Evaluation Report: Unlocking Potential Oxfordshire

Prepared by Research Oxford for Aspire

August 2019
LAST UPDATED 26/09/19 (V4)

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1   EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Recognising that young people remaining NEET (not in education, employment or training), for over six months are more likely to have complex barriers preventing them from moving into employment, Aspire[1], supported by Oxford City Council, set up the Unlocking Potential Oxfordshire (UP project)[2] with delivery beginning in January 2017. The aim was to help young people who were NEET for over six months to discover their true potential, supporting them to take up meaningful employment, education and training opportunities. The project was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and the European Social Fund through the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) scheme.

At the time of this evaluation there were three delivery partners – Aspire, BYHP (Banbury Young Homelessness Project)[3] and SOFEA (South Oxfordshire Food and Education Alliance)[4]. The project was delivered via one-to-one mentoring relationships, providing targeted emotional and practical support as well as access to a range of other support services, education and work opportunities.

In June 2019 Aspire commissioned Research Oxford to conduct an independent, qualitative, evaluation to help gain a deep understanding of the experiences and impact of the project from participants' and delivery partners' perspectives. The findings will be used to inform the design of the next phase of the project (referred to as BBO2) and its evaluation.

The insights from this evaluation are based on project delivery between May 2018 and June 2019. The research involved one-to-one in-depth interviews and a small amount of email feedback. 25 individuals took part - 7 case workers, who were employed by the partner organisations to deliver the mentoring, and 18 project participants. It should be noted that this evaluation did not include participants who had disengaged from the project part-way through.

The key findings from the evaluation can be summarised as follows:

1.1   PARTICIPANTS – BACKGROUND, ENGAGEMENT AND EXPECTATIONS

- Project participants had begun the project from a range of challenging situations and having experienced a variety of hardships including, but not limited to, homelessness, disability/learning disabilities, chaotic family situations and caring responsibilities. Most had significant issues with anxiety and/or other mental health issues, often as a result of the difficulties they had been facing.

- Participants discovered the project via a mix of word of mouth and recommendation, signposting from other services, on-line searches and approaching or re-engaging with partner organisations. Furthermore, all participants said they would definitely recommend the project, it was even suggested that its reach should

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[1] https://www.aspireoxfordshire.org/

[2] https://upoxfordshire.org/

[3] http://www.byhp.org.uk/byhp-services.html

[4] https://www.sofea.uk.com/

be extended to younger people through schools and colleges. Expectations at the start of the project were generally low or open-ended; for some there was a degree of apprehension about taking part due to issues with anxiety. Post-engagement, expectations increased and concerns reduced.

- Engagement with the project was prompted by a variety of factors which included the desire to get 'unstuck' from having nothing to do but lacking the confidence to change this; gain or regain paid employment, reengage with education and set positive goals linked to personal aspirations. Learning to manage and overcome mental ill health was also a common goal as this was seen as a gateway to a better future.

1.2   DELIVERY AND CONTENT

- The project was a good fit for all three project partners given that they could all provide access to a useful range of opportunities and resources. In particular, they were all well-placed to support young people facing a complex range of challenges on their journey towards education and employment.

- The one-to-one mentoring was a highly effective format for project delivery and pivotal to its success. Some ad-hoc group activities had been arranged and there could be scope to explore extending these in future but in addition to, not instead of, the mentoring.

- Case workers' ability to be flexible and highly person-centred, within the mentoring relationship, was highlighted as a key strength. Integral to this was working at a pace that suited the participant, while including some 'stretch' where possible - rather than simply ticking the 'getting a job' box. A minority of participants might have benefitted from a more structured, planned approach to meeting length and content.

- Case workers put great effort into identifying participants' obstacles and barriers to progress. They helped them to set goals to overcome these and worked towards fulfilling their potential, in the context of their individual set of circumstances.

- The availability of a personal budget allowed case workers the opportunity to help participants quickly overcome logistical barriers to their progress into education or employment, in a person-centred way.

- Participants were generally satisfied with the locations of mentoring meetings and other project-related activities but did, from time-to-time, need help to reach them. There was a keen interest among case workers to set up/develop existing drop-in/hub premises in Abingdon and Witney with a view to enhancing service provision and recruiting more participants.

- The development of meaningful, trust-based mentoring relationships, coupled with wider interactions with people in the workplace or on courses, clearly contributed to the improvement of participants' interpersonal skills and self-confidence.

1.3   PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

- Outcomes varied widely from participant to participant depending on their individual needs, circumstances and goals. A range of practical hard outcome were achieved

including securing a basic income, obtaining household essentials and having enough food to eat. Once in place, these provided many participants a springboard to successfully get into education or paid employment.

- Numerous incremental yet pivotal softer outcomes were also evidenced. These included improved mental health, broadening of horizons, development of hope and aspirations, improved confidence, better self-care, and ability/willingness to trust. This had a positive impact on participants personal identity allowing them to explore different career paths and areas of interest as well as gender identity, and 'becoming an adult'. It was clear that these softer outcomes had been critical precursors to achieving the planned project outcomes of moving into education and employment.

1.4   PROJECT MANAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND MONITORING

- There was active and effective cross-partner communication in place between caseworkers from all three organisations. Regular meetings had recently been scheduled to allow them to periodically discuss challenges and share ideas.

- The value of having a wide network of external partners was highlighted by all case workers, not only to facilitate access to other services such as housing support, but also in order to access a comprehensive range of work placements. Additional focus on the latter may increase the quality and impact of the project going forward.

- Case workers were frustrated about the Participant Exit Form's lack of focus on capturing incremental soft outcomes that are critical to participants becoming work ready and/or entering education. To address this, some were keen to explore making Aspire's Tier System an integral part of the outcomes monitoring process going forward (see Section 3.4.2 for details) - while accepting that the Participant Exit Form needs to be retained. The importance of including case studies in outcomes monitoring was also underlined.

- While participants exited the project 'on paper' when they met the relevant criteria, in practice they often continued to receive open-ended, flexible support. Through this case workers aimed to maximise the sustainability of project outcomes as well as maintain a duty of care towards participants. However, there were concerns about the potential for prolonged dependency and over-stretched resources.

- As is common with projects of this type, some participants disengaged from the project part way through. Case workers often put significant time and effort into encouraging them to reengage. However, there was a lack of clarity about how long they should continue doing this before taking participants off the project completely.

2   INTRODUCTION

Oxford City Council is the lead partner for the UP project. In collaboration with Aspire, they secured funding for the UP project via the Building Better Opportunities (BBO) funding programme which is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and the European Social Fund.

Delivery of the UP project began in January 2017 and runs to end of September 2019. At the time of this evaluation (June 2019) a total of 184 participants had taken part. Funding has recently been secured to continue the project from September 2019 to June 2022.

2.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The UP project was set up to undertake a wide range of activities which aimed to help young people who had been NEET (not in education, employment or training) for six months or more, to discover their true potential.

Specifically, the objectives of the UP project were to:

- Enable young people who were NEET to quickly develop:
    - self-confidence
    - self-esteem
    - work readiness
    - employability skills
- Provide support into meaningful employment, education and training opportunities with a diverse range of local employers and training providers, with ongoing in-work support.

2.2 APPROACH AND CONTEXT

During the period covered by this evaluation, the UP project involved Aspire, based in central Oxford, working in partnership with BYHP, based in North Oxfordshire and SOFEA, based in South Oxfordshire.

