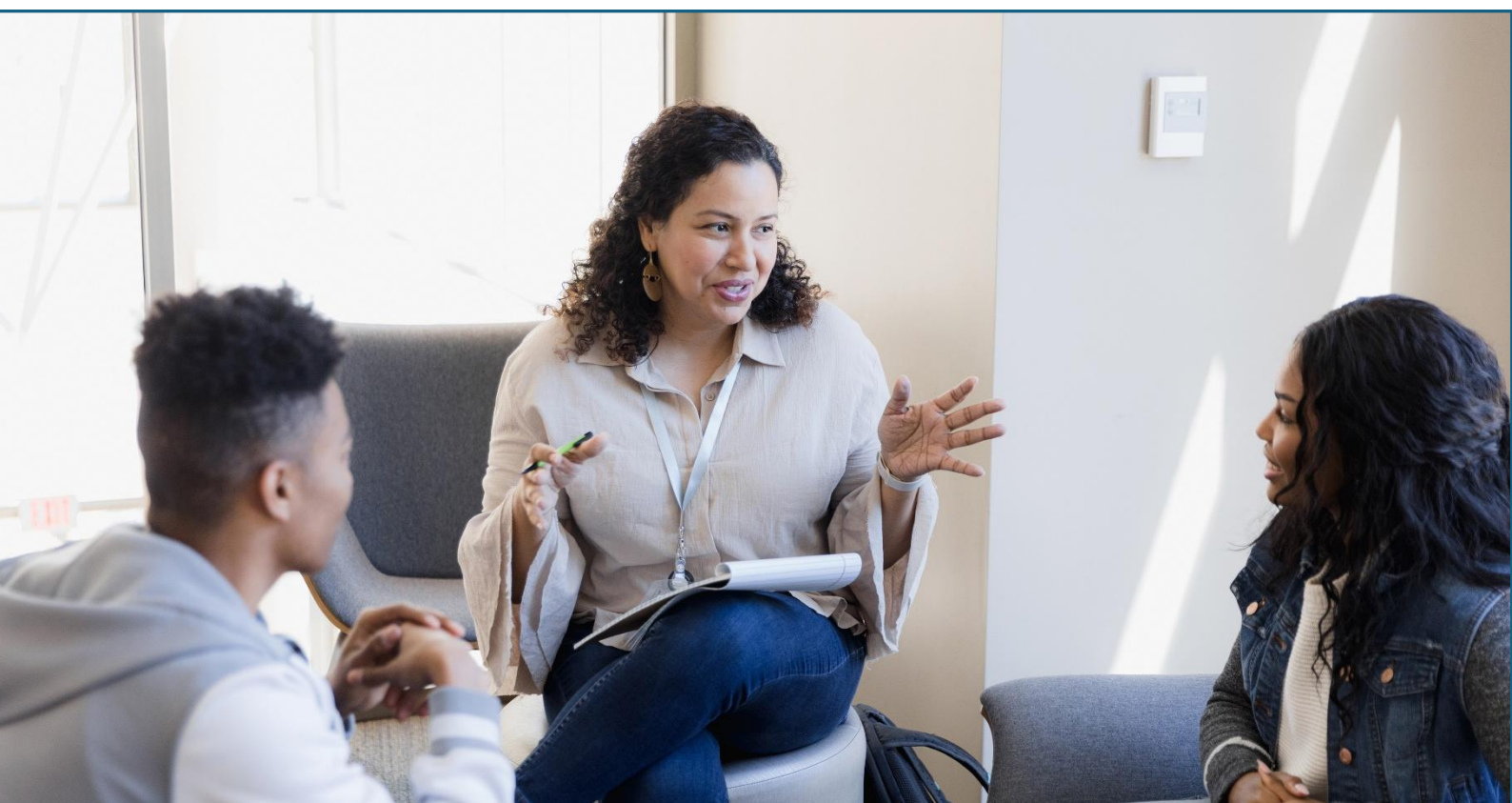


University of Bath Evaluation Report

SomersetWorks Plus

UK SHARED PROSPERITY FUND



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31/03/2025

Introduction

SomersetWorks Plus aims to 'support economically inactive people to overcome barriers to work by providing cohesive, locally tailored support including access to basic skills.

