Blackpool Opportunity Area Evaluation Strand 2
Report for Blackpool Council

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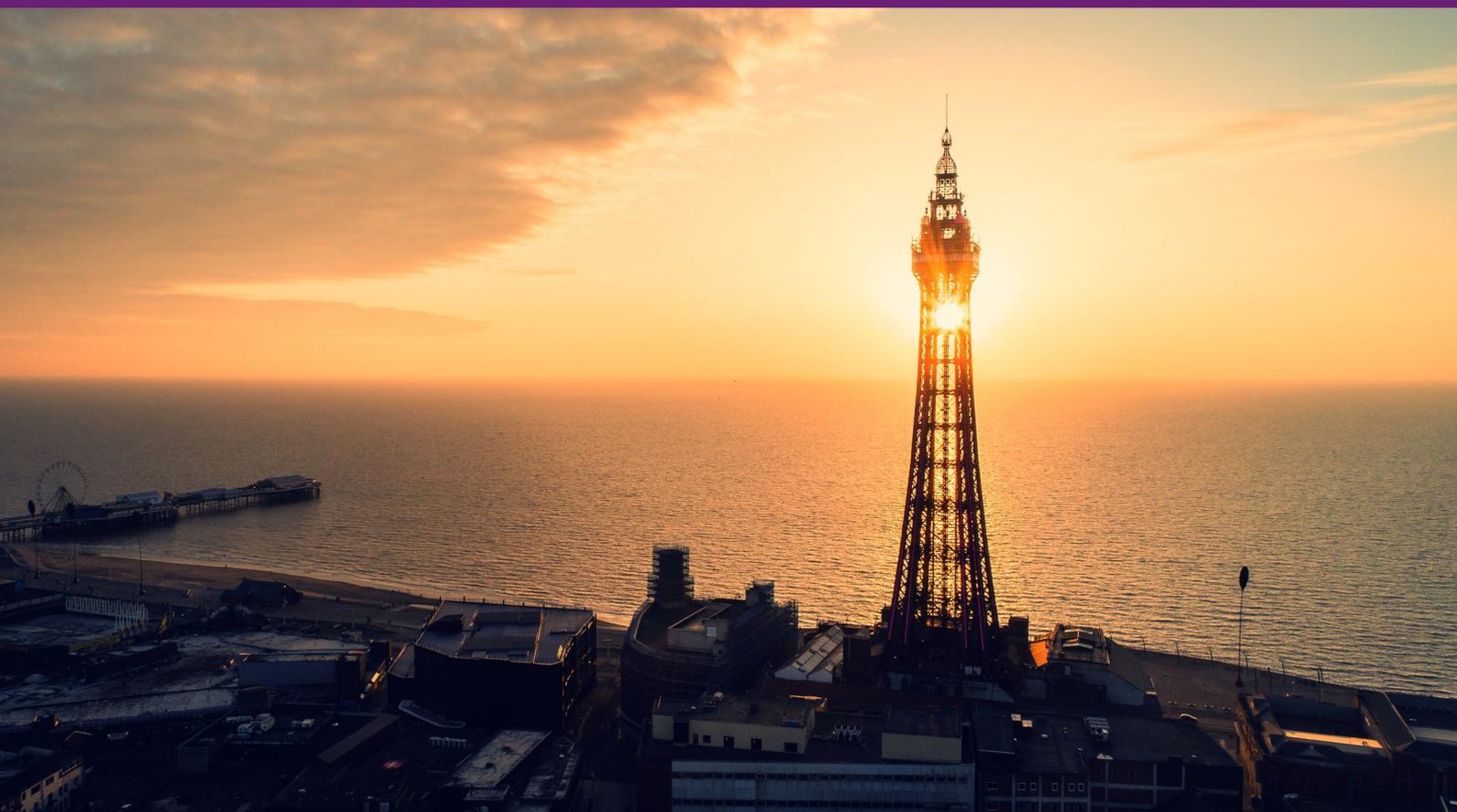
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Executive Summary

Blackpool Council commissioned a consortium between Edge Hill University and the University of Cumbria to evaluate the Blackpool Opportunity Area programme Strand 2. The overall purpose of the Opportunity Area programme is to improve the experience, engagement and employment outcomes of young people transitioning from compulsory education into Post 16 education, employment or training (EET). The Strand 2 element of this programme involved the *Blackpool Engagement Journey* consisting of two projects, the 'Pathways for All' and the 'Targeted NEET' project.

The overarching objectives of the evaluation were to:

1) Measure the impact of the programme, identifying best practice within each distinct project, guided by the questions: how does the programme work, for whom and under which circumstances?
2) Assess the strengths and weaknesses, and the enablers and barriers, to support the effective implementation of the programme as a whole, as well as for each of the two projects
3) Identify the wider benefits of the programme for Blackpool

To achieve the objectives of this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach was undertaken. In summary, the following methods were incorporated into the evaluation:

1) Evaluability assessment – including a review of available data and interviews with project stakeholders
2) Semi-structured interviews with young people, individual support officers and engagement coaches and with Blackpool Council employees involved in NEET strategy development
3) A workshop with frontline staff from both projects
4) Secondary data analyses of routinely collected project data
5) A Social Return on Investment (SROI) Analysis

We found that there has been a clear, if differential, impact on young people by both the Targeted NEET and Pathways for All interventions. Both projects showed a positive impact on the career development, career planning and actual employment outcomes of some young people. Young people reflected positively on the nature and scope of the activities delivered by Targeted NEET and Pathways for All.

In particular, using a Social Return on Investment analysis, the evaluation produced evidence of a clear overall cost benefit by the Targeted NEET project to the Opportunity Area programme. We recommend continuing both projects with a view to make their activities an integral part of Blackpool's long term NEET Strategy.

List of Tables and Figures

Background

NEET in England and Blackpool

NEET is defined by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as 'anybody who is not in any of the forms of education or training and not in employment'. The ONS, which monitors young people in NEET between the ages of 16 to 24 through the annual Labour Force Survey, notes that 'there continues to be a strong fall in the number of people aged 16 to 24 years who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), driven largely by those aged 18 to 24 years.'

This may be attributed to the fact that 'there is a rise in young people in full time education whilst the total number of young people is decreasing'. The estimated number of people who were NEET in the UK and economically inactive in April to June 2021 was 351,000, a record low.[1]

The picture in Blackpool, however, looks different. The number of young people in NEET or 'not known' in Blackpool provided by the ONS has been 290 in 2021 and 2020, up from 200 young people in 2019. These data refer to young people in NEET or 'not known' between the ages of 16 and 17 only. The numbers represent a change of NEET or 'not known' in the population of young people aged 16 or 17 in Blackpool from 6.2% (2019), to 9.6% in 2020 and 8.9% in 2021. Excluding 'not knowns', the percentage of young people aged 16 or 17 in NEET only in Blackpool was 3.8% in 2019, 4.7% in 2020 and 4.4% in 2021, roughly flatlining as a proportion of the young population.

Local socio-economic and educational context

Blackpool ranks as one of the most deprived areas in England. It has a high proportion of postcode areas (n=6) in the 10% of the most deprived areas in England.[2]

People in Blackpool face many of the socio-economic issues and health problems that may contribute to young people in NEET, such as higher than average rates of unemployment and higher prevalence of children in care. As of end of March 2021, there were 223 per 10,000 children in care in Blackpool compared to on average 67 per 10,000 children in care in England.

The educational context in Blackpool is also challenging reflecting the wider picture of underachievement in the North West of England. The percentage of young people not achieving 5 or more GCSEs at C-A Grade aged 17 is 49% in the North West, whereas the England average is 37%. In the field of education, recent concerns have mainly revolved around the attainment gap between English regions. There is clear evidence of a significant attainment gap between the North West of England, where Blackpool is located, and other regions. The Education Policy Institute in their *Education in England: Annual Report 2020* write that 'across the country, a large disadvantage gap remains well-established in several regions … in the North, West Midlands and parts of the South.' In Blackpool, poorer pupils

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[1] Accessed on 27 December 2021 at
https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentor trainingneet/august2021

[2] Accessed on 27 December 2021 at https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019

are over two full years of education (26.3 months) behind their peers by the time they take their GCSEs.[3]

The impact of COVID

The pandemic is likely to have had a significant impact on the relative socio-economic, educational and health disparities of young people in Blackpool compared to their peers across other parts of England. The Education Policy Institute write in their Annual Report 2020 on the national impact of COVID:

'The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the attainment gap. It is difficult to accurately measure how far the gap has widened within a region or nationally because the assessment process across the school system has been so disrupted. However, estimates for Autumn 2020 put the gap between the most and least disadvantaged Year 6 pupils at seven months, an increase of two months from previous estimates.' (EPI, 2020, p.9)

Referring to the disparities between English region, the report notes

'By the second half of the 2020 autumn term, primary pupils in the North East and North West [of England] experienced the greatest loss in reading within the country, of 2.0 and 1.9 months respectively' (EPI, 2020, p.9)

Opportunity Area Programme

The Department of Education created the Opportunity Area programme to address concerns about social mobility and educational attainment in England. It selected 12 areas through a specific methodology and provided funding to selected local authorities to remove barriers for young people to achieving their full potential.[4] The Opportunity Area programme adopted a 'place-based' approach, targeting areas of greatest disadvantage to address some educational inequalities.

Within Blackpool, the Blackpool Opportunity Area is intended to 'raise education standards locally, providing every child and young person in the area with the chance to reach their full potential in life. The programme includes three priority focused areas including raising attainment in Blackpool's schools, supporting vulnerable children to stay in mainstream education, and improving advice, support and aspiration for young people when considering career paths, moving into work or further education'.[5]

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[3] Accessed on 27 December 2021 at https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/EPI_2020_Annual_Report_.pdf

[4] Accessed on 27 December 2021 at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas

[5] Accessed on 27 December 2021 at https://blackpoolopportunityarea.co.uk

Evaluation of *Blackpool Engagement Journey*

Blackpool Council commissioned a consortium between Edge Hill University and the University of Cumbria to evaluate the Blackpool Opportunity Area programme Strand 2. The overall purpose of the Opportunity Area programme is to improve the experience, engagement and employment outcomes of young people transitioning from compulsory education into Post 16 education, employment or training (EET). The Strand 2 element of this programme involves the *Blackpool Engagement Journey* consisting of two projects, the 'Pathways for All' and the 'Targeted NEET' projects.