Aspire is a multi-award-winning employment charity and social enterprise, established in 2001. It exists to empower vulnerable people facing homelessness, poverty and disadvantage to find employment and housing. It supports over 2000 people every year across Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire.

BYHP was established in 2001 and is a charity based in Banbury that supports young people (aged 13 to 25) who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, and/or disadvantaged. Their services cover three core areas – health and wellbeing, housing and/or homelessness advice and training and employability.

SOFEA was set up in 2014 and is based in Didcot in South Oxfordshire. It focuses on transforming young people's lives through study, work and improved wellbeing. Work experience is provided via their warehouse where, in partnership with FareShare[5], they rescue and re-distribute hundreds of tonnes of food surplus each year to charities throughout the Thames Valley, supporting families in need while reducing food waste.

The UP project offered *"a variety of 'keys to try"*[6] to help participants move away from being NEET. It was delivered through the development of one-to-one mentoring relationships between individual case workers and participants. These facilitated access to other support

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[5] https://fareshare.org.uk/

[6] https://upoxfordshire.org/

services, work experience, volunteering opportunities and a range of courses and accredited qualifications.

Project participants had all been NEET for at least six months and came from a range of backgrounds, but had all experienced one or more forms of serious hardship, trauma or difficult life situations. These included but were not limited to homelessness/ difficulties with securing accommodation, familial problems, caring responsibilities, social isolation, drug/alcohol addiction, limited access to education and suffering abuse. Participant profiles are discussed in more detail in Section 3.1.

2.3 OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION APPROACH

Aspire commissioned Research Oxford to conduct an independent evaluation to help understand the experiences and impact of the project from participant and partner perspectives. They had already collected quantitative data to meet the funders' requirements, so the focus of this evaluation was to capture qualitative data to gain deeper, more holistic insights about the project delivery and outcomes.

This section provides details of how we conducted this evaluation, including information about the research questions, timings, sampling, context and limitations of the approach.

2.3.1 Research Objectives

The research objectives for this evaluation were to gain a deep, robust understanding of the following:

- The participants' experience of the project;
- Partner organisations' experience of the project;
- Outcomes from participant and partner perspectives;
- What has worked well and why;
- What has not worked so well, and why;

In order to inform:

- Evidence-based recommendations for the design of the next phase of the UP project and other projects of this type;
- The design of an annual, qualitative, evaluation of the next phase of the UP project.

2.3.2 Design and Approach

Fieldwork took place in June 2019. Case workers were interviewed at the Aspire premises in one day. Most participants were interviewed face-to-face at the Aspire, BHYP and SOFEA premises or at regular outreach locations. A few who were unable to attend in-person were interviewed by phone and email. The proportion of participant interviews conducted for each partner organisation was based on the proportion of participants that had engaged with each of them. There was also a mix of genders across the interviewees and the table below provides a breakdown of who we spoke to:

Organisation / location in Oxfordshire	Participants	Case workers
Aspire (Oxford City)	9 x face to face interviews @ Aspire 1 x tele-depth interview	4 x face to face interviews @ Aspire
SOFEA (South Oxfordshire/Vale of White Horse)	5 x face to face interviews @ SOFEA/ Costa Abingdon 1 x email response	2 x face to face interviews @ Aspire
BHYP (Cherwell)	2 x face to face interviews @ BHYP	1 x face to face interview @ Aspire

2.4 LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There are some limitations to this evaluation which should be taken into consideration when reading this report. The first is that we only spoke to participants who were still successfully engaged with the project, or who had recently exited. This was mainly due to the difficulty in reaching those who had disengaged. This means that the feedback is unlikely to reflect the less positive experiences of participants, the reasons for this and the insights that this information could provide.

The second limitation relates to the period in which participants had engaged with the project. At the outset of the evaluation we aimed to speak to those who had participated in it between May 2018 to April 2019. However, as fieldwork progressed it became clear that not all the participants interviewed were involved during the specified time period. Indeed, some had only been involved for a matter of weeks. For this reason, the findings actually relate to the period between May 2018 and June 2019.

Thirdly, the lack of a project premises in Abingdon meant that some of the interviews had to take place in a coffee shop environment. This was not ideal as it lacked the privacy and calmness of the rooms used for the other interviews. That said, the participants in question seemed comfortable and were familiar with the venue because it was used regularly for their one-to-one mentoring meetings (see Section 3.2.2 below).

Finally, in three instances, when participants were particularly nervous, or suffered from severe anxiety, case workers were present during their interview. In these cases, we cannot be sure that participants' answers were unaffected by the case workers' presence. However, it did provide a useful opportunity for interviewers to observe the relationship between participants and case workers first-hand.

3 DETAILED FINDINGS

In this section we provide the detailed findings of the evaluation. We begin by outlining the profile of participants, how they discovered the project, why they engaged in it and what their expectations were. We go on to cover key aspects of the project delivery, content and management. Finally, we discuss findings relating to participant outcomes.

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

This section explores participants' situations prior to engaging with the project, their discovery and expectations of the project, and the reasons they continued to engage with it.

3.1.1 Participants' situations prior to project engagement

Participants' back-stories and specific circumstances varied a great deal across the eighteen interviews conducted. They included, but were not limited to;

- Autism
- Disabilities / learning difficulties
- Caring responsibilities
- Complicated family relationships
- Chaotic family / home situations
- Gender dysphoria / transition
- Mental health issues, with anxiety being the most common

A number of participants indicated that prior to engaging in the project, they had become 'stuck' or stagnated in their lives.

> *"I was just sat at home doing nothing."*
>
> Participant

The specific reasons for this were varied but always linked to one or more of the challenges listed above. The way in which these played out at home and/or at school, college or in the workplace very often led, or contributed, to some form of mental health problem.

> *"I wouldn't talk to people, I wouldn't do stuff. I wouldn't go out of my way to do activities...Eight months ago I was literally like boxed in a cage, you know, I wouldn't come out, in a sense."*
>
> Participant

> *"I'd got diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety and then…you can't go to work just yet until you're ready to get back on your feet"*
>
> Participant

This mix of issues contributed toward participants' struggles to gain education and/or employment due to particular barriers, for example anxiety about interviews or difficulties in completing paperwork. Meanwhile, others highlighted the difficulties they had experienced with self-motivation;

> *"Well, I guess before I started, I was struggling to find the jobs that would suit me, and trying to go to interviews if I had one. The hardest part was the interviews."*
>
> Participan

> *"It's like...I couldn't be arsed to do nothing. I was sleeping all the time….Yeah, I'd sleep all the time, just couldn't be arsed to do nothing."*
>
> Participant

The following examples illustrate in more detail the range of complex personal circumstances and challenges faced by project participants. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

CASE STUDY ONE: Rebecca

Rebecca, aged 20, had not been in education since leaving school. She had not been in any paid employment and had experienced a long period of depression and anxiety, primarily linked to her gender dysphoria and the impact this was having on her identity in relation to applying for work or training. *"I would definitely say I felt confused, and almost a bit isolated in a way."* Having begun her transition, another obstacle to progress was successfully navigating the necessary path to an official name change.