The project built on the proven, evidence-informed practices and embedded in SomersetWorks' approach of mentoring and advocacy for those furthest from engagement, particularly those struggling with mental health, wellbeing and anxiety. It expands support to those who fall outside the scope of SomersetWorks to support them into employment outcomes. These are young people who have recently fallen through the net of support and have not been able to access the support they need to engage due to other circumstances, including :

- Early leavers from Post 16 who do not have a progression pathway in education and have not secured qualification levels that enable them to progress, especially those in Year 13.
- SEND (Special Education Needs & Disabilities) young people who need additional support to become ready for employment, including those who have had an EHCP (Education, Health & Care Plan) which has been ceased.
- Care-experienced young people.
- Year 14 (Post 18) young people who have become economically inactive and become 'lost' to limited existing support systems.
- Post 16 Elective Home Educated (EHE) students who have missed substantial periods of statutory school education and are now unable to progress Post 16, massively increasing the risk of becoming long-term unemployed.

This approach aimed to enable access to additional support beyond the age of 18, where many young people 'fall off the cliff edge' due to previous funding restrictions and other services being withdrawn as a young person turns 18. By traversing arbitrary boundaries and age and stage related cut-offs (e.g. Post 16, Post 18, Qualification levels achieved etc), the intention was to provide a seamless service for those who require more intensive support to move on from EHE, education or training into employment outcomes.

SomersetWorks Plus built on the strengths and successes of their Partnership College model of Advocacy and Mentoring, linking this with established Supported Employment and Job Coaching models to help young people to overcome long-term traumas, EBSA (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) as well as those with diagnosed and undiagnosed SEND needs, providing intensive support as they move into work. Given the growing number of young people who are not yet ready for Supported Internship programmes, this offers a progression pathway in the form of a **Pre-Supported Internship**. It includes elements of work experience, work shadowing supported by

Advocates/Job Coaches, whilst also building employability skills, numeracy and literacy skills and mental fitness programmes.

Evidence-based approach to NEET reduction

The project builds on evidence-informed approaches to engaging young people.

Evidence-informed approaches to intervention for engagement:

The *Pathway to Change* Model ¹ (Bath University) details the five mechanisms that underpin a wide range of effective interventions to tackle early school leaving and helps to ensure that support is pitched appropriately. SomersetWorks had previously integrated this into their ‘Support of Journey Map’ and ‘Distance Travelled Scale’ (see Figure 2) to guide the work of their Advocates and Mentors by offering concrete steps to guide and track progression on the journey from NEET to EET. These have been further developed to integrate insights regarding the impact of connection and belonging on young people’s engagement and wellbeing (see Figure 1).

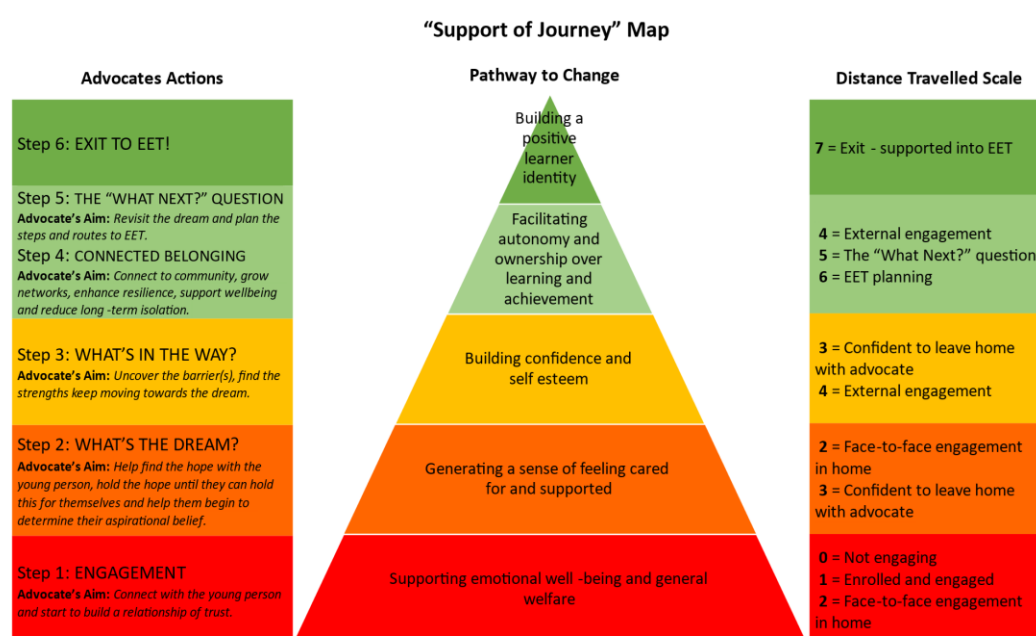


Figure 1: SomersetWorks Plus’: Support of Journey Map

The ‘Support of Journey’ map is the impact measure used to evaluate the young person’s progression and help identify any sticking points, ensuring support approaches and priorities can be reviewed and altered in a timely way.

