



## WEA Reaching Forward Project

### Community Based Life Skills Course – Bridge to Further Education

The Reaching Forward project **helps women and men throughout Aberdeen City help themselves to broaden their horizons**, realise their potential and work towards employment. We work with adults who want to return to work but **need support to overcome personal barriers**.

We offer a nine week intensive course to build confidence and motivation. This is supplemented by bespoke short courses to **meet individual needs**, where learners have identified gaps in their skills which are preventing them from going back to work. For example, IT is a popular short course as it is often identified as a barrier.

The main course content focuses on confidence building. **Peer support from the group is nurtured** as this can be a very powerful support for change. Learning tends to be informal and is usually discreet. We often use art or food preparation as a vehicle to build life skills and identify realistic progression routes;

The mode of delivery and activities are **always negotiated with the learners**. We have found that by taking a different approach to mainstream, learners are able to practice democracy in a safe environment. They are then **more able to use the skills learned in a wider context**. This approach also enables the WEA to engage more easily with those who may have had negative experiences in the past. Responsibility for learning is put in the students' own hands, which encourages decision making, critical thinking and taking responsibility for their destinies.

A recent student, K, had a similar life story to many of our learners. She had left school at sixteen with no qualifications. Although very bright, she had dropped out before sitting any of her exams, partly because she was a carer to her alcoholic parents. Although she did have hopes of returning to education, she had three children in quick succession which meant plans had to be put on hold.

When K came to us a Reaching Forward, her older children were at school and the youngest at nursery. She had long harboured dreams to using her own childhood experience to help other young people going through similar experiences and was determined to gain the qualifications necessary to enter a caring profession. Although when she initially joined Reaching Forward she knew she had a focus, but needed to work on how she could achieve her goals in manageable steps. Over the nine weeks, she grew in confidence as was more able to deal with some of the barriers she faced, including debt, housing problems and childcare. With support from staff she worked out a progression route. The initial step was enrolment at college. As a single parent, she was given advice on the most affordable options and started a Renew course. This has gone very well and she is now looking at what to do next. So many students reach this crucial stage and then lack the confidence to continue. Projects like Reaching Forward can provide that additional support and encouragement to ensure that students like K make the most of their opportunities.

### Supporting Transition to Further Learning

For many of our learners, college is an excellent next step. However, there are numerous pitfalls that need to be taken into consideration to ensure that it is a successful experience. Often learners fail because they find it difficult as a mature student in a group of school leavers, or they can be worse off financially, courses are often cancelled at the last minute or timings can be difficult to fit in with childcare. Sometimes it can simply be the sheer size and noise of a busy college that is too intimidating and we **try to overcome this by letting learners see the college in a different light**, for example going for beauty treatments or to the training restaurant. It is vital that learners are **given the time and support to find what is right for them** if they are to succeed and to continue a support package during those first few weeks when they are particularly vulnerable.