"That was one of my big things before, because obviously having to use my previous name is, you know, and then having to explain the whole transgender thing and stuff like that, it's a bit awkward, and it's quite stressful and draining…"

CASE STUDY TWO: Diane

Diane was aged 20 when she engaged in the project. She had been NEET for over three years and was living in supported housing. She had previously quit her college course, while still living with her parents, because she felt misunderstood by the staff regarding the support she was providing at home. "*They turned around saying, 'Your mum should be cleaning the whole house, it's not your problem'… Even though she's classed as disabled."*

Talking about the challenges she faced Diane also explained that *"I do have Asperger's, so I struggle to explain things properly."*

3.1.2   Participant discovery and expectations of the project

Participants became aware of the UP project via a range of channels. Quite a few described being signposted via their local Job Centre. This was not always a direct sign-post to the project itself but often to general services offered by the partner organisations;

> *"My job coach gave me a leaflet about this whole place [Aspire] when I was visiting at the Jobcentre one day, because he thought that it would help me"*
>
> Participant

Another route for referral was via other agency interaction. For example, from key workers of participants living in supported housing. There were also a lot of word-of-mouth referrals, particularly through peers and parents who had been involved with partner organisations, via UP or otherwise.

Almost all participants said they would recommend the UP project to friends and acquaintances if they were facing similar difficulties engaging with education or work. This underlined the importance of, and impact of, word-of-mouth referrals.

> *"I was meeting up with [another project participant] and she introduced me to [interview participant] and said, 'I think he might need some help.'"*
>
> Case worker

Participants' advocacy for the project was further evidenced by the view that it should be introduced to young people at an earlier life stage, through schools and colleges.

So, I would say working with schools would be a really big one, … Because, especially a project like this that is so flexible, and is so helpful, I think there would be an abundance of students in schools and colleges who would say 'I really need that.'"

<div align="right">Participant</div>

General awareness of partners and/or previous involvement was also a notable route to engagement. Participants who had previously had positive experiences with the partner organisations were open to engaging with the project and this engendered a basic level of trust from the outset.

"Yeah, they [SOFEA] said 'we think that you'd benefit from this a lot'" I'm like,'Okay. I would do anything to try and get my life back on track', so I was like,'Yeah, why not?'"

<div align="right">Participant</div>

"I was with them [Aspire] before, but then there was like… I stopped seeing them for a while. Then I came back, then they said about the project, I thought, 'Interested,' and it's helped me a big lot."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

One participant found out about the UP project simply by conducting an online search as described below;

"I found it online, just through a google search, along with a few others."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Reflecting on their expectations of the project at the start, participants generally indicated that they were open minded, albeit slightly unsure about what to expect. For some there had been a sense that 'there's nothing to lose'. Being NEET for an extended period of time, meant participants felt that if something positive happened, it would be a bonus.

"It was like, if it's going to happen, it'll happen but, like, if it works then even better, so, that was literally just the case of it."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

With the majority of participants suffering from some form of anxiety, it was not surprising there was apprehension about engaging with the project.

"I was worried, because that's just how I am. I've got bad anxiety, so I was worried at the time. I didn't know what to expect."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Some participants had expected there to be more emphasis on self-guided development and were, therefore, pleasantly surprised at the level of individual support provided.

"Yeah, I think I expected it to be a very much a self-help focused thing, and it is but the coaching really goes a long way to making sure you know what to do next."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

In summary, participants discovered the project via a mix of word-of-mouth and recommendation, signposting from other services, on-line searches and approaching or re-engaging with partner organisations. Participant's advocacy for the project was further evidenced by a suggestion that it could be made available as an earlier intervention via schools and colleges. In general, their expectations at the start of the project were

relatively low and there was often a degree of apprehension about taking part, normally linked to issues with anxiety and self-confidence.

3.1.3   Reasons for engagement

While participant expectations were not necessarily high on initial discovery of the project, they were certainly exceeded as they became engaged. Regardless of how they came to discover the project, and what they expected of it, the participants identified a variety of reasons for deciding to engage with it. Unsurprisingly, the initial decision was determined by their individual circumstances. Some were keen to get 'unstuck' from the monotony of having nothing to do. Others wanted to overcome the fact that they felt a lack of direction, unable to make decisions about their future.

> *"I'm just…I'm fed up of not really doing anything with my life at the minute, because it gets really repetitive, not doing anything, all day every day"*
>
> Participant

> *"I didn't really have any, like, ideas of what I wanted to do."*
>
> Participant

A number of participants decided to take part because they wanted support in learning to manage, or overcome, mental health issues that they felt were holding them back.

> *"I was just more hoping for help with being able to get my self-esteem back or my health and everything back up so I just needed that support of someone being able to give me the support of working with me and build myself back up with my confidence and stuff like that"*
>
> Participant

While almost all participants said they wanted to gain employment, some felt more work-ready than others at the start, highlighting that this was their primary motivation for engaging.

> *"You know, help me apply for jobs if some of them are hard to do, and also get some job-related advice like interview skills and other things related to jobs, really."*
>
> Participant

We also noted that some participants felt as though they were work-ready at the outset of the project. However, case workers highlighted that, in some cases, it was important for them to gauge the extent to which this was the case and work with participants to identify and address any gaps. This is discussed further in Section 4.2 below.

3.2   PROJECT DELIVERY AND CONTENT

This section covers findings relating to project delivery and content, including project partners, format and location, flexibility of approach, personal budgets, barriers, goal setting and pace.

3.2.1   Project partners

The UP project was delivered by seven case workers each employed by one of the three project partner organisations. We found that it sat very comfortably within all three of these organisations, albeit for slightly different reasons. Each partner setting had a range of opportunities and resources to offer participants including at least one of the following -

work experience, access to free courses, clubs, essential food supplies and space to socialise. Findings relating to project delivery and content all fit within the broader context of these partner organisations, including their physical location.

3.2.2 Format and location

One-to-one mentoring was delivered via a mix of face-to-face meetings, phone calls, texts and emails. At times, case workers also accompanied participants to meetings and appointments to provide advocacy and / or emotional and practical support. Without exception, participants and case workers highlighted the one-to-one format as critical to the success of the project. The following comment illustrates the value placed on the mentoring by participants;

> *"Fun, motivating, helpful. Trustworthy … good, kind .. everything really."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Comments like this one were echoed throughout the in-depth interviews by participants who clearly had formed a strong bond with their respective case workers, discussed further in the next section. In addition to the one-to-one mentoring, a small amount of group activity had been included in the project at Aspire. From the limited amount of feedback gathered on this topic (from just one case worker) this appeared to be useful.

> *"I started doing some group work with the… some of the young people that come in, and they all quite enjoy it, because I said, 'Oh, well, you know, we've done it for a few months now, maybe it's time to not do it,' and they're like, 'No, no, we still want to do it.' So, I think they really need that social interaction, because a lot of them are missing that."*
>
> <div align="right">Case worker</div>

While the emphasis on one-to-one mentoring was favoured by all participants, there was a suggestion that more targeted group activities could be added to the options on offer via the project.

> *"Send a group of people to a big job fair or something, and I guess have a little talk with the people there, and also do a group activity where we all learn how to do well in the employment-finding environment."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

When asked about the location of the mentoring meetings and other project-related activities participants were generally satisfied. Some met their mentors at the relevant partner's premises (i.e. Aspire, BYHP) and others (i.e. those based in Abingdon and Witney), had their meetings wherever was convenient. Often this was in a local coffee shop such as Costa in Abingdon. One participant commented on the state of dis-repair of the Aspire building. However, they were keen to point out that it did not bother them personally.

> *"It's a bit run down, which doesn't bother me, but the first time I came here, it definitely struck me as less of a business, office vibe, which is a good thing, given that it's not really that, it's helpful people, but I think there's probably things that they could do which would make their lives more convenient."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

A few participants indicated that the location of some courses or work experience opportunities had proved difficult for them due to the distance from their home.

