris West**

**Director of Finance and Legal Services**

**Coventry City Council**