The projects were supposed to address concerns that vulnerable young people may apply for Post 16 education or training but may not start a course or drop out in the early stages potentially setting a "NEET churn" pattern of in and out of education and training; and that young people, after leaving school, still need targeted support to prepare them for Post 16 education, training or work.

The Pathways for All project is a jointly funded project led by Right To Succeed and Educational Diversity (Pupil Referral Unit). It supports vulnerable young people at risk of NEET over the Post 16 transition through an evidence-based approach.

The Targeted NEET project is a project piloting an evidence based employability model (Individual Placement and Support – IPS) with young people who are NEET to help them into work. In this project young people have access to a work experience placement and a paid internship to build their skills and to encourage the employer to give a vulnerable young person an opportunity.

Throughout this report we will refer to these projects as Pathways for All and Targeted NEET projects. In addition, we will refer to the area of Blackpool Council as Blackpool. The projects employed slightly different terminology referring to their service users. We will refer to users of the Pathways for All project as 'pupils', whilst we will use the term 'client' to refer to those who received services from the Targeted NEET project. We use the term 'service users' or 'young people' where we refer to all direct beneficiaries of the programme, i.e., pupils and clients.

Evaluation objectives

The overarching objectives of the evaluation were to:

1) Measure the impact of the programme, identifying best practice within each distinct project, guided by the questions: how does the programme work, for whom and under which circumstances?
2) Assess the strengths and weaknesses, and the enablers and barriers, to support the effective implementation of the programme as a whole, as well as for each of the two projects
3) Identify the wider benefits of the programme for Blackpool

Methods

To achieve the objectives of this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach was undertaken. In summary, the following methods were incorporated into the evaluation:

1. Evaluability assessment – including a review of available data and interviews with project stakeholders
2. Semi-structured interviews with young people, individual support officers and engagement coaches and with Blackpool Council employees involved in NEET strategy development
3. Workshop with frontline staff from both projects
4. Secondary data analysis of routinely collected project data
5. A Social Return on Investment (SROI) Analysis

Further details relating the each of these data collection methods are provided below.

Evaluability assessment

A systematic evaluability assessment of the two projects was undertaken, supported by the framework developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2019). The evaluability assessment included a content analysis of relevant programme and project level documentation and semi-structured interviews with strategic programme leads. The assessment included policy documents from both projects, such as Logic Model templates, Programme Summaries and information about data currently routinely collected. The evaluation team also received copies of two evaluation reports by Eunoia Associates, produced in June 2020 and March 2021 respectively, and a report by Infusion Research, the Council's in-house research team. All information underwent an initial documentary analysis feeding into the evaluability assessment.

The evaluation team then conducted semi-structured interviews with purposively selected key stakeholders (*N*=4), including the Council's programme lead, the two project leads and the Director of Eunoia Associates. The aim of these interviews was to enhance the evaluation team's understanding of the projects. Where further clarity was needed, the project leads engaged in email correspondence with these stakeholders.

Existing information and data and the planned data collection activities (interviews and a workshop) were then mapped against the evaluation objectives. This enabled the evaluation team to assess the evaluability of Strand 2 of the programme and to identify gaps in anticipated data collection activities which would prevent the successful completion of the evaluation.

A report by Eunoia Associates (March 2021) provided additional information perspectives of young people (*N*=9), project staff (*N*=10) and employment advisors (*N*=2). The report provided insights into the impact of COVID 19 on project implementation as well as accumulated evidence of project outcomes. It also highlighted the need to collect evidence on 'softer outcomes' which may help demonstrate the wider impact of the programme in times of COVID.

Semi-structured interviews and workshop

The project team undertook a series of semi-structured interviews (*N*=18) to investigate the two services operating under this strand of the Blackpool Opportunity Area. Participants included young people service-users, front-line staff delivering the services, and Blackpool Council Managers involved in NEET strategy development. A breakdown of participant demographic information is provided in table 1 below.

Table 1. Number of participants by type of participant

Participant group	Number of participants
Service users	12 (3 through online Google Form)
Front-line staff (including individual support officers and engagement coaches)	7
Blackpool Council Managers involved in NEET Strategy development	4

All interviews were conducted remotely either online using Microsoft Teams or Zoom or by phone between July and September 2021, at a time convenient to the participants. A semi-structured approach was adopted, with the evaluators utilising an interview schedule to explore participants' perspectives of the programme in depth. The interviews lasted between 25 and 50 minutes, averaging approximately 33 minutes duration.

The evaluation team also ran a workshop with front-line staff from both projects (*N*=4). This was conducted on Microsoft Teams in August 2021. Data was collected through various interactive activities. The workshop lasted approximately 1hr 30mins.

All interviews and workshops were recorded with the consent of participants, recordings were then transcribed and anonymised. The anonymised interview and workshop transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This analysis entailed two researchers reading through the transcripts independently and identifying initial codes. These codes were then compared and refined into key themes emerging from the data. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. The themes were then integrated and examined against the aims and objectives of the evaluation of the Blackpool Opportunity Area.

Secondary analysis of project data

We reviewed the scope and quality of routinely collected project data and deemed the data to be potentially suitable for simple descriptive analysis. In this report, we use frequency tables and charts to illustrate the results of this secondary data analysis. Service user level data routinely collected within both projects were obtained and secondary data analyses were conducted. However, data collection and data management approaches differed substantially between both projects. There was also no tracking of individuals across both projects over time. Both project data sets contained information relating to activities organised for each pupil and client as well as some limited demographic data (gender, age) in the

Targeted NEET data set. The absence of demographic data in the Pathways for All project made it difficult to identify patterns of activities with specific groups of young people and correlate this to their overall NEET risk.

Qualitative interviews and themes

A Consolidated Framework for Implementation Research (CFIR) (Leung *et al.,* 2020; Andreanevedalvagov, Reardon and Jackson, 2021) was applied in our analysis of interview, programme documentation and routinely collected activity data. This enabled the identification of strengths and weaknesses of both projects through facilitating a critical review of the programme set up, implementation and outcomes. We recognise, however, that the framework is not a perfect fit for some specifics of programmes, such as contextual factors that are contingent on particular settings. Thus, we have used the CFIR to structure our analysis and reporting but have added additional dimensions that speak to the specifics of the programme.

We report below themes for each project first, followed by the themes that emerged at programme level. The CFIR helped us to categorise emerging topics; categories differed between the projects as the type of evidence collected differed between the projects. Themes generally related to programme characteristics, such as the needs of young people, the strengths and outcomes of the programme, as well as the impact of COVID. The section below also details staff experiences and concludes with evidence about the relationship of the programme with external factors. There remains a small range of issues that are outside the analytical framework which we report at the end of the findings section under 'other issues'. They emerged as part of the overall analysis of transcripts at programme level.

Verbatim quotes are included to illustrate findings. However, due to the small number of interviewees, and to protect the identities of respondents, we have not associated quotes with professional identities.

Social Return on Investment Analysis

We also conducted a Social Return on Investment (SROI) Analysis to provide additional evidence to Blackpool Council about any hypothetical cost savings from the programme. We calculated the social return of investment by offsetting any potential savings through the programme preventing participations from becoming NEET at age 18 against the assumed individual social and economic costs of a person being NEET at that age.

How to read this report

In the report, we will provide findings from our evaluation in four main sections. The first section reports findings from the Pathways for All project. The second section provides the findings for the Targeted NEET project. These sections are followed by Programme wide themes and findings and, finally, the SROI analysis results. In the individual sections we report the results from the secondary analysis of routinely collected data first and then report the themes from our qualitative data collection activities.

Pathways for All - Project Findings

Pathways for All Data Analysis Results

Data relating to the Pathways for All project mainly comprised activity related information for each pupil. Whilst the data set covered project activity data there was no demographic information on project beneficiaries in the data set. Pathways for All data were collated locally by engagement coaches but were provided to the evaluation team by Right to Succeed. Right to Succeed cautioned that 'there were some changes in how Engagement Coaches recorded data, resulting in some gaps in the data.' They noted that 'Engagement Coaches would indicate that a young person had been engaged with during the month time period, but may not have specifically indicated the type of engagement session.' This note of caution is contained on the spreadsheet of both years indicating that data gaps are still to be addressed. It is acknowledged that the project has had to build a data system from scratch but in its next phase it is recommended that the activity of engagement coaches is recorded in a format that permits a more meaningful monitoring and data analysis, including any potential auditing of project activity.

COVID impact

The project initially planned to undertake meetings with young people and their families, carers face-to-face. As COVID restrictions came into force, it was agreed to proceed on the basis of virtual meetings. Data for both years thus contain a number of face-to-face interactions, as well as virtual meetings, with young people and their families or carers as well as virtual meetings.

We conducted a descriptive analysis of data provided by Right to Succeed which revealed some underlying patterns of service activity by engagement coaches with young people.

First cohort

The data reveal a positive picture of significant engagement of young people with engagement coaches throughout the project duration. There were 138 young people included in the data set leaving in 2020. Ninety-three (93) young people in this cohort came from Educational Diversity, whilst 19 young people were at Highfield School and 26 young people at St George's.

Whilst there was a limited number of face-to-face visits with carers or families (n=28), most interactions with families and carers (n=68) of young people took place through virtual platforms (phone calls, video calls etc) as could be expected during the pandemic. There were also data on home visits (n=29) which are defined as the engagement coach meeting the young people at home. It is not clear from the data whether there is any difference between visits categorised as 'home visits' and those classified as 'face-to-face visits' with young people which are recorded separately.

There was a small number of one or more one-to-one sessions with some young people (n=11), and a large number of young people (n=74) who benefited from one or more virtual meetings, presumably taking place once COVID restrictions came into force. A cross

tabulation revealed that there were 34 young people who did not receive either a virtual 1 to 1 meeting or a virtual family, carer or parent visit. However, they may have received other types of interventions that were not categorised as engagement. It is also important to note that young people could receive virtual or face-to-face meetings with engagement coaches.

There is no activity recorded in the data set by engagement coaches for 18 young people, either for themselves or their family, carers, or parents. Four of those are from Highfield School, and 14 are from Educational Diversity.

Another 14 young people have been recorded as having 'engaged' and there is no information in the data set what this engagement amounted to. Of those 14 young people, 8 are from St George's, 1 from Educational Diversity and 5 from Highfield School.

A cross tabulation of the number of virtual one-to-one sessions by school reveals that, with two exceptions, most high frequency interactions between engagement coaches and young people occurred with young people from Educational Diversity. Only 3 students at St George's and no students at Highfield benefited from interaction with engagement coaches more than 10 times.