> *"I live in Cowley, so I need to get a bus from mine…. So, a bus from mine to town, a bus from town to the station, a train, and then a 30-minute walk to get there."*
>
> Participant

However, in the main it was clear that case workers supported the participants in overcoming obstacles to attending meetings, appointments and courses whenever possible. This was often made possible by the availability of the 'personal budgets'. Further information about these is provided in Section 3.2.7 below.

In the areas, where there were no partner premises, case workers saw potential value in having a central project hub where participants could drop-in or arrange an appointment to see their case worker. It was suggested that this could allow for more privacy and also provide an opportunity for recruiting more participants to the project - harnessing the power of peer-to-peer recommendations.

> *"I'd like to think that there may be a hub in Abingdon, so finding an actual venue where we're based on a specific day and I would commit to that. Because I feel that would be an improvement… that would really help."*
>
> Case Worker

With this in mind, a drop-in location had recently been established in Witney but was still in the early stages and seen as limited and in need of development.

> *"So, moving forward, I would love to have that space, because that's what young people are telling me they need, but I'm not sure it's the right place that we've got at the moment. So that's a real, kind of area that I'd like to develop."*
>
> Case Worker

Overall, feedback from participants and case workers evidenced that the one-to-one mentoring was a highly effective format for delivery of the project and pivotal to its success. Some ad-hoc group activities had been arranged and there was scope to explore extending these in the future but only in addition to, not instead of, the mentoring. Participants were generally satisfied with the locations of mentoring meetings and other project-related activities but did need help to reach them from time-to-time. There is an appetite among case workers to set up/develop existing drop-in/hub premises in Abingdon and Witney with a view to enhancing service provision and recruiting more participants.

3.2.3   Meaningful relationships

Strong bonds were formed between case workers and participants throughout the mentoring process. When participants described their first meeting with their respective mentors, they often underlined how this cemented their decision to engage with the project and how it helped them to feel positive about the potential benefits of it. This was powerfully illustrated by the description that one participant gave of this experience.

> *"I initially met [case worker] and then I was like "this is going to work out, it's going to be better" [than previous attempts to help] because as soon as we met we just clicked and I went, "she's going to be able to help me and I just know it."*
>
> Participant

Feedback from another participant further underlined the strong positive connection that had developed between her and her mentor;

"I like working with her a lot, because I love all the help she's been giving me recently…You know, it helped me out a lot with the things that I struggled with before I came here."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Another participant talked about developing respect for his mentor through the close bond that they had created. Interestingly, this participant had only been involved in the project for around four weeks.

"Don't know how to describe it. I, kind of, like, look up to him…Well I've never really had, like, a man figure in my life. So, that's been really helpful."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Importantly, participants unanimously believed that their case workers wanted to help them. This belief had been consistently reinforced by the case workers' demonstration of their commitment to this aim throughout the process.

"I think we're both committed to the mentoring we do…sometimes we've done twice, two meetings a week. So, I don't think there needs improving either, no."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Aside from the relationships that participants developed with their case workers, the UP project provided opportunities to engage with others via work experience. In general, these relationships developed well.

"I mean, I go out a lot more now. I'm a lot more confident as a person"

<div align="right">Participant</div>

The development of meaningful, trust-based mentoring relationships, coupled with wider interactions with people in the workplace or on courses, clearly contributed to the improvement of participants' interpersonal skills and self-confidence.

3.2.4 Identifying barriers and setting goals

Having built rapport and trust with participants, case workers spent time during the early mentoring sessions working out what the barriers were for each individual and understanding steps to help overcome these. Sometimes this was also about building their confidence to push themselves and resilience to continue when things did not go to plan right away.

"Yeah it was really helpful, they were like, once it wasn't successful, we started looking again for more. We just kept on going. They were really supportful."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Some barriers, simply to engaging in the opportunities provided by the project, were fundamental and more difficult to overcome. This was evidenced by one participant who was a carer;

"I did go to one of the meetings, like one of the work experience sort of things. It was a music one here, but that was quite a while ago. All the others, I'm normally busy [with caring responsibilities] unfortunately."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

One of the stated aims of the project was to help participants to become work ready. In the context of participants' different starting points (discussed above) progress towards work-

readiness meant that their goals needed to be tailored to individual circumstances. For some participants having the opportunity to discuss interests and map those onto potential career paths, helped them to consider and short-list options that they might not have thought of before;

> *"Well, we were just talking about what I can do to help me and all that. And I showed him my art that I drew and stuff like that. And then he said I should go into illustration and animation at college."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Building on an existing strength or interest was useful in that it often led to more positive reinforcement for participants who needed it. Another desired skill was that of developing coping strategies to make going out to work a more realistic option for some participants. The focus for others was on developing and sticking to a daily routine that was compatible with going out to work. Sometimes this meant a change in sleep patterns and improving the approach to personal care.

> *There's days where I'm like, "I can't be bothered today" but I'm like, "Actually, I enjoy doing it." So, I get out of bed, "let's go".*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Case workers also highlighted the value of having regular meetings and sticking to agreed dates and times where possible as a precursor to work readiness. Support in development of other new or different habits further aimed to ensure participants could engage with work and colleagues in an effective and sustainable way. In addition, some very tangible, practical goals were set including the completion of various courses, getting important official documents in place such as birth certificates for ID purposes and applying for a provisional driving licence.

> *Because basically, when I started coming to Aspire, I had nothing, and she was just like, "Right OK, we'll get you a birth certificate, your original."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

During the mentoring meetings, case workers appeared to work hard to identify participants' obstacles and barriers to progress. They then helped them to set goals to overcome these and work towards fulfilling their potential, in the context of their individual set of circumstances. Remaining consistent with this person-centred approach it was also important to work at a pace that suited each individual participant. We go on to discuss this next.

3.2.5 Pace

Closely linking to the flexible person-centred principles of the UP project, case workers clearly highlighted the importance of working with participants at the pace that suited their individual set of circumstances.

> *"I don't go in all guns blazing, right education, what are we going to do? because they seem to have either been through that process and had professionals saying, 'You need to be in work'. Well, if they've got trauma and they've got bad experience…they just refuse…they're often in…a bit of a negative, kind of, pattern where they would be sleeping all day. Or socialising with other people who are out of education or employment consistently, and they all convince each other that they're doing the right thing."*

While some quick progress was seen as positive, it was clear that not all participants were in a position to change fast, and case workers focused on the need for positive outcomes to be sustainable, as opposed achieving quick wins. For example, while a participant may have felt determined to achieve employment as soon as possible, once engaged they may not have been able to sustain momentum. This was usually due to them not having the right internal and/or external support mechanisms in place. Case workers all highlighted the importance of sustainability in this regard and strived to ensure participants worked at what they felt was an appropriate pace.

> *"Each young person that I've worked with has been completely different. So, my approach to everyone is, just begin to get to know them, they get to know me and then figure out their pathway and what they really, actually want as their long-term goal."*

<div align="right">Case Worker</div>

The overall focus of the mentoring has been to support positive progress, at a pace that suits the participant, while including some 'stretch' where possible - rather than simply ticking the 'getting a job' box. For example, encouraging participants to gently push themselves, to the next step and reach their potential depending on individual circumstances and life stage – be that getting out of the house or sustaining a job for more than a month.

