

BLACKPOOL VISIT

Background

On 8 May 2025, the Social Mobility Policy Committee visited Blackpool as part of its inquiry. The purpose of the visit was to see how local partnerships promote an integrated approach to social mobility in the transition from education to work, and the particular challenges being faced by this seaside town.

Eleven members attended a number of meetings, all of which took place at Blackpool and The Fylde College. The purposes of the visit were: to speak to students about their own experiences of making the transition from education to work; to meet local employers to talk about integrated approaches to supporting students into the workplace; and to hear about Blackpool's NEETs strategic partnership. The Committee is very grateful to Alun Francis and Ruth Carney for their advice and detailed oversight of the day's programme, as well as to the many other members of staff for their time in arranging the visit, speaking to members and sharing their insights. Members extend their thanks and appreciation in particular to the students who shared their own thoughts and experiences on their studies and their plans for the future.

Roundtable discussion with students

Committee members spent an hour talking in four small groups to students in the engineering, construction, digital and health departments. Members wished to hear their views on why they had chosen their subject, what they were planning to do next, and what had been a help and what had been a barrier in making those choices. The discussion was structured on three questions.

1. Why did you choose your current course? What help and advice did you receive in reaching your decision – from school, family members or friends?

Construction students enjoyed the practical nature of the subject. Those studying cyber security were attracted by the idea of working in business. Those training to be plumbers or electricians had often been encouraged by the advice and experience of their families. There was a limited number of apprenticeships in the area and therefore some competition in getting one. Some had had careers advice in school; others had had a mentor.

The engineering students were enjoying their subject, with many expecting to get good jobs.

Health students taking the T-level had been attracted by the six month placement which formed part of the course, when they worked on hospital wards and in areas such as home care, cardiac care, maternity care and midwifery. These placements were generally allocated, though some preferences were taken into account. Age was also a consideration, for example students over 18 years were able to work in surgery. There was some interest in doing a work placement in mental health. Students described the work placement as being "like an early apprenticeship".

Family support

Students touched on the importance of family support and encouragement. More than one said his parents wanted them to find a subject that they enjoyed. Some engineering students' parents worked for one of the companies offering apprenticeships. One had been encouraged by that; another had a brother who had advised him to find a smaller company that he felt would suit him better. All

agreed that it was important to have a wide range of different types of company to consider.

Pastoral care

Students said they had “great pastoral care”, and that allowed home circumstances to be taken into account during their course of studies.

Other skills, and personal development

Interview practice and CV building were mentioned by engineering students as important skills and ones in which they were keen to get support and practice. One student described themselves as “pushed to interact with people in the organisation” and had felt their confidence had grown as a result.

Structure of studies

Health students described how their week was divided between two days on their placement and three in college. They finished their placements before preparing for exams. Their portfolios allowed them to reflect on their experiences on the course. Students said that this was very different to school, and “much more positive”. The mixture of theory and practice allowed them to learn about, for example, the documentation and administration of drugs before putting that into practice. Students had to have GCSEs in Maths and English before doing the health-related T-level.

2. What do the next couple of years hold for you in terms of training and work?

Support and advice

The College had asked students what they enjoyed, taken GCSE grades into consideration and encouraged them to gain as much experience as they could. The encouragement was directed towards further education, not necessarily just higher education. Students were ‘directed into the correct avenue that’s best for us’. Free bus passes were provided for some students.

Family support was very important, but so was College support in helping students to study what they were interested in and not what their families wished for them.

Participants said that they felt like they receive personalised tailored support. People who had neurodiversity or other disabilities received a lot of support and all students got personalised support from a personal tutor. Some people were also supported with laptops and other extra resources.

One participant said that having personal family support was important, especially when they have seen tricky things at their placement. The College also had a mental health service on-site, or a virtual function where students could talk to a trained member of staff about mental health. In addition, participants talked about their peer support and how valuable that has been.

Careers advice

All engineering students agreed on the importance of careers advice. One student described the benefits of early careers advice, in Year 8 at school. That had helped inform his GCSE choices, with the opportunity to try multiple taster sessions of different subjects. Others had had to do research themselves (in fact had shown remarkable energy in doing so). That was the case for a school that had just been set up.

Students studying different aspects of digital work welcomed the advice given by lecturers about the different levels of subject. They relied on advice from the careers team and family members. The College was very keen to offer advice, and the advice given on the different levels at which students could study a subject was welcome, as well as information on the apprenticeships available.

Health students said schools had been supportive of the vocational roles that are available to students at Blackpool and The Fylde College. All participants in the health group said that they had good careers advice in school that allowed them to understand how T-Levels could be the route for them.

Why an apprenticeship?

Engineering students spoke of the good mix of aircraft apprenticeships available. Many digital students welcomed the chance to 'earn and learn' and wanted to leave their training without a student debt.

Pecking order

It emerged that engineering apprenticeships themselves seemed to have a pecking order, with a sense of pressure to get into one of the big firms. They said it was 'not just about BAE' and other companies, for e.g. Babcock were given as good options. Some had themselves found an apprenticeship that suited their own interests.

University

Students said that university was an option for some. Those considering this wanted to go leave Blackpool, but not venture too far away.

All students in the health group were studying T-level health courses for 2 years; the equivalent of 3 A-levels, allowing students to progress onto a degree. Many of the students were choosing to go onto the University of Central Lancashire. One health student talked about the expense of moving away from Blackpool to attend university and therefore staying in Blackpool might be the best option for them.

Participants said that they found that they had a high-level of expertise when they joined a university, more so than other students who have joined from other routes.

3. Do you envisage yourself as staying around Blackpool, or moving elsewhere? What kind of opportunities are offered in the region for the sorts of skills and experience you have now, and will have in a few years?

Importance of place

Some engineering students talked about getting an international licence in their trade, in order to be able to work and live abroad. There were not enough digital opportunities in Blackpool, however, so students were likely to have to relocate.

Health students said that they were keen to continue working in Blackpool, but also said that they were keen to explore elsewhere, such as Liverpool or Preston. One health student has been encouraged into joining the Paramedic service. They were hoping to go to Sheffield or Leicester, as there were few places that offer Paramedic courses.

Transport

All health participants said that they lived locally to the college, but there were some people on their course who commuted from neighbouring towns. Participants said that the College did provide a bus for local students who live a little further away. The bus was free, and came twice in the morning and twice in the afternoon. The College also arranged taxis for people to go to their placement if they needed it. Some people got a free bus pass that could be used on all buses in Blackpool. Participants thought that the local authority paid for the buses.