A possible explanation may be that Educational Diversity has higher NEET figures than all the mainstream secondary schools and, as a Pupil Referral Unit it educates young people excluded from other schools with exclusion being one of the national risk of NEET indicators. In addition, the engagement coaches are employed by Educational Diversity and are based there. The combination of higher levels of need and greater accessibility of young people to the engagement coaches may have meant that more high frequency interactions occurred with young people from Educational Diversity.

It would be helpful to conduct further analysis about whether this strong focus of work by engagement coaches on pupils at Educational Diversity improved programme outcomes for them proportionate to the input.
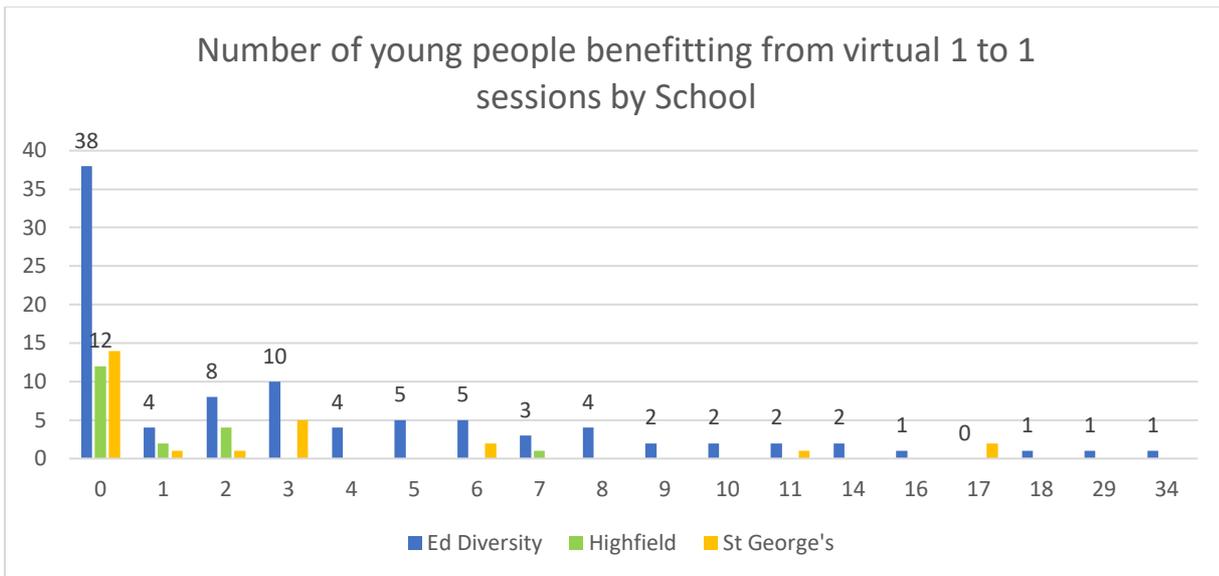
Figure 1 Frequency of virtual 1 to 1 sessions by school

Second cohort

Similar to the first cohort, the data demonstrate a positive level of engagement between young people and engagement coaches with a significant number of interactions. There were 122 young people included in the data set leaving in 2021. The majority (n=88) were from Educational Diversity, with 15 young people from Highfield School and 19 young people from St George's. They received a mixture of face-to-face or virtual activities.

There were home visits for 55 of the young people and 43 face-to-face family, parents or carer sessions, whilst engagement coaches met virtually with the family, carers or parents of 45 young people over the course of the project. Many of those families had multiple meetings with engagement coaches. Overall engagement coaches met virtually with families, carers or parents 137 times, whilst they met them face-to-face 156 times. In the second year 115 of the young people in the project received one-to-one sessions with engagement coaches, whilst 52 young people benefited from virtual sessions.

Engagement coaches also conducted a number of groups sessions which benefited 23 young people over the course of the year. Overall, 115 young people were engaged at least once during the project.

Cross tabulation analysis reveals some young people demonstrated a higher level of engagement than others whilst a small number of young people (n=6) in the data set are recorded as having no interaction with engagement coaches.

Given the significant number of face-to-face interactions which have taken place with this second cohort, we analysed the distribution of the activities by school for both virtual and face-to-face meetings with young people. It would be helpful to conduct further analysis to determine whether or not the young people receiving the highest number of engagement coach sessions also improved most in terms of reducing their risk of NEET.
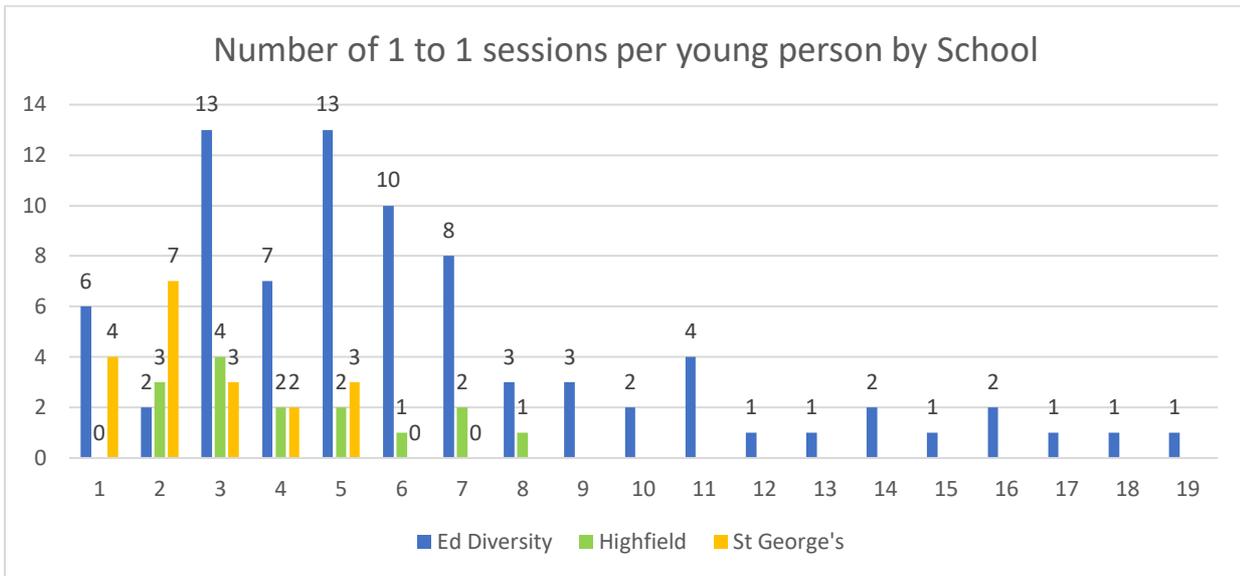
Figure 2 Frequency of 1 to 1 sessions by school

The chart indicates that most high frequency face-to-face interaction took place with pupils from Educational Diversity. Figure 5 shows the smaller number of virtual meetings with young people in the second year and demonstrates that pupils from all three schools benefited from repeated virtual sessions with engagement coaches.
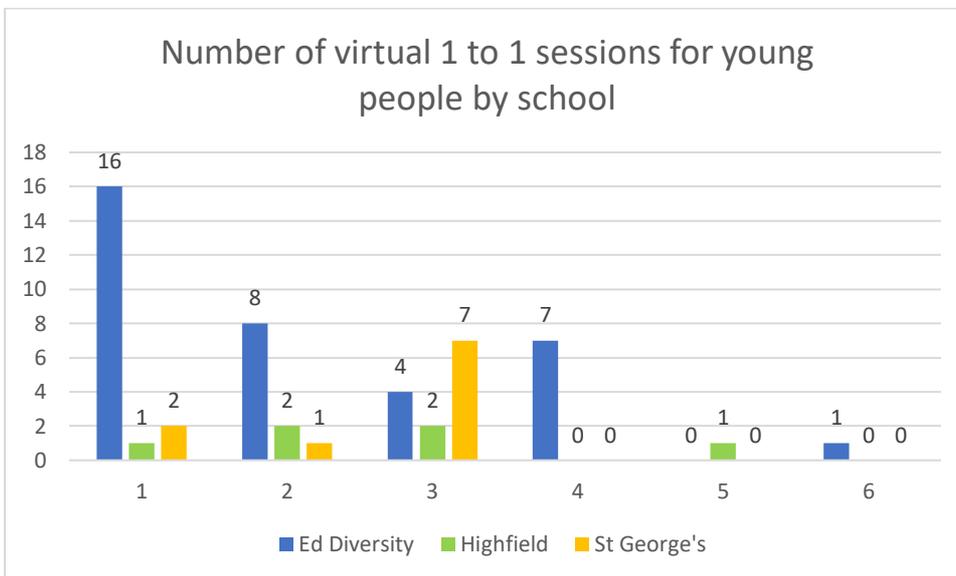
Figure 3 Frequency of virtual 1 to 1 sessions by school

The data shows a strong focus of the work by engagement coaches on young people in Educational Diversity. This may be indicative of the higher risk of young people in this unit of becoming NEET. It would seem important to undertake further analysis to determine whether

this higher input for some young people produced a proportionate reduction in risk of becoming NEET.

Pathways for All - Themes emerging from interviews

Nature and quality of support for young people

A key theme emerging about the Pathways for All project was the nature and quality of available support for young people. Staff commented that the options for work experience in the locality were of sufficient quantity and quality but highlighted the lack of suitable apprenticeships for this population.

> "Normal route is probably college or sixth form. We do have one or two doing apprenticeships, but again, they're few and far between due to COVID, so we've not had as many this time. But yeah, it's predominantly college."

> "Cause so many people have lost their jobs, and a lot of places have closed. And so, yeah, it isn't—it's not easy. That's why we try to promote college as much as we can at the minute."

The project encouraged young people to build their skills and staff offered advice around CV building, interview techniques, and online job searching.

Multiagency working

A core feature of the project was its multiagency approach. Multiagency working emerged as a second important theme. The multiorganisational nature of the project put some emphasis on cross organisational coordination, the ability to facilitate multi-professional interaction effectively and work together towards a unified, clearly identified vision.

Staff articulated examples of excellent collaboration with other agencies. In particular, co-location was a factor in facilitating improved multiagency work. Being co-located with Educational Diversity was highlighted by respondents as a positive aspect of their work.

> "We have strong links with the pastoral team here [educational diversity], safeguarding team, teachers and we do get to see them more often because we're based here, we get to build relationships a lot easier."