3.2.6 Flexible approach

One of the key strengths of the project, highlighted by both the case workers and participants, was the case workers' ability to be flexible and highly person-centred within the mentoring relationship. Participants described how case workers would often work around them, meeting them where they felt comfortable, at times that worked for them both and had an open approach to contact, enabling extra questions or last-minute changes to plans.

> *"We literally catch up for like three hours straight…if I need her, like, I can always just message her or ring her and ask her and she'll always like try…most of the time she can do it because she's pretty good like that…It's just like, we've just got this friendship."*

<div align="right">Participant</div>

> *"With individual clients I have met them in the community, so I often meet them either at Costa, or at Greggs, wherever they feel comfortable."*

<div align="right">Case Worker</div>

While there was overwhelming support for the flexible nature of the mentoring relationships, some of the feedback from participants indicated that they did not always know what to expect from their meetings. In general, this was not seen as a problem but one participant, who was autistic, identified that he would like to agree and stick to a plan for what a meeting would include. He also expressed a preference for having longer weekly sessions (although he had not articulated this to his case worker).

> *"It's usually for an hour, which is fine…for an hour, we search on the internet for jobs, apply for them, and… next week, if there isn't any job things I see, we do the anxiety bit where, to be honest, I would actually prefer it if one of those days it could be…*

One hour would be job searching, if I had anything saved or we found something, and then after that we focus on the anxiety bit, and that could be the end."

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Staying mindful of the person-centred principles of the project this example suggests that, for some participants, there may be a need to leave room to agree what will be covered during future meetings, encourage them to express their preferences and manage expectations if necessary. Managing participant expectations is further discussed in the context of exiting the project in Section 3.4.4.

3.2.7 Personal budget

During the interviews we heard that another important element of the project was that case workers had access to a small 'personal budget' for each participant. The purpose of this was to facilitate the purchase of items that would make a positive and practical difference to the individual, helping them on their journey towards employment, education or training. Feedback from both participants and case workers underlined the value and importance of the availability of this budget.

From the case workers' perspective, it was an important aspect of their person-centred approach to supporting participants. Indeed, the variety of purchases made across the different participants highlights the flexibility this afforded, as illustrated in the following case studies. Names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

CASE STUDY ONE: David's story

David had contacted Aspire because he wanted help with his CV and finding a job. A member of staff mentioned the UP project which led him to think that *"Okay, maybe I could get a job, or they could help me.*"

To begin with David's case worker had helped him to overcome some fundamental barriers to employment linked to social skills and confidence.

"Yeah, I was very shy. I couldn't really, like, talk to people, but Aspire have helped me do that... I can be... have more conversation with people, like speak to them more, have conversations, make new friends."

The next step was to identify where David's interests and skills lay with the aim of helping him onto a career path that was sustainable and fulfilling. Following this his case worker supported him to find potential job opportunities, develop his CV and apply for positions.

At the time of the evaluation David had been in paid employment for two months. Speaking about his new job he commented;

"Yeah, I'm really enjoying it. But I wouldn't have been able to get here without [case worker's help."

David explaining that, while he had secured work, without some special clothing and having the money to pay for travel to get to work, he would not have been able to accept it. This is where the importance of the 'personal budget' was highlighted because it allowed his case worker to purchase key items to help him overcome these final barriers to employment.

"And they've helped me get some new boots, because I didn't have steel toecaps at the time, so they helped me get them, and bus pass."

CASE STUDY TWO: Jenny's story

Jenny was a full-time carer for her father. Before starting the mentoring relationship as part of the UP project, Jenny had been diagnosed with severe depression and anxiety. With the demands of caring for her father taking up all of her time, she describes herself as being in a situation at the start of the project where *"it's not easy to look forward."* The practical demands and high level of responsibility of Jenny's caring role had clearly compounded, if not caused, her mental ill health:

"I wasn't you know a girl"

"I was having to hand wash his clothes… and then I'd have to run around thinking of what I need for him."

Rather than starting with a job search, Jenny and her case worker set their sights on building *"confidence and self esteem"*. A precursor to this was enabling Jenny to have time to focus on her own needs and development. The purchase of a washing machine, made possible by the UP project personal budget, helped to facilitate this. Jenny said that the washing machine meant that *"I can do what I need to do while the washer's on."*

At the time of interview Jenny, eight months into the UP project, described herself as now being *"a typical girl"*. She has had the time and space to develop her interests and aspirations with her case worker's support. This included having two of her photos entered into an exhibition, where she has met new people and has been able to leave the house. She says that the UP project has *"given me the ability to find out my abilities for work…planning what I like."* She had also developed an understanding of the need to attend to her own wellbeing and how to make this happen under very challenging circumstances.

Jenny says in reference to following her interests, *"I realised, like, 'actually you should do that because it's good for you, it'll do you good."'* In this case the practical enabler of a washing machine has acted as a catalyst for real change in Jenny's life, helping her to look to the future more positively.

"It's helped, it's helped a lot to decide on what I want to do and where I want to go. I haven't fully got there but I'm getting there slowly."

3.3   PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

In this section we discuss the findings that relate to the outcomes achieved by project participants. Where relevant, we have intentionally linked these back to the incremental changes discussed throughout Section 3.2. this provides evidence of the distance many participants needed to travel in order to become work-ready.

Hard outcomes achieved by participants included gaining paid employment as a result of help with preparing CVs, support to find suitable vacancies, administration/paperwork and interview preparation. All participants clearly attributed their success in achieving these outcomes to the help they received through the UP project.

> *I've had this job for nearly two months. It's at the Westgate; it's in a car park… Operations. They helped me get that. I'm basically helping people with their lost tickets, fixing the machines, helping people who have lost cars…Yeah, I'm really enjoying it. But I wouldn't have been able to get here without [the UP team's] help.*

> Participant

Other incremental hard outcomes had acted as building blocks towards employment and more holistic, longer-term life goals. These began at the most basic level, for example obtaining food in order to function, securing a basic income to live on and obtaining household items;

> "She brings food parcels as well. Because I'm on short money at the moment with the Jobcentre, so she helps me out with food. So, it's pretty good, yeah."
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Outcomes further along the road to employment included being enrolled on courses, securing a place at college, attaining or improving on GCSE grades, passing a driving theory test or moving home.

> 'It's got me into EMBS, which is a, like, kind of, small college thing… I'm doing functional skills and maths and English. So, it's getting those up and that way I've got better grades.'
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Other participants were not always keen to re-enter a traditional educational setting due to negative experiences they had had in the past. Instead, they engaged with alternatives such as completing various on-line- courses to boost their CVs.

> "You'll choose the ones that are relevant to your goals, so I chose alcohol awareness, and licensing laws, but there's things like fire safety, and a whole host of things which are somewhat tedious sounding, but sound very good on a CV, which is the idea behind them"

Some of the incremental hard outcomes were important enablers on the path towards moving away from being NEET. For example, registering with the job centre to enable them to secure a basic income via Universal Credits and support with name change for transgender participants.

> "I got my name legally changed, which was an obstacle my family and I were struggling to get over. Now if and when I do get a job a major insecurity has been lifted."
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

These hard outcomes clearly link with soft outcomes. For example, a participant passing his driving theory test gave him the confidence to believe he could learn to drive, obtain his own transport and be able to travel to a job.

The involvement of participants in leisure, arts and sports activities (gym and football for example) through the project had given some participants a sense of purpose and direction. Improved social skills was an outcome for many project participants. One said that they now have more "*conversations*" as a result of participating in the project. This, and their engagement in the UP project itself meant participants were positively engaging with their community.