¹ Brown, C., Douthwaite, A., Savvides, N., & Costas Batlle, I. (2022). Five mechanisms for tackling the risks to NEETHood: introducing a pathway to change to guide educators’ support strategies. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 27(1), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2130082>

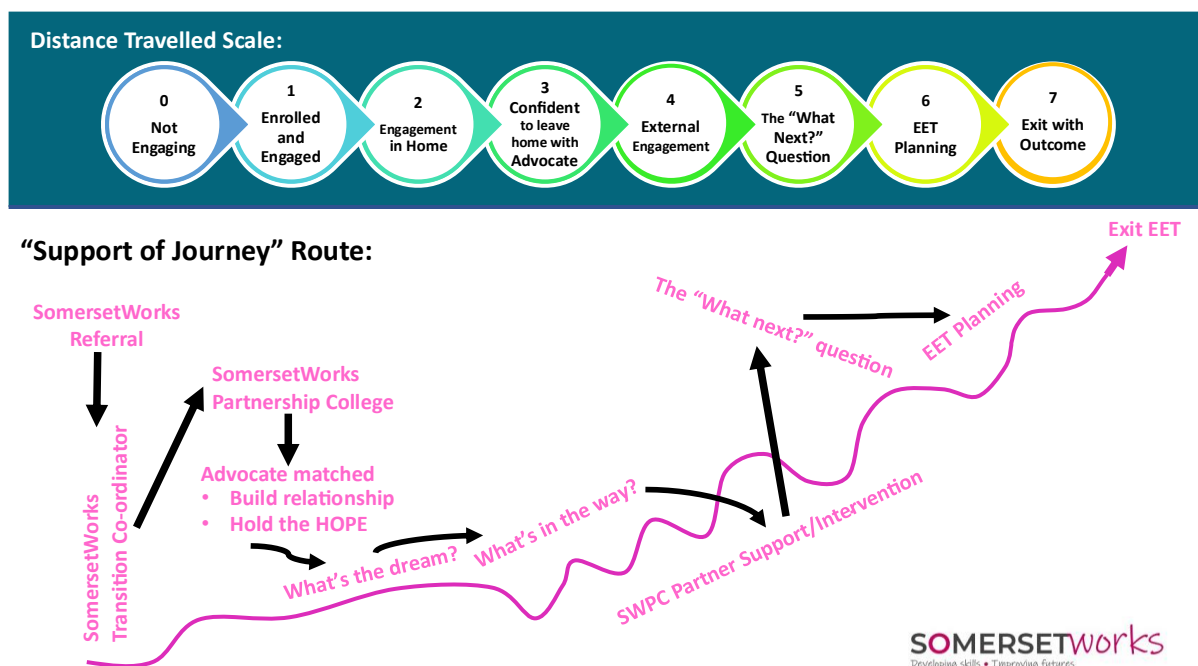


Figure 2: from SomersetWorks Plus Distance Travelled Scale and accompanying visual representation of route from Referral to EET

Evidence-informed approaches to supporting wellbeing

The scales also integrate recent research into the importance of young people's sense of connection and belonging across the different domains of their life for their identity development and wellbeing² (see Figure 3).

Young people in this projects' cohort are likely to face specific barriers to their wellbeing in terms of experiencing a sense of connection, belonging in key domains of their lives; so, this is specifically addressed in the Advocate's Actions.

² Brown, C., Douthwaite, A., Donnelly, M. & Shay, M. (2025). *Connected Belonging: A relational and identity-based approach to schools' role in promoting child wellbeing*. *British Educational Research Journal*, 00, 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4112>