> "I've realised [co-location] is [very important] now yes definitely. With it being a new programme at the beginning I wasn't so sure how best that would work. Sometimes you wonder if it would be better providing the service just from our own building just because we've got everything happening there and are used to delivering what we do from there but it became apparent quite quickly that that would be the best way to get buy in from the [service] staff as well, to be seen as part of their team rather than almost just turning up and saying right, we're here to sort things out. So yeah, very early on it became apparent that was really important"

Whilst staff clearly saw significant benefits in being co-located with Educational Diversity, they were more critical of other aspects of working together with other organisations. There were some instances of initial hesitancy amongst staff from other organisations when the programme started. The ability of programme staff to overcome these barriers was positively commented upon.

"Because some of the staff at the time I think felt they could still do it themselves, so we had to merge in that way and show that we're working with them, not instead of them or against them. And I've got to say that's credit to the advisors as well that they've made that work."

Key workers or social workers were also thought to be too busy on some occasions to attend multi-agency meetings. Staff however thought that any potential fallout from this could be addressed by updating key workers through other means.

"So, we should have a three-way meeting once a month, so ideally the first meeting will be three-way, it's not always possible because the keyworkers have busy time schedules"

"There have been times where it's not worked because you can't get in touch with a social worker at all ever and they don't feed back information of where they're up to."

Continuing to make the link to keyworkers was seen as an important factor in working effectively with young people who may be hard to reach in some cases.

"Also, it's important to use the keyworkers experience, as I mentioned before, if we're struggling to get hold of that person, a young person, getting in touch with them."

"I think it's so important for everyone to make sure that they are up to date with information from other agencies to make sure you are supported in the right way, it's so I don't look like an idiot as well when I go into meetings. It allowed me to understand the bigger picture about the type of people that are around."

The advantages of working with other agencies and of working within other organisations were widely acknowledged by respondents.

"But also, them [staff] being able to work in another organisation and be taken on board by that group of people and support them, that was something quite new and after maybe a few teething problems at the beginning, worked really well."

Although respondents were complimentary about their excellent collaborative relationship with one educational provider, Educational Diversity; the picture was slightly different when working with mainstream schools in the area. Engagement coaches were employed by Educational Diversity, so they had to develop relationships with mainstream schools from scratch. At times, this proved to be challenging.

"In mainstream, like I said, it's a bit, I don't want to say less structured but it's a bit more on a rushed basis because you don't have as much time with them, you might see a student once a month away from doing phone calls and that type of stuff."

"But again, it's just not as intense because they are a mainstream student at the end of the day, they're not used to that constant 1-2-1 support because they are in a mainstream class."

This impacted on the establishing connections between the staff and the young people and their parents.

> *"Very difficult, 'cause you're going in as an outsider and then expected to go to the home and visit, or ring parents, and you don't wanna say you're from Ed-Diversity because they don't understand. Then they're, "Well, why? My child doesn't have anything to do with Ed-Diversity, so why are you calling?" ... it's not the parents, you know, it's not, it's not the parents' fault that they don't know who we are. But I think school could've done more to, you know."*

Feedback from the commissioner who attends the Project Steering Group indicated that school careers leads are now reporting stronger relationships between school staff and the Engagement Coaches as the project evolves. However, whilst these issues may be interpreted as relating to routine work practices, it may be useful to explore further whether or not the setup of the project itself through Educational Diversity staff is the right one. It may be helpful to understand whether Pathways for All project resources are effectively targeted by analysing the number of young people from Educational Diversity or mainstream schools compared with their NEET/EET destination. Our analysis of Pathways for All data shows that pupils in the first cohort who received a high frequency of sessions with engagement coaches were from Educational Diversity. This may be reflective of their higher needs but it seems important to examine that the comparably smaller project input for those pupils in the two mainstream schools was not a result of more challenging working conditions there for engagement coaches.

Summary of themes

There was clear evidence of flexible and proactive support for young people from our staff interviews. Staff were also complimentary about their working relationship with the co-located educational provider, Educational Diversity. They identified there was more work to do in building relationships in mainstream schools. Whilst the Engagement Coaches support transition processes to help their caseload move on to college, it was noteworthy that there was no mention of any link with the school based statutory transition process. Linking the project support more clearly with the statutory transition process in school may also assist in creating a project legacy in existing support systems.

Targeted NEET - Project Findings

Targeted NEET Data Analysis Results

Age of clients

For ease of reading we refer to the Targeted NEET project as 'NEET project' below. Findings from this analysis demonstrate that the NEET project cohort 2 (second year of programme) across the Blackpool Opportunities area included 167 clients, with 155 of them 16, 17 or 18 years of age. Age information was missing for 12 clients. About half of the clients were 17 years old (n=83), whilst about 35% were 16 (n=59) and just short of 8% (n=13) were 18 years old. The overwhelming majority of clients engaged through the project were thus 17 years old.
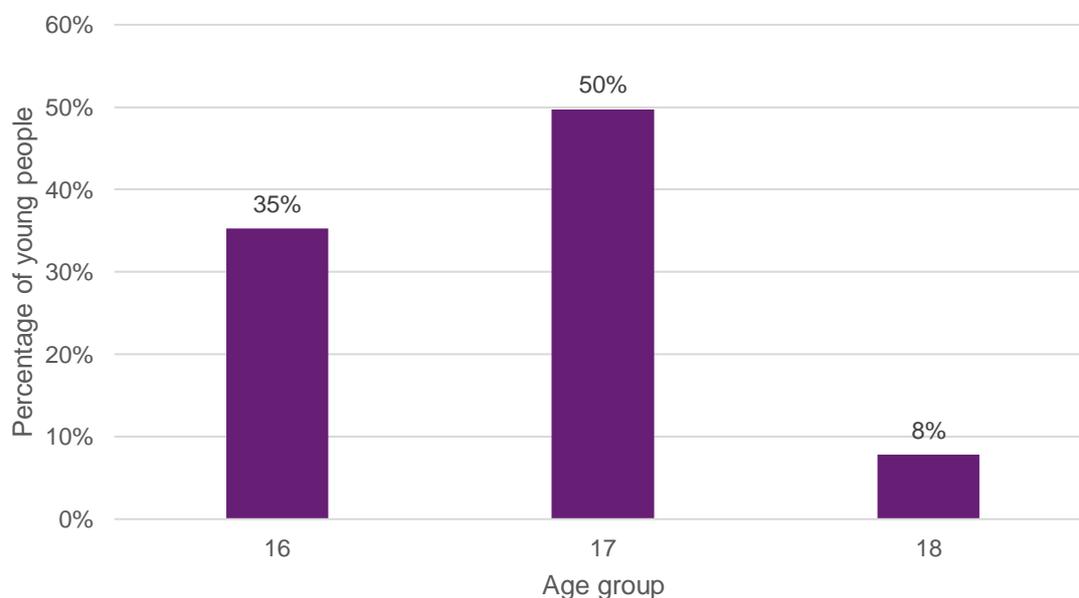
Figure 4 Age of clients engaged with NEET project

Gender of clients

The cohort comprised 151 individuals, 110 individuals were male (65.9%) and 41 female (24.6%). However, some client records (n=16, 9.6%) had no information in this regard. Males were thus overrepresented in this cohort to a significant extent.
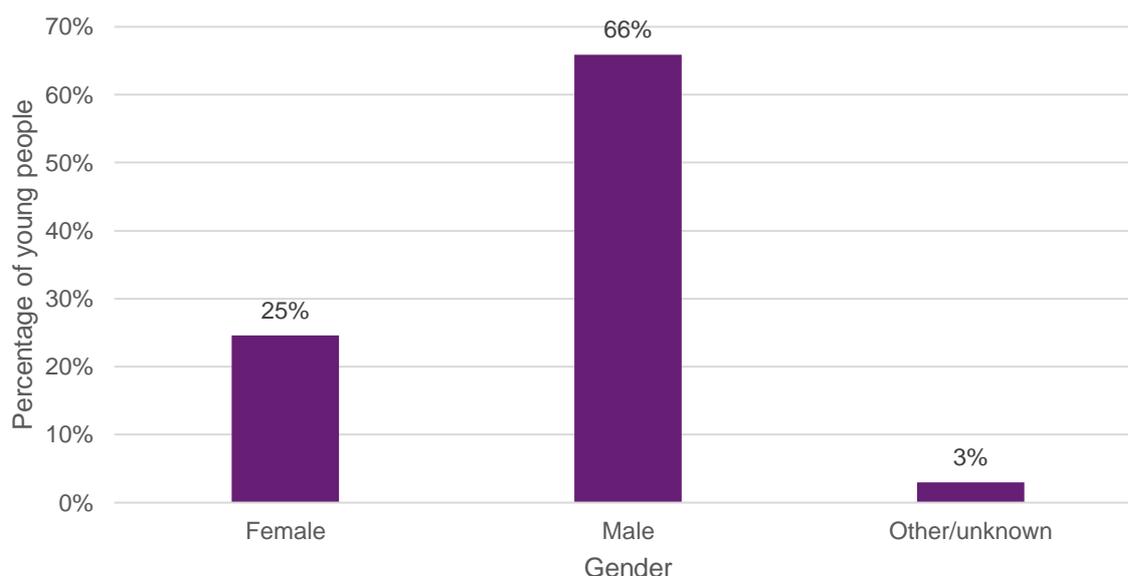
Figure 5 Gender of young people engaged with NEET project

Client engagement/disengagement

Data reflecting the status of clients as 'engaged/disengaged' indicated that of the 167 clients in cohort 2 (2020/2021) 119 young people (71.3%) had either completed the programme or disengaged from it. A minority of records (n=12, 7.2%) had no information as to their project status.

Table 2. Number of young people who were engaged or disengaged with the project

	Frequency	Percent
Clients remaining engaged	36	21.6
Clients disengaged or left programme	119	71.3
Total	155	92.8

A cross-tabulation analysis showed that neither age nor gender is a predictor of 'programme completion/disengagement', however, the visualisation of the cross-tabulation demonstrates that females are somewhat more likely to stay with the project than males.

Table 3. Young person's gender and engagement/disengagement with the project

Gender	Engaged	Disengaged	Total
Female	13	28	41
Male	23	87	110
	36	115	151

Employment outcomes

The Targeted NEET closure report provides figures on the project outcomes. It indicates that 39 young people obtained jobs over the two-year duration of the project, of which 32 were sustained over a 13-week period. Seven jobs had not reached this 13 week point yet as they had only come into effect in the last period of the project. Having created 32 sustained jobs means that the project achieved an overall outcome of 37.5%.