> "I come out a lot more now, and I never used to. I used to just stay inside. But I'm out nearly every day now. So, it's helped a lot."
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

Participants attributed outcomes relating to improved mental health, particularly in relation to anxiety, to their involvement in the UP project. Some recognised this as the critical precursor to having the confidence to engage with others and begin job-hunting;

> *"The other thing we also did here is, she also covered many aspects of the anxiety part, where she pointed out, you know, a lot of things that causes us to feel nervous and down when we feel that way … You know, ways to overcome it, and how to feel better, and the many techniques to overcome your anxiety."*

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Participants reported that others in their life, such as their parents, had recognised a real change in their behaviour.

> *"I've changed. I've changed to be someone better than I was…. Like my mum and dad, I mean, they… say that I'm completely different than I was."*

<div align="right">Participant</div>

Outcomes varied widely from participant to participant depending on their individual needs, circumstances and goals. Overall, participants had clearly achieved a range of hard outcomes such as getting into education or employment, as well as softer outcomes such as improved mental health, broadening of horizons, development of hope and aspirations, improved confidence, improved self-care, and ability/willingness to trust. This has had a positive impact on their personal identity from the angle of exploring different career pathways and areas of interest as well as gender, and 'becoming an adult'.

Finally, it is important to note that some participants had only been engaged on the project for a matter of weeks, so progress towards their goals was still very much a 'work in progress', but all reported a number of positive outcomes as a result of taking part.

3.4 PROJECT MANAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND MONITORING

The next section focuses on the processes around project management including communication, partnerships, monitoring outcomes and managing project exit.

3.4.1 Communication and partnerships

One of the positive aspects that case workers emphasised about the project was the ongoing communication they had across the various teams and partners involved. Although there did not appear to have been a formal check-in process in place, case workers were very aware of the work that was happening at the different partner locations. Also, we learned that regular meetings had recently been set up allowing case workers from each organisation to discuss challenges and share ideas.

So, despite being involved in a cross–organisational project, case workers presented as a cohesive team during the interviews. This was evidenced by various examples of cross-referral between partner organisations, which appeared to be fairly commonplace. Cross-referral was particularly useful when a project participant had a change in circumstances. In these instances, case workers were able to appropriately respond with an alternative offer of support, as opposed to the participant in question dropping out of the project entirely.

> *"It's been really good. The partners that are on the project, I think it's been really, really useful. We have meetings quite a lot anyway, just to link up. Like I said, because we have someone based in each area as such, if a client moves out of area, it means they don't lose the support, which is really good. It means we can refer through… It's been really simple, the handover process.."*

<div align="right">Case Worker</div>

The value of having a wider network of external partners was highlighted by all case workers, not only to facilitate access to other services such as housing support, but also in order to access a comprehensive range of work placements.

Once they had determined where a participant's particular area of interest lay, case workers were keen to connect them with relevant work experience opportunities. Whilst most case workers felt that they had a reasonable range of contacts, it was clear that there was not always an existing link with a suitable organisation.
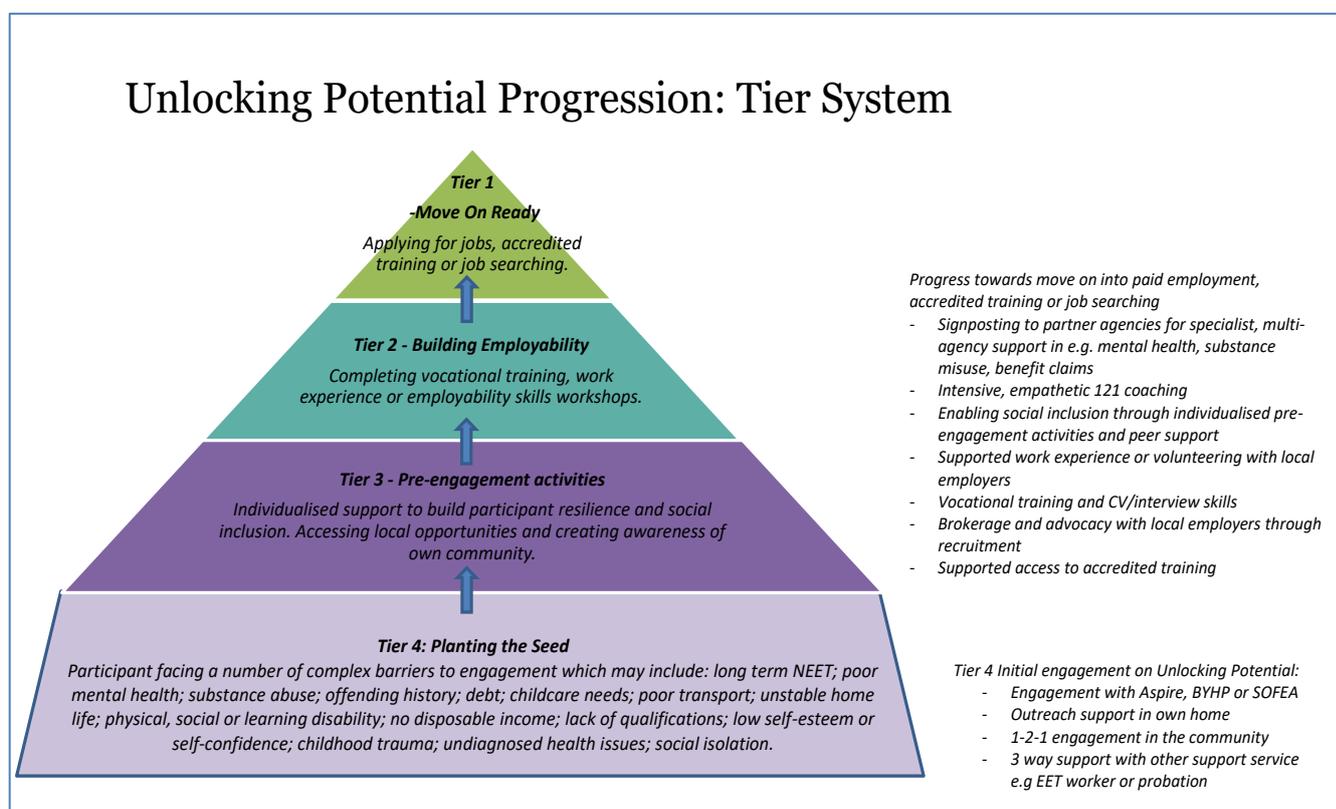
> *"I would love to get to a point where I've got lots of, like, painting and decorating and horticulture, and retail, kind of, voluntary… more of a diverse range of volunteering ready. That's what I need to do, I think. I think that will really help. Because even if I had somebody that doesn't know what they want, I'd love to be able to go 'Well, just go and try that on Wednesday, let's just see.'"*

Case Worker

This meant that, at times, case workers were putting a great deal of time and effort into widening their volunteering and work experience networks. However, in the meantime their first port of call became whoever was most easily accessible at the time of searching. In general, case workers saw the development of their external partner network as their responsibility but highlighted that some additional support in this area would help to increase the quality and positive impact of their work.

3.4.2   Monitoring Outcomes

Two approaches have been used to monitor participant outcomes. Some caseworkers had been using a model, already in use at Aspire for other projects, called the Tier System – see below.

Unlocking Potential Progression: Tier System

Tier 1
-Move On Ready
Applying for jobs, accredited training or job searching.

Tier 2 - Building Employability
Completing vocational training, work experience or employability skills workshops.