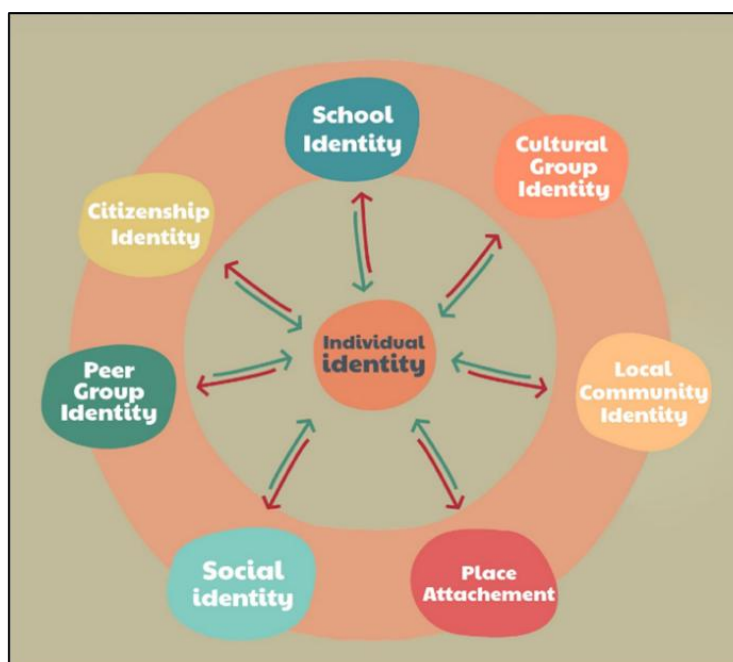


Figure 3: Connected Belonging Model diagram of the areas of connection and belonging impacting young people's wellbeing which informs the Support of Journey Map and Distance Travelled Scale

Evidence-informed approaches to understanding risk

Lastly, the approach to support was informed by recent research findings into the risk factors leading to an increased likelihood of NEET outcomes and early school leaving³. The model of five categories of risk (Figure 4) highlights the complex interplay of risks for individual young people. It underscores the importance of taking a holistic view of risks in understanding the specific way they impact the individual and tailoring support to unpick complex challenges.

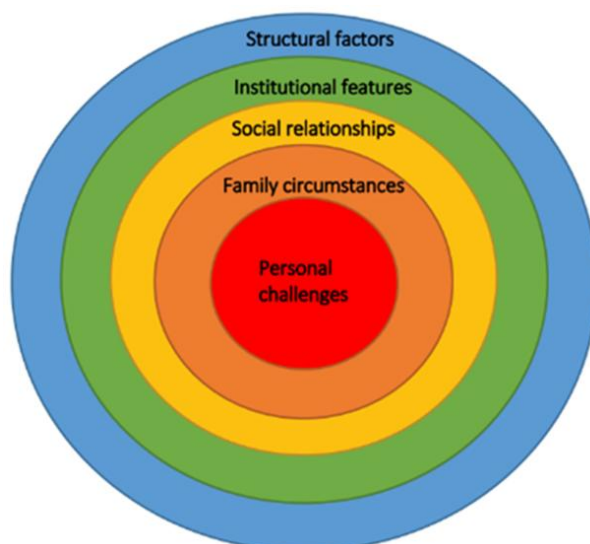


Figure 4: Model of five domains of risk which informs the Risk and Opportunities review tool used by SomersetWorks

³ Ceri Brown, Patricia Olmos Rueda, Ioannis Costas Batlle & Joaquín Gairín Sallán (2021) Introduction to the special issue: a conceptual framework for researching the risks to early leaving, *Journal of Education and Work*, 34:7-8, 723-739, DOI: [10.1080/13639080.2021.2003007](https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.2003007)

The Project Leads collaborated with Education Researchers from the University of Bath, Dr Ceri Brown and Dr Alison Douthwaite, to develop a Risk and Opportunities Review Tool (see Figure 5). This supported the development of a consistent approach across the Advocates, Mentors and Partners involved in supporting the cohort, particularly in tailoring support to young people’s specific challenges and building on any opportunities for connection and belonging to support their successful progression to employment outcomes.

Risk Review of: (Name)		Completed by:		Date:		
Risk Category	RISKS: AREAS OF CHALLENGE, DIFFICULTY, BARRIERS		IDENTIFYING GAPS IN SUPPORT	STRENGTHS: SOURCES OF CONNECTION, BELONGING, IDENTITY		ACTIONS AND SUPPORT
	What RISKS do you identify?	Interaction with risks in other categories	What support is in place to meet these risks/needs?	What OPPORTUNITIES are there in each domain to progress towards their future self/dream?	What OPPORTUNITIES do they have for building connections and belonging?	
Personal Challenges						
Family Circumstances						
Social Relationships						
Institutional features						
Societal factors						

Figure 5: Risk and Opportunities Review Tool used by SomersetWorks'

Key Project Actions

Recruitment of Advocacy Providers

7 Advocacy Providers were engaged and trained. In addition to internal training and ongoing support via Advocate’s Assemblies, they also attended training led by Education Researchers from the University of Bath, Dr Ceri Brown and