Targeted NEET project - Themes emerging from interviews

Organisational context

In contrast to Pathways for All, the Targeted NEET project ('NEET project') delivery structure was centred around delivery of services through job coaches directly employed by the provider. There were no concerns raised in the interviews about the way in which the NEET project delivered its services.

Implementation plans for the NEET project included the upskilling of the workforce and provisions were made for a cross-fertilisation effects between NEET project staff and core funded Council staff. NEET staff planned to upskill staff at the Blackpool Young People's Service (BYPS) in the IPS Lite approach which NEET staff utilised. According to the Project Closure and Exit Report (accessed on 26 October 2021) NEET project staff used 3-way meetings with young people and BYPS key workers to facilitate a 'knowledge transfer/work shadowing' methodology. It was outside the remit of the evaluation to verify the extent and scope of emergent skills of BYPS staff to utilise the IPS Lite model.

Similar to the Pathways for All project staff interviews, co-locating was also a theme commented on by Targeted NEET project staff as respondents positively noted the potential of being co-located in a Youth Hub at some time in the future.

> *"We hope to have a youth club that's in Blackpool Council where all the young people services are going to be, we should even have a job circle drop-in there, so that would YPS, probably cover Youth Offending Team, so that's great because when the young person's not been talking to me, but they're in to see that person I can collar them, you know, 'Hang on a minute.' You'll have a more holistic, joined-up approach, yeah."*

> *"And we are going to be looking at moving into about where I want to move in with your people services, because you've got all that experience around your all that knowledge that you can tap into. So, it is quite valuable that you with other people that work on similar programmes, not just what you find in terms of being in a building with other people. And as I say, it's about sharing your knowledge and information"*

Staff articulated some concern about the number of services involved with some young people and the risk of duplicating other services' input.

> *"Yeah, I think, I think they are. I think some of them maybe not sometimes, 'cause I think, in some instances, there might already be a lot of agencies involved, and sometimes we can just be another person that's already doing something that somebody else down the line has already done. So, yes, but then there can be the obviously the—if there's lots of agencies involved, do they really need another person?"*

Reducing duplication was noted as an important issue to be addressed through the programme so it appears surprising that staff mentioned this as still occurring.

Nature and quality of support for Young People

There was evidence that staff were clearly conscious of, and attentive to, the diversity of needs of young people, paying close attention to existing mental health issues, problems or difficulties in their family and conditions such as learning disabilities. This is evidenced through some of the comments made by young people:

"We're just waiting for diagnosis to find out what, what, what I can be good at, and then it's going to help me study, it's going to help me find a job around that. So, he's been quite understanding and supportive of everything that's going on."

"It was when I was searching for jobs and everything. He got in contact with me and he got to understand me and all my life needs."

"My interview course was good. But both interviews were good, not interviews, both interview courses were good, because it got me out of the house and I have anxiety and depression. It's kind of hard for me to get out the house."

Young people commented that they liked the range of options offered and the encouragement they received from their coaches to do individual job searches.

"Yeah, there was a lot of options."

"Yeah. Want to get into paramedics. Response has been very supportive, and he said kind of was a great career path for me."

"The first one, erm I've forgotten her, she was actually the one who got me this volunteer job at Warren Manor. …Okay. Yeah. She helped me out a bit, tried to fine me a few places to get me experience."

Young people were clear that staff showed willingness to discuss various options and the young people were in a position to make suggestions which would then be taken on board.

"Yeah, there's been a few times I've done that, you know, he'd give me suggestions and I've said, I don't think that I'd like that. You know, it's not my sort of cup of tea."

"Yeah, he said, it's all up to you that what you want to do. Like you make the decisions."

The overall perception of programme activities by young people was positive and they were happy with the support they received. In particular, the work experiences, after initial hesitation were perceived to be positive, changing the outlook of young people on work and jobs.

"Yeah, I'm enjoying it. I think I'm just going stick it through. Obviously, finish my apprenticeship, so I can become qualified, and then. Go from there. Make some money."

"I've got no complaints. It's all been all been (..) nearly everything that you know, nothing too hard. Nothing too easy. It's all been quite relaxing, really. Enjoyed it."

"So, it's really the kind of getting you to think bigger about what's out there, as well as your options."

Staff also commented positively on the continuity of support offered by the programme. It represented an undoubted strength of the programme which allowed staff to follow up with their customers even beyond the formal engagement period of 6 months.

"So even though they go into work, we're still going to make contact with them once a month for six months."

"Which will be a natural progression so it's not a case of saying like, 'Goodbye, off you pop,' you know, we will look at where we can signpost that individual to."

Staff recognised that, where adequate support existed in college, the programme support could be withdrawn flexibly.

"The support is so good at sixth form that you tend to find that they don't really need—once they get there, they don't really need me cause they've got that support there."

There was, however, a feeling amongst some staff that a group of young people who would have benefitted from these activities failed to take them up for a variety of reasons. This had an impact at times on staff motivation.

"You end up being more motivated on other people because they're going to engage with you, you will spend that little bit more time even though you can book somebody in and you'll do that for that other person, if they're not answering the phone or they're not coming in to appointments, you're not going to do as much work for them."

"I'm not going to work my socks off to find that person."

Young people's views on outcomes

The NEET project managed to place a significant number of young people in their desired destinations. Young people remarked that the programme offered welcome flexibility when identifying placements and work experiences.

"He had told me about possibilities with other jobs, so I told him what I'd like and then he was like, well, if you like that, then you might like this. Would you like me to have a look into this, and you can have a look."

"I wanted to be a lifeguard or trying get into structural engineer. See there was none of them available and obviously needed a job, so just went for the one what was closest and the best opportunity."

"I went for a job interview at a nursery, and I got the job on the spot. So amazing, yeah, and I was like there for two months I'd say, because that was like experience but I got paid for that experience."

Young people felt that the programme had broadened their ideas about jobs and work, as well as improving their prospects in the labour market.

> *"Yeah, it was good. I was looking forward to it. Because obviously, it's like a new opportunity for me to see and go forward."*

> *"To interact with other people more, obviously, understanding what it's like in the job."*

Young people also observed that the programme had (re)built their trust in themselves and increased the confidence leading to positive outlook on their future.

> *"It kind of like got me into a routine because I was like every day at the course, so it got me into a kind of routine."*

> *"I think it's more along the lines of I'm setting a problem dealing with it instead of, you know, just keep it to myself and just hope it works out later"*

> *"Really what I could say was that it's important to developing my character today and were I'll be going in the future."*

Young people attributed many of these positive developments to the trusting relationships they had formed with their coaches and advisors.

> *"Yes, it's been all very encouraging to, you know, reach for my dream. Because well my family they've all wanted me to try different career paths, and everyone had been really helpful."*

> *"My friends have been in touch with [x] for his help, because I told them about his help, and they want help finding jobs."*

> *"It is positive. I think, obviously, all the supports always there in a way. Like, if mom is struggling with like the job, I can always give [x] a ring. But I think with all these surveys, I think that will help eventually, like offer opportunities to people, to offer to help."*

> *"I enjoy, like, I enjoy his time and talking to him. I enjoy the opportunities that he gives."*

Staff also commented extensively on the quality of provision and monitoring programme outcomes. They spoke of the regular contact they had established with their clients and how important this was to the success of individuals in the programme. They noted that staff facilitated contact through a range of methods, such as online, WhatsApp messages and phone calls, which was something that had become necessary due to the social distancing requirements during COVID. The young people reacted mainly positively to this and felt that staff had been accessible.

> *"I actually enjoyed speaking to [x] quite a lot, because we don't just talk about, you know, boring work, like doing all the work stuff, we talk about day-to-day activities as well."*

"I got him through the pandemic so a lot of it was phone call appointments. So, we spoke on the phone quite a bit and we, obviously I told him what jobs I wanted."

"I've got his work number, you know, that I can call and speak to. He said if I need anything, you know, just give them a message and he'll you know. So, I know that I've made sort of a friend over there. So, if I needed anything, you know, yeah. Go speak to him."

"Before I got the job, I think it was a couple times a week, and once I had the job I think it was once every week or two, but obviously just Like, just have a catch-up and recap on how it's been, you know what I mean."

"She just explained how she'd be there, you know, to help me if anything's, you know, bothering me, and she gave me her email, in case I had any questions."

Strengths of support offered

An important strength of the programme was the amount of flexibility and latitude staff were permitted to use when working with their customers. This was a consistent theme identified by staff and young people in the interviews we conducted. It positively influenced the focus, scope and duration of the activities in which young people were engaged.

Young people positively commented on the considerable flexibility advisors and coaches had when deciding where and when to meet them.

"Yes, she would. She would come by to visit and do like a check to see how I was."

"Before I got the job, I think it was a couple times a week, and once I had the job I think it was once every week or two, but obviously just Like, just have a catch-up and recap on how it's been, you know what I mean."

"She just explained how she'd be there, you know, to help me if anything's, you know, bothering me, and she gave me her email, in case I had any questions."

Staff also reflected extensively on the activities and flexibility to provide various types of interventions to their customers.

Working flexibly with their customers was a much commented on programme advantage. This flexibility applied to the type of activities or intervention and the scope, as well as the duration of the intervention provided.

"I think there's a bit of a licence to adapt and change to meet that individual."

"That first appointment if you complete the vocational profile and the Workstart, you can see for somebody that is nervous coming in, it is a lot of information. For some other people you know, it's fine, they can do the bulk absolutely no problem and there have been times, even when I've been observed, I've felt you know, this is not the right time to do both of them."

"The beauty of this contract to others that I've worked on, there is that flexibility."

"I think the flexibility of the contract is the best thing for me, you know, where we have worked with some contracts in sorts of employment sort of thing where it's very rigid."

"Initially we sort of said that the support would be for six months but what we've learnt is that isn't enough. So realistically the fact that the programme is a year, we're happy for customers to be with us for that length of time if they're still making progress and not quite getting where they need to be."

Room for improvements

There was, however, one aspect that staff noted was potentially impeding the effectiveness of their work with clients. The length of the programme engagement overall was thought to be too short for some clients as building relationships with clients in this age group based on trust, was considered to require longer intervention periods than 6 months.

"Six months probably could be a little bit too short, we'd like the option of, the flexibility of seeing people a bit longer, especially if they've gone through training, you could have somebody go through skills training for example."

"But the possibility maybe twelve months to work with a young person rather than just six months."