Tier 3 - Pre-engagement activities
Individualised support to build participant resilience and social inclusion. Accessing local opportunities and creating awareness of own community.

Tier 4: Planting the Seed
Participant facing a number of complex barriers to engagement which may include: long term NEET; poor mental health; substance abuse; offending history; debt; childcare needs; poor transport; unstable home life; physical, social or learning disability; no disposable income; lack of qualifications; low self-esteem or self-confidence; childhood trauma; undiagnosed health issues; social isolation.

Progress towards move on into paid employment, accredited training or job searching
- *Signposting to partner agencies for specialist, multi-agency support in e.g. mental health, substance misuse, benefit claims*
- *Intensive, empathetic 121 coaching*
- *Enabling social inclusion through individualised pre-engagement activities and peer support*
- *Supported work experience or volunteering with local employers*
- *Vocational training and CV/interview skills*
- *Brokerage and advocacy with local employers through recruitment*
- *Supported access to accredited training*

Tier 4 Initial engagement on Unlocking Potential:
- *Engagement with Aspire, BYHP or SOFEA*
- *Outreach support in own home*
- *1-2-1 engagement in the community*
- *3 way support with other support service e.g EET worker or probation*

The aim of this model is to provide a consistent way of monitoring progress which, crucially, tracks 'distance travelled' as well as the achievement of overarching project outcomes.

The second approach to monitoring participant outcomes was that which was required by the project funders. This involved the completion of the "Participant Exit Form" (See Annex One) and asked participants to provide information about their employment status (Pages 2 & 3). In addition, they were asked to indicate whether their confidence levels had 'improved', 'stayed the same' or 'not improved' compared to when they joined the project – both "*about yourself*" and "*about your potential to find a job.*" (Page 5).

A particular area of frustration expressed by case workers was around the use of the Participant Exit Form as the primary tool to monitor project outcomes. While they recognised the importance of gathering this information, they felt it did not provide a full picture of the impact of their work in that it omitted the incremental 'soft' outcomes that underpinned the participants' ability to ultimately move away from being NEET.

> *"Certainly from everyone that I've spoken to within the project, which is pretty much everyone, I think people have really big successes, but then they're not... they aren't really counted as outcomes... So, where people don't leave the house, for example, sort of actually engaging with them in the first place is actually quite a big step for them. Then, coming out from their house, even if it's just visiting a shop or something, actually it's a massive thing for them, so then you're already making some helpful changes."*

<div align="right">Case worker</div>

Case workers did acknowledge that they were encouraged to submit case studies about their participants to help augment and expand on the quantitative feedback provided on the Participant Exit Form. However, despite the provision for these case studies to be submitted, there seemed to be an inconsistent approach amongst case workers to this process; with some case workers saying that they wrote case studies as much as possible and other saying there was not enough time available to do so.

> *"So, we do case studies, try and do them for each client, especially if it's a case where, actually, a one-page exit form doesn't really explain what's gone on and everything we've done."*

<div align="right">Case worker</div>

> *"I don't ever get the time to do a case study."*

<div align="right">Case worker</div>

Some concerns were also expressed about whether the case studies were taken into consideration for evaluation purposes.

> *"And I guess it would just add more time to the paperwork, but it'd be nice just to know that the case studies had been acknowledged, and all these softer outcomes…"*

<div align="right">Case worker</div>

In summary, the Tier System was favoured by those who used it because of its suitability for recording the distance travelled by participants and the more incremental softer outcomes achieved on their journey towards education, training or employment. This prompted the suggestion that it be adopted as a more integral part of the outcomes monitoring process to compliment the detailed Participant Exit Form and ensure the distance travelled by participants is fully acknowledged moving forward. Finally, there was an inconsistent approach to the submission of participant case studies, however this may be addressed by providing more clarity around how they contribute to the outcomes monitoring process.

3.4.4 Managing project exit

Formal exit from the project, according to the project guidelines, is dependent on one of three triggers:

- Secured paid work

- Secured on to a form of recognised training

- Moved from being economically inactive (i.e. no income) to being registered as actively job searching

Participants only needed to meet one of these criteria and once this has been achieved, they were recorded as having exited but could continue to receive support from their case worker for a further month.

Feedback from case workers and participants evidenced that, in practice, a much more flexible approach was taken to full withdrawal of mentoring support. The following feedback from a participant, who had been employed for approximately eight months at the time of the evaluation, demonstrates that, in some cases, the relationships continue for a significant period beyond official exit, albeit in an ad hoc way.

> *I still check back in when I'm free, off work kind of thing, because I want to also improve my English, my maths. My maths isn't that bad. It's my English, and my English is rubbish.*

> Participant

Post exit, all caseworkers felt it was important for participants to be able to access support from them beyond the first month. Furthermore, that there should be a degree of flexibility with the potential not to be too specific about when the support would stop as this could trigger anxiety and uncertainty for the participant. They saw the main purpose of post-exit support as being to ensure that the young people stayed on track with their plans, providing a safety net if they encountered set-backs.

> *"But I've got this support network around me. These young people don't have that. So, we're essentially doing that, then they get a job and we take away a big part of their support network. So, there's something we need to think about, about job retention."*

> Case worker

> *"For me, if we want to be successful, then it's actually retention, it's not just, they've got a job...if I'd have set them up too quickly, and then they go in there and they get told that they've done something wrong, and yet their behaviours aren't quite, you know, quite relaxed enough to accept someone giving them any kind of criticism, and then they kick off and tell them to "eff off". Could happen. And then they're back to square one, they're no longer allowed back, our project has closed them, and then they don't have the support and they're fit for a failure...at the moment I'd like to think that we could keep it open and monitor them."*

> Case worker

However, it was accepted that, by providing flexible, on-going support they ran the risk of promoting long-term dependency which, in turn, could impede the development of self-reliance and become a drain on project resources.

> *"At the same time though, we don't want them to become reliant on us. So, this is one of the dangers around the work we do, is they… We gain their trust, they start to open up, we start to move forward, and then they become over-reliant on us."*
>
> <div align="right">Case worker</div>

Participant feedback supported this to some extent:

> *"Well I think, me personally, I find it very hard to self-motivate, but when I'm doing something for someone else, as it were, just with that little bit of input, I find it much easier to motivate myself to do things."*
>
> <div align="right">Participant</div>

According to the case workers, some participants have exited the project before meeting the exit criteria, by simply disengaging. This has normally been due to a wide range of factors. It was felt that negative influences from peers can trigger this for some, as illustrated in this comment:

> *"Some young people disengage again. They might have a culture of, maybe, other young people around the area, and whether they go into drug dealing. It's very difficult, because it's very easy to go into drug dealing if they're worried about money, and don't feel like they're capable of earning money."*
>
> <div align="right">Case worker</div>

However, disengagement can just as easily be caused by increased caring responsibilities, difficult family situations or a relapse in mental health. One case worker gave an example that related a situation where a sibling was potentially being taken into care.

> *"All of her family then are up in arms, and she's speaking to grandparents and parents, and she's going round to help. So, it, kind of, has taken over a lot of her time. And that caused disengagement."*
>
> <div align="right">Case worker</div>

In overview we learned that the exit process is more flexible and open-ended in practice than outlined in the project guidelines. This is due to the importance placed, by case workers, on maximising the sustainability of the project outcomes for participants and feeling a duty of care not to let them down post exit. However, it was acknowledged that there is a risk of creating long-term dependency and over-stretching project resources.

When it came to participants disengaging from the project, case workers fully anticipated that a degree of this was inevitable for a project of this kind. However, they were not always clear as to how long they should keep trying to re-engage with a participant, before taking them off the project.

4   RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking ahead to the next stage of the UP project (referred to as BBO2), we recommend continuing to include the many successful aspects outlined in the findings above while considering some potential improvements:

4.1   MOVING FORWARD: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT DESIGN

- **Extend the network** - Having access to a comprehensive range of work experience opportunities is key to the success of this project. Case workers put a great deal of

time and effort into building links to facilitate this but it is time consuming and needs to fit in with their multiple responsibilities as mentors and recruiters. Provision of additional support to help extend this network could help ease the burden on the case workers and allow for stronger relationships to be made with potential employers and existing networks - for example Aspire's Inclusive Recruitment Network[7].

- **Provide project hubs in Witney and Abingdon** – Explore options for providing a project hub in Abingdon and developing the current drop-in centre in Witney. The aim would be to enhance the support provided to existing participants and facilitate recruitment.

- **Consider more group activities** – Identify potential opportunities to introduce more group activities to the project, but not at the expense of the one-to-one mentoring. The aim would be to help further develop participants' social skills and encourage engagement in the wider community.

- **Improve clarity around post-exit support and re-engagement** - Participants and case workers are likely to benefit from having more clarity about the parameters for post-exit support – with the focus on providing a useful safety net while avoiding over dependency and achieving a healthy closure for the mentoring relationship. One possible solution could be to conduct a six monthly 'check in' following project exit. If this were the case, it could also be a useful time to do some follow-up evaluation with these participants to learn about longer-term project outcomes.

- **Include soft outcomes and distance travelled in outcome monitoring process** – In recognition of the importance of incremental, softer outcomes to becoming work/education ready, explore the potential to make the Tier System (see Section 3.4.2) and case studies more integral to the 'formal' outcomes monitoring process rather than relying solely on the Participant Exit Form (Annex One).

- **Early intervention** - Placing the emphasis on prevention of becoming NEET, rather than 'cure', consider inviting UP project participants to talk to children in local schools with the potential to explore a peer mentoring model. This would not only benefit the school children but also provide the UP participants with valuable experience to boost their self-esteem and contribute to their work-readiness.

4.2 MOVING FORWARD - RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DESIGN OF ANNUAL EVALUATION OF BBO2

Reflecting on our experience of conducting this evaluation, we have identified the following points to consider for the design and execution of future annual evaluations of the UP project.

- **Include disengaged participants** - As highlighted earlier in the report, all the project participants we interviewed were either engaged with or had successfully exited the project. We anticipate that there would be value in gathering feedback from those who have disengaged from the project to gain a more balanced picture. The question is how to reach those who have disengaged? One possible solution would

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[7] https://www.aspireoxfordshire.org/what-we-offer

be for case workers to flag when participants show early signs of disengagement and quickly try to conduct an 'exit' or 'red flag' interview with them. If this proves too difficult an alternative solution could be for case workers to journal intakes and exits, sending the evaluators an email to documenting key information including what happened when a participant disengaged, and what the triggers/circumstances were.

- **Improve consistency of evaluation sample** - Evaluation participants had been engaged in the project for very different lengths of time and outside the time period originally agreed (May 2018 to April 2019). To improve the comparability of the data, it would be ideal to include participants involved in the project over a similar time period who are either near to exit or recently exited.

- **Conduct follow up evaluation** – In addition to evaluating the project from the perspective of recent or current participants, we see value in undertaking some follow up evaluation. To understand more about the sustainability of the UP project it would be useful to interview participants who had successfully exited the project a few months, or at periodic intervals, after project exit. This would allow for an evaluation of the long-lasting impact of involvement with the project tracking whether they are still in employment or education and what challenges they have faced and overcome since exit.

- **Further involvement of partner organisations** - There is potential to gather feedback from CEOs/other staff members at partner organisations in order to understand their perspective of how the UP project fits with their organisation as well as their views on the project delivery and outcomes.

ANNEX ONE: PARTICIPANT EXIT FORM

Participant exit form

For participants and project staff to complete

NATIONAL LOTTERY FUNDED

European Union European Social Fund

This form is to be completed by the participant together with a project officer.

Part one: Summary

This is completed by project staff once the participant's eligibility has been confirmed.

Organisation:	
Participant name:	
National Insurance number:	
Customer reference number:	
Exit date from the project: Date of the participant's last activity on the project	

Part two: Participant status on exit from the project

This information needs to reflect the participant's status within four weeks of the exit date (last recorded activity on the project)

Your current employment situation, tick one box

☐ I am economically inactive (not in employment and not seeking work)

☐ I am unemployed and searching for a job (including long-term unemployed)

Please tell us the number of consecutive **months** you have been unemployed

☐ Employed (including self-employed)

Are you engaged in education or training? Yes ☐   No ☐

Please briefly tell us more about what you are currently doing, complete all applicable boxes

Part three: Education or training

If you are or are moving into education or training, please tell us more about this below including which college, university or learning provider you have registered with, what course or training you are undertaking, when you enrolled, what date you start and how long your course or training will last.

Part four: Employment or self-employment

If you've moved into **employment** or **self-employment**, please tell us who you are working or going to work for, what job you will be doing and when you will be starting. If you are self-employed please tell us what you are doing.

Part five: Job-search

If you are job-searching, please tell us what job search activity your have undertaken, what jobs you have applied for details of any job clubs or similar provision you have attended.

Part six: Data protection and privacy notice

This privacy notice explains who the Data Controller is for the personal data which is collected through the Building Better Opportunities Programme and how you are able to find out how and why the Data Controller uses this data.

Who is the Data Controller for the Building Better Opportunities Programme?

The Data Controller for the Building Better Opportunities Programme is the Department of Works and Pensions.

For more information about how and why the Data Controller uses your personal data or to exercise your data protection rights please see www.gov.uk/dwp/personal-information-charter or contact the Department of Works and Pensions using the contact details below.

Contact Details

If you have any questions, queries or complaints, and to exercise your personal data rights, please in the first instance contact the Data Protection Officer at the Department of Works and Pensions rightofaccess.requests@dwp.gsi.gov.uk .
You can contact the Information Commissioner's Office on 0303 123 1113 or via email https://ico.org.uk/global/contact-us/email or at the Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire SK9 5AF.

Please review and sign the participant and project officer declarations in section seven and eight

Part seven: Participant declaration

Tick **each** box to confirm:

☐ I acknowledge that the support I have received was funded by the European Social Fund and the Big Lottery Fund.

☐ The information provided in this form is true and accurate

Name:	Signature:
Date:	

Part eight: Project officer declaration

Tick **each** box to confirm:

☐ The participant has been told that the support they have received was funded by the European Social Fund and the Big Lottery Fund.

☐ The information provided in the form is, to the best of my knowledge, true and accurate.

Name:	Signature:
Job title:	
Organisation:	Date:

Please ask your project participants these two questions around the same time as the exit form is being completed. The answers will help us to monitor progress in the project overall and the answers will not be shared alongside with the participant's name.

Participant Name:

Project Officer Name:

Organisation:

Would you say that you are feeling more confident about yourself now than when you joined the Unlocking Potential project?

Please circle one of the following:
Yes

No

About the same

Would you say you are more confident now about your potential to find a job than you were when you joined the Unlocking Potential project?

Please circle one of the following:
Yes

No

About the same

Date questions answered:

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