"That it [programme service] could have been extended, it could have been made to be longer."

"Six months, it's a very short period to build up that rapport with that young person and get them engaged and on board, and work placements and into work, it's a very short period of time to do all that work with the young person."

"Some people building a relationship might take longer and trust in and getting the right placement and the job match, you might take longer than others."

Programme sustainability

During the interviews respondents were also asked to reflect on the processes anticipated to transfer project activities into business as usual. In the NEET project, upskilling the workforce was identified as a dedicated step towards business as usual.

"In terms of the sustainability, the thinking was well actually if the opportunity area fund a couple of staff who are well-versed in using this IPS model and they are collocated with the children's services staff who've got responsibility for NEET so they're almost coaching them and working alongside them using this IPS model and all the principles of that model to see how it works and the sustainability is whatever the strengths are of the IPS model for young people, that that becomes part of their working practice when the project finishes."

"So, the idea of the programme was for us to not only offer that support but also upskill the staff within [service] so that as we pull out if you like from that contract, they can continue to offer a similar service and continue to support customers with the skillset we've invested with them"

"Certainly at the start it [the programme] was very much about upskilling my workforce as well as colleagues within social care, so social workers of those children around how to have those work focussed conversations, how you can build that into a plan that's wider than you know, that family support need."

There was also an expectation that the youth hub would become the new unified location for work around employment support.

"The exit plan for this project in particular is around the youth hub."

It was less clear whether or not staff actually had detailed knowledge of business-as-usual planning or had been actively involved in planning for the transfer of project activities into future services. As it was hopeful that the project would secure follow on funding beyond the Opportunity Area timespan, business as usual planning was perceived to be delayed for the time being although a project exit report was completed.

Summary of themes

The data we obtained for this programme was greatly enhanced by the views of young people. Young people's views allowed us to complement staff views and opinions with the perspectives of young people participating in the project.

For staff, issues of importance were the flexibility of support to young people which staff felt was exemplary in this project. There were positive comments on the sustainability of the programme mainly through the Youth Hub and core funded BYPS staff who were to continue to support young people after the project ended.

Assessing the capacity and ability of BYPS staff to provide support to young people at the same quality, depth and duration should be an aspect for a future evaluation examining the programme legacy. Young people provided considerable favourable feedback on the help they received through the project which testifies to the project's positive impact.

Programme themes emerging from interviews

The transcripts from our interviews were also analysed with a view to identify programme level themes. The section below reports on these.

Needs of young people

The programme put in place effective needs identification strategies of their service users, utilising a range of assessment tools. This allowed staff to adequately ascertain the goals of young people when entering the programme. Staff emphasised the need for young people to play an active role in formulating their own programme goals.

> *"They've got to take the initiative."*

> *"So, it's them taking ownership on that [CV]."*

> *"It's just about getting them on board in terms of getting some practical experience of working behind him, and then focusing more on what it is that interests them and want to do, but you have to inspire that interest at the beginning to get them motivated and engaged in going into work."*

This approach speaks of the positive supportive nature of the programme, reflecting young people's need for ownership and highlighting their part in bringing about change. There was clear evidence that staff consistently encouraged young people to take an active role in goal definition, identification of aims and objectives of their programme participation and provided helpful guidance to young people in an encouraging and helpful way.

Whilst being aware of the needs of young people was a consistent aspect of the programme intervention, addressing those needs adequately was often hampered by the limited range of options open to staff. For example, one member of staff commented:

> *"Do we have enough provision for young people with additional learning needs, probably not."*

Within the current COVID context, there were also some reservations that the programme had obtained a comprehensive understanding of young people's needs.

> *"I don't actually think we truly understand the general NEET cohorts' needs and I think that's something that's important and particularly the impact COVID had on that and young people's mental health and I think there is an assumption that there's all this provision out there, why are young people in need and I think it's understanding those young people's experiences and understanding, what their barriers are is almost preventing us from moving them forward."*

Some staff thought that more complex cases which required significant multi-agency support where at times challenging to accommodate within the programme offer.

Workforce development

In terms of staff skills, respondents from both projects were complimentary of their skills development over time, cognizant of ongoing learning.

"I've really enjoyed it, so I've learned a lot of new skills while being on this provision."

"When I started this job, I wasn't big on talking to people I don't know but I've learnt to adapt and get used to that now it's absolutely fine."

"It's how far you can capacity build the others to get a certain level of knowledge [NEET]."

"What we did do at the programme's inception is we follow an IPS Lite model of employment support so all of the [service] staff did do some training on that. It was like a couple of days training just to understand the mechanisms behind it."

Respondents were also appreciative of new perspectives and angles on engaging this population.

"I've learned how difficult it is for young people, and…how easy it is really for college to say, "Right, no, you don't fit in here. So off you go." And if you're not... getting the grades they want you to get, instead of looking at the background of the pupil and looking at why they're behaving in this kind."

There was however no evidence in our interviews of systematic utilising and maximising this gain in knowledge across staff working within different projects through shared learning processes apart from the representative of Blackpool Council Positive Steps attending the Pathways for All Steering group.

The programme also did not create any cross-project data or information sharing channels which had an impact, in the view of some respondents, on the ability to connect programme interventions for individuals.

"They are great projects ... but it almost seems to be that they work in isolation."

External factors

The Blackpool Engagement Journey programme is embedded within the wider NEET strategic environment defined by Blackpool Council and informed by the policy priorities of the national government, manifested in the Opportunity Area contract for 12 sites in England. This makes for a dynamic yet complicated environment with intersecting policies, prior project legacies and an emerging dedicated NEET strategy at Council level.

The link to the Blackpool Council strategic development of NEET was clearly established through the programme lead. This ensured awareness about the programme upwards to council strategic staff, and awareness of the ongoing strategic deliberations downwards to project leads. The programme itself was also understood to provide key information and data on what works in the NEET prevention field, thus playing in important role in producing robust evidence for policy makers.

However, respondents identified various challenges facing effective NEET prevention provision in Blackpool from the strategic point of view. First, NEET prevention itself may be

outside conventional funding streams which are mainly orientated towards education or training echoing the departmental silos of government.

> *"The challenge is there is rarely any funding that's directed at NEET prevention, i.e. what should you be doing two years before leaving school."*

> *"It is encouraging that the programme itself and the evaluations may play a role in changing this."*

> *"The NEET prevention side in schools is difficult to fund but the commissioners will have this evaluation and make decisions on where they can go with this."*

It was noted that the focus of the Pathways for All project on NEET prevention is forming the basis of the NEET prevention strand of the emerging Blackpool Young People Employment and Skills strategy, a key pillar of the education strategy. The new governance arrangements for these town wide strategies are also raising awareness of this project to a wider audience of strategic decision makers in Blackpool. This may alleviate some of the boundary issues regarding funding NEET prevention.

> *"Education there is a new ten-year education strategy with a link to education vision and tackling NEET is a part of that strategy."*

Whilst the Engagement Coaches supported their caseload through transition processes in their journey towards their college place, in our conversations with interviewees there was an absence, however, of how the work of engagement coaches linked into the statutory transition arrangement from school to post-school destinations for young people with additional learning needs. There appears to be a disconnect between the school transition planning for those young people and the Blackpool Engagement Journey. The Project Management lead explained how the Project Steering Group supports transition processes and also how the links should be working but there was no mention by Engagement Coaches of transition plans, how they would link to the projects in the Blackpool Engagement Journey or how staff engaging young people were potentially utilising existing transition plans or contributing to them through their activities. It is something that a future evaluation should explore in more detail.

The programme had various shared learning options set up through the wider Opportunity Area Programme board, including project twinning with Stoke on Trent (Football Community Trust) and shared learning processes with Lancashire.

The impact of COVID on the programme

Whilst young people and staff were agreed that COVID had some impact on the programme, it was also noted by staff that the end of COVID restrictions presented coaches and advisors with some issues that need to be addressed flexibly by the programme leads.

> *"I think one of the problems is that the people who are new to the service started off just having phone calls and then it's trying to encourage them to come in, whereas the people before, they probably would have been used to coming in more."*

> *"Obviously with COVID, school, it's had an impact on education and leaving school, and no exams, and coming into our…the NEET programme, hence*

*why they're with us, 'cause they're not in employment, education or any
training. So, I think that COVID has had quite a knock-on effect with young
people; and, as I say, coming out of lockdown, being able to go out and being
with people now, young people have got different priorities, if you understand
what I'm saying."*

Other issues

It is noteworthy that the programme did not contain any element of peer-to-peer support for
young people. Peer-to-peer support is deemed to be effective in supported employment
programmes for young people with learning difficulties and there is strong evidence about
the effectiveness of peer-to-peer support in employment support programmes for other
populations as well (Kaehne and Beyer, 2013; Kern *et al.*, 2013; von Peter *et al.*, 2021). Peer-
to-peer programmes are voluntary programmes also widely used in educational contexts.
The idea is that young people sometimes find it easier to talk to other young people than
adults. They also often develop mutual trust and understanding more quickly. This may lead
to positive supportive mentorships between young people in a school. In the Pathways for All
project, whilst engagement coaches facilitated group sessions with young people in the
second year of the project a dedicated peer-to-peer support approach was not utilised.

In addition, the programme was originally planned to incorporate a research consultation
project with young people which was delayed because of COVID. This means that the
programme was not co-produced with young people. Respondents noted that recently, a
group of youth advisors has been established which offers the opportunity to co-produce
Blackpool's NEET Strategy. There may have also been other ways in which the programme
leads may have captured the young people's voice during the programme design and
implementation phase, but we did not find any evidence for any direct involvement of young
people to date.

The Commissioner, as a member of the Project Steering Group, reported that shared learning
and the celebration of success is a key focus of each Steering Group. However as far as we
know programme successes were not celebrated either with young people themselves, or at
programme level between and with project staff. Celebrating success is a key factor in
motivating staff and demonstrating the programme value to potential clients and it seems
important to explore opportunities for celebrating success at project and programme level.

Shared learning was equally seen as largely positive by staff but there were no explicit plans
for shared learning between project staff across different programme components. This
meant that mutual learning and sharing lessons from project work may not have been
maximised as would have been useful for a programme of this complexity.

In terms of resources available to the programme staff, the programme benefited from
significant investment into detailed project plans, including logic models which were available
to staff to increase their understanding of the intervention's theory of change.

> *"There was no existing model on the prevention side, so the project was
> tasked to build up an evidence based approach to it but if you like the core
> of the model was to have a named worker, in this case, an engagement
> coach so in terms of delivery, most of the funding goes into employing three
> or four engagement coaches."*

The programme plans also created feedback loops at the programme leadership level to take account of considerable uncertainty during implementation period.

The logic models developed, however, were capturing programme level implementation processes, reflecting the predominance of an organisational lens at the planning stage. There was a lack of explicit conceptualisation of why specific interventions with young people would work, how and for whom. In other words, theories of change for job coaching, work experiences and other support interventions were informed by prior experience and evidence from previous programmes, yet not clearly articulated for the staff-client interaction level. Person centred delivery of interventions was therefore a result of the wider programme characteristics such as flexibility of approach for each client, rather than based on consistent person-centred conceptualisations of intervention logics.

One consequence of this dominance of the organisational perspective was that pathways of young people through and across programme components was ostensibly under conceptualised and lacked robust modelling. There was however clear evidence that the programme makers had provided detailed evidence and gained a good understanding of key moments of young people's journey from school into different post-school locations.

> *"So, there is actually then a more of a physical institutional transition and change which therefore makes it more of a risk in terms of it going smoothly compared with the sixth form that you know and love and just progress."*

> *"First six weeks at college very often is the most vulnerable period."*

The programme models did provide significant focus on what was thought to be a critical phase of young people's journey towards NEET at the first six months when entering post-school destinations.

> *"They might be fine in year 11 but its year 12 when it matters in the September when they go, that's when the barriers really hit; new places, new people, transport, something as little as transport, I'm not going to get on a bus because I don't want to interact with strangers, its stuff like that."*

There was, however, no evidence from our interviews with frontline staff that young people benefitting from Pathways for All may be able to move seamlessly into the next project, Targeted NEET, if needed. Whilst, it was discussed at management meetings to agree cross referrals between projects and a previous report mentioned that there was 'real potential for individuals to move between the 2 projects' (p. 20, EUNOIA & Associates Report, June 2020), linking the two service populations through relevant data processes involving frontline staff may make an important contribution to more seamless service for those in need.

Organisational readiness to change

The success of implementing a new programme depends to a large measure on the readiness of the system to change and open itself up to novel and innovative ways of working. The CFIR puts particular emphasis on probing whether programme staff are able to adopt new ways of delivering services, and how they deal with change during the programme's lifetime. The overall theme for this is often termed *change readiness*. We investigated this aspect from two different angles, for those changes that occurred within the programme

structure, and for those changes that occurred without the programme, i.e. prompted by external factors.

Here we report the findings for internal programme changes and adoption of innovative programme delivery. Blackpool was seen as 'project rich' by most of our respondents. Whilst this does not per se prepare staff well for change it meant that many were used to working on projects that had a restricted range and scope in terms of service population as well as a limited lifetime. Respondents commented positively and negatively on this.

Respondents noted flexibility as a precondition for adopting new ways of working in contrast to other projects they had worked on previously.

> *"I do like about this contract compared to some other ones that I've worked with in the past, is there's a bit of a licence to adapt and change."*

> *"I think the flexibility of the contract is the best thing for me, you know, where we have worked with some contracts in sorts of employment sort of thing where it's very rigid."*

There was, however, no evidence of spreading innovation through the services bottom up or across programme components. Programme staff may have maximised their ability for flexible and innovative working individually with clients, but we did not find any evidence that innovative ways of working were systematically gathered, discussed, and explored through programme channels or programme mechanisms.

Yet, there were clearly instances of instinctive programme learning which indicate that implicit learning did happen, and programme staff demonstrated a degree of readiness to adapt.

> *"We didn't appreciate at the offset that it would take longer to get people of 16 to 17 into a position where they wanted to go into work. That was a learning curve for ourselves so when we put a flight path together, we expected people going into work sooner than they actually did."*

Partnership building

The published evidence shows that a significant amount of time is taken up with building robust and trusting relationships between partners when implementation new programmes (Kaehne, 2020). In the case of Pathways for All, the lead organisation, Right to Succeed, have worked in Blackpool since 2015 and have a relationship with the council. There was a direct long-standing partnership between the Programme lead at Blackpool Council and the NEET project provider as the latter are part of the council. Whilst there was no evidence that staff involved in the two projects had previously worked with each other, there was a legacy of prior working relationships between Educational Diversity and engagement coaches.

> *"Having a local employment team like Positive Steps is really key cause they already know [Council], they know our teams, we work well together, we can have quite frank and honest conversations."*

It appears that prior working relationships facilitated strong and resilient partnerships between the programme lead and the project leads. There was evidence of discussions and ongoing analysis about NEET support in the area prior to the programme inception which shaped the programme aims and objectives, the logic models and delivery structure.

"How the project [NEET] came about is the manager of that service said I do think sometimes that our frontline workers perhaps don't have the same focus on helping a young person into a job as they do, helping them with housing and benefits and this and that and that and we need to kind of, I suppose the theory that we're testing."

"Overall, this translated into a shared vision of the programme, something that existing research identifies as essential to successful implementation. Sharing a vision also gave programme leads the ability to adapt and amend the programme parameters to new and emerging challenges."

"[similar vision] I think we're working to the same outcomes so it's easy to trial things if they don't work, change things around you know."

Collaborative practices, however, between partners and providers were considerably hampered by insufficient linkage between IT systems and the lack of a unified record of service for each client. Understandably the programme itself did not build up its own data sharing infrastructure but established clear reporting processes with the programme lead at the centre. However, effective programme delivery depended to a large extent on the ability of programme staff to access relevant data from educational and other providers. This was an Achilles heel of the programme in terms of resources.

"So we don't have the RONI data, so the Risk Of NEET Indicator data from schools ideally we would have a database or all databases would talk to each other, we do struggle with databases in terms of schools as schools use SIMS, not all that data is always collected via SIMS with schools, sometimes they use spreadsheets and we don't always get intended destinations for young people which then helps us with September guarantees and it helps with us ensuring that young people are progressing to college and other providers, so I do think it needs to get better, I think data sharing needs to get better and we need a better way of collating that data."

Summary of themes

The programme demonstrated a good focus on increasing the resilience of young people through making them the agents of their own change. As for staff, the programme clearly contributed to the skills development of staff and provided them with new insights into effective project delivery. The link of both projects and the programme as a whole to the wider NEET strategy of Blackpool Council was clearly established by the programme lead throughout the duration of the programme. Whilst COVID undeniably had a significant impact on the delivery of the projects, programme and project staff showed considerable flexibility. In fact, the Targeted NEET project exceeded the outcome target.

There were some issues which would benefit from being examined in more depth. One is the possibility of co-producing the programme (and the individual projects) with young people which seemed not to have occurred initially due to COVID. We note that a process is now in place to co-produce the Council's NEET strategy. It appears important, however, to endeavour to co-produce specific projects as well, rather than simply the overall policy or strategy of the Council.

Whilst the Engagement Coaches supported their caseload through transition processes on leaving school, there was also an absence of clear links with the school transition process.

The rationale of the project was to supplement existing transition processes which apparently had not met the needs of the most vulnerable learners in the town. For young people covered by the statutory school-based transition process, making stronger links between this process and the project should ensure supplementary measures lead to additional benefits for young people in transition.

There was also a lack of evidence of celebrating success with the young people and/or staff. Celebrating wins would have reinforced staff motivation and could have been a starting point for wider shared learning processes amongst and between project staff at programme level.

The programme did, however, benefit from good preparatory work, including logic models at project level. It also profited from excellent relationships between partner organisations. Prior collaborative projects may have assisted in establishing robust links between partners based on mutual trust.

Social Return on Investment Analysis

Objective of analysis

The evaluation proposed to conduct a Social Return on Investment (SROI) Analysis based on project outcome data. The objective was to provide evidence of hypothetical cost savings from the programme for Blackpool Council. The primary metric was destinations of young people moving into education, employment or training from the current programme cohort offset against NEET social and economic costs of the cohorts. The wider aim was to produce additional information on the impact of the programme, help illustrate the wider socio-economic effect of the programme on Blackpool and its community and to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of each programme component, informing decisions about sustainability and future development and funding.

Context

Over the last two decades central government has frequently commissioned work to estimate the costs of NEET to the public purse. There have also been attempts to calculate the broader societal costs of NEET of young people. The scope and nature of different strategies employed calculate potential costs of NEET vary considerably. The lowest estimate of lifetime public finance costs was thought to be just under £12billion in 2010 (Coles *et al.*, 2010). A higher estimate included hypothetical costs incurred through losses to the economy through lack of employment as well as additional financial burden to the welfare and justice system and set the figure at £22billion. A report by Public Health England in 2014 indicated that 'each 16-18 year-old who is NEET will have an estimated cost to society of £56,000 over their lifetime.' This was 'based on the costs of benefits, lost tax and national insurance contri-butions, and some small costs in the health and criminal justice systems.' (Public Health England, 2014, p.20)

These reports utilised lifetime costs based on the number of young people in NEET at the time. Since the assumptions and methodology of the calculations were not always sufficiently transparent, we based our calculation on a more recent report which identified annual costs of NEET instead of lifetime costs (Centrepoint, 2016).

Methods of SROI

Our analysis sets out to estimate the cost of a young person who is not in education, employment or training (NEET), compared to a hypothetical situation where they did not experience NEET. Subtracting the overall amount hypothetically saved by preventing the NEET status of young people in the programme from the programme cost to Blackpool Council provides strong evidence of the impact of the programme to the public purse.

SROI deploys an analysis framework which comprises various elements to ensure that cost calculations are robust and transparent. These include the following steps: (1) establish the scope and boundaries of the intervention; (2) map the outcomes; (3) evidence the outcomes and assign a value to outcome(s); (4) and calculate the impact by subtracting the deadweight (outcomes that would have happened anyway) on the basis of an understanding of effect attribution to the programme intervention.

There are two data points of interest to this evaluation: the annual cost of NEET of a young person at age 16/17, and the annual cost of NEET of a young person at the age 18 and above. In 2016, the charity Centrepoint provided benchmark data for both age groups in a report on the cost of homelessness of young people NEET (Centrepoint, 2016). The respective figures were £3,300 and £7,200. This provided the evaluation with two options for calculating the cost benefits of the programme using SROI, one calculation based on programme costs using costs for the under 18 cohort and one calculation based on the hypothetical costs for the above 18 cohort. For the cost estimation in this preliminary report the cost of NEET at age 18 and above were used.

Since Targeted NEET and Pathways for All delivered interventions that contributed to the prevention of NEET differentially, direct programme benefits could only be estimated for the Targeted NEET component. Analysing the SROI of the Pathways for All programme component would have required individual level data with sufficient granularity about activities and their impact on young people which we did not manage to obtain. Modelling the impact of project activities on mitigating risks of NEET would be a key building block for a SROI analysis. We recommend that a suitable SROI model to measure the social return from Pathways for All project outcomes is to be developed so that the project's impact on NEET outcomes can be assessed in the future.

Results

The NEET programme engaged 124 young people in the first year of its existence (2019/2020) and 142 young people in the second year (2020/2021) [available NEET data set July 2021]. With 290 young people recorded as NEET or 'unknown' destination in January/February 2021 representing 8.9% of all young people aged 16 to 18 in Blackpool, the programme constitutes an important intervention, ostensibly engaging a significant proportion of eligible young people. Of those it engaged, 8 young people obtained employment whilst no young people went on to further education in the first year. Of those young people engaged in the second year, NEET data indicate that 31 young people obtained employment, and 4 young people went into further education.

The estimate of future hypothetical cost savings of preventing young people aged 16, 17 or 18 from this programme are therefore **£57,600** for the first year, and **£252,000** for the second year. The assumptions underlying these calculations are that the young people remain in employment or training/education beyond the time of programme support. This still requires further confirmation through the project lead.

The direct project costs to Blackpool Council were £189,974 and £107,530 for 2019/20 and 2020/21 respectively which shows that there was an overall hypothetical cost of the project to the commissioning authority of **£132,374** in the first year whilst there was a hypothetical benefit to Blackpool Council in the amount of **£144,470** in the second year.

Evaluation strengths and limitations

This evaluation has certain strengths and limitations. One strength is the exemplary level of engagement and collaboration we received from the staff in both projects. This allowed us to interview all project staff and some additional stakeholders who invested in the development of the NEET strategy at Blackpool Council. Staff provided significant insights and useful information about the projects and programme in open and frank conversations with the evaluation team. The support received from the programme lead was also exceptional, allowing us to establish constructive working relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Project leads gave us access to individual level project data which helped us conduct some limited descriptive secondary analyses of project activities and project outcomes. Data from the Pathways for All project, however, were not of a sufficient quality to undertake any granular analysis for project activities with individuals.

The evaluation also has some important limitations. The timeframe for the evaluation was extremely tight and, given COVID restrictions and new working practices in schools and support agencies, this meant that recruiting young people for interviews or other data collection activities proved a challenge. Whilst we managed to obtain good data for the Targeted NEET project from some young people, we manage to recruit two young people who benefited from the Pathways for All project and obtained three Online Google Form returns from three young people. The data obtained through this data collection technique were unfortunately not suitable for further analysis.

One reason for a lack of engagement from young people may be that those initially selected for evaluation interviews who subsequently declined were some of the most vulnerable individuals. COVID restrictions also meant that face-to-face interactions with young people were not an option for a significant amount of time during the evaluation. Engaging with vulnerable learners remotely around a personal and sensitive topic such as NEET hence presents considerable challenges.

This constitutes a significant limitation and led to a considerable gap of evidence for our evaluation. Our analysis of the Pathways for All project was, hence, based on a documentary analysis of project documentation and staff interviews. However, our view is that the emerging findings would have greatly benefited from being verified through additional interviews with young people.

Another important limitation is that, due to working conditions in the educational sector during the COVID pandemic, the evaluation team did not engage directly with staff in mainstream schools, with project school leads or staff in colleges. Interviewing staff in these organisations may have provided a more holistic picture of the programme's impact.

Conclusions

The evaluation set out to produce actionable evidence in three areas.

1) Measure the impact of the programme, identifying best practice within each distinct project, guided by the questions: how does the programme work, for whom and under which circumstances?
2) Assess the strengths and weaknesses, and the enablers and barriers, to support the effective implementation of the programme as a whole, as well as for each of the two projects
3) Identify the wider benefits of the programme for Blackpool

Measuring the impact, the programme exceeded its targets in the second year of placing young people in education, training, or employment through the NEET project. It delivered employment and further education places for 39 clients.

Identifying best practice remained difficult to assess for both programme components. The projects did not establish clear shared learning processes for frontline staff within projects or between projects and best practice remained implicit in local practices rather than being clearly articulated to promote spread and adoption across project staff.

The key question of what works for whom and under which circumstances was also difficult to answer. The Targeted NEET project applied a tried and tested service model (IPS Lite) which can marshal substantial published evidence of efficacy (Burns *et al.*, 2015). IPS Lite stands for Individual Placement Support Lite and is a type of supported employment which is time limited in the case of this programme. A key feature of IPS is that support is provided at any time a client encounters challenges in the employment or placement in which he or she is placed. This additional flexibility of support is intended to address attrition from clients. How it worked in the specific context of the Targeted NEET project in Blackpool and **why** it was effective for 39 young people to gain employment still requires further investigation.

A detailed analysis of delivery methods and contextual factors predicting success would only be possible with a better understanding of young people's individual needs and how the project proactively responded to them. A key mechanism for this would have been to create needs profiles of young people to aid the analysis for those young people who failed to obtain employment, a place in further education or training. We recommend the creation of needs profiles of young people based on NEET risk to further understand who is likely to benefit from the programme.

Answering the question what works for whom under which circumstances has proved to be difficult for the Pathways for All project. Whilst the data clearly showed plenty of positive activity for many young people currently in education, there is a lack of detailed information about who they are, and how they specifically benefited from those activities. We were assured that demographic and other additional information were contained in profiles collated by engagement coaches. This information should be maximised and used systematically at programme level to produce insights to improve the targeting of provision to those young people most at risk of NEET. This is essential to ensure that project resources are effectively aimed at the young people requiring most support.

The Pathways for All project staff clearly articulated a need for a shared measurement framework and we would echo this. Being able to measure project benefits for young people appears to be critical to being able to assess the overall success of the project. Again, a useful tool may be to develop young people's needs profiles, stratified by the Risk of NEET indicator (RONI). This would allow programme makers to answer the question whether the right programme beneficiaries have been identified and how they have progressed over time by reducing their risk to become NEET.

In both projects, there was lack of detailed demographic data for further analysis. Whilst staff thought ethnicity data to be of low value given the relative ethnic homogeneity of the client base, we believe the significantly higher proportion of Black and Black British young people becoming NEET, albeit at very low numbers, justifies collecting ethnicity data to ensure that programme efficacy for this ethnic group can be assessed.

Our analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the programme revealed that the programme benefited from clear logic models at programme level and a shared vision amongst staff across programme components. Some additional work around young people's journeys through the service, using journey maps, may have helped to identify the lack of conceptualisation of how (some) young people may transition between projects.

The programme also had clear prior evidence available about points of highest risk of NEET which informed the programme design. A further analysis of young people's journeys would complement information about their point of attrition from the programme and provide additional insights into whether the programme succeeded in making a significant impact at the points of highest risk and for whom.

The programme may have undervalued shared learning processes within the projects as well as across programme components and perhaps with other Opportunity Area sites in England. Whilst shared learning was clearly taking place at the Project and Programme Steering Group level and through the dissemination of case studies provided for the Department of Education and the Association for School and College Leaders, establishing shared learning forums for frontline staff may have disclosed additional insights into what works and why for young people in the programme.

A significant barrier to consistently engaging young people in mainstream schools was the lack of co-location of Pathways for All staff in mainstream schools. Constructive collaboration with mainstream schools and conducive working conditions in these schools appear essential for staff to be effectively engaging young people there. As the Pathways for All Project is widened to include other mainstream school it is important to find the best delivery structure with staff. Staff employed by Educational Diversity and not co-located in mainstream schools may find it difficult to establish effective collaborative working relationship with mainstream schools.

We conducted a SROI analysis to demonstrate the wider benefits of the programme for the Blackpool region. The analysis showed that Blackpool Council accrued significant benefits from the programme in the second year. The programme more than returned its investment through the successful placing of young people in employment or further education.

A key issue for both projects is to ensure that current programme funded activities leave a long-term legacy on the educational and careers support systems in Blackpool. Dedicated

plans for transferring programme skills, competencies and lessons learned to school staff and career support staff employed by Blackpool Council should play an important part in making this programme business as usual.

There has been a clear, yet differential, impact on young people of both the Targeted NEET and Pathways for All interventions. Both programme interventions show a positive impact on the career development, career planning and actual employment outcomes of some young people. Young people reflected positively on the nature and scope of the activities delivered by Targeted NEET and Pathways for All. Both interventions appear to have engendered positive changes in attitude of young people to work and work based activities and, on the basis of our findings, we recommend continuing them with a view to making their activities an integral part of Blackpool's long term NEET Strategy.

Recommendations

Programme wide recommendations
(feed into emerging town wide strategy)

- Continue both Pathways for All and Targeted NEET projects

- Ensure transfer of learned programme skills and competencies into existing educational and career support system capacity in the long term

- Consider using co-production models with young people, stakeholders and schools to design and deliver future engagement support services

- Track young people's overall journey through both projects, identifying beneficiaries that transition from the Pathways for All to the Targeted NEET project

- Consider collecting demographic data of programme beneficiaries, including their ethnicity

- Establish a shared measurement framework to assess the impact of programme activities undertaken as part of the future NEET prevention strategy

- Develop a joint SROI model for both Pathways for All and Targeted NEET projects as a routine measure to evaluate Blackpool's NEET Strategy outcomes

- Create a forum for shared learning for project staff across projects

- Continue to explore links with other programme sites for additional learning

Pathways for All project recommendations
(feed into NEET prevention strand of emerging town wide strategy)

- Review effectiveness of Pathways for All delivery structure utilising Educational Diversity staff for mainstream schools

- Build on existing data recording and analysis used to provide commissioner progress reports by ensuring activity recorded by engagement coaches complies with conventional data management standards

- Strengthen the link between the Pathways for All project and any statutory transition processes at school where appropriate

- Consider the potential benefits of peer-to-peer support activities

- Conduct further analysis whether or not the young people receiving the highest number of engagement coach sessions also improved most in terms of reducing their risk of NEET

Targeted NEET project recommendations
(feed into NEET action strand of emerging town wide strategy)

- Develop young people's needs profiles to identify individuals benefitting most from IPS Lite support

- Assess programme legacy for BYPS staff in terms of their ability to continue working with young people based on IPS Lite model

- Celebrate success with young people and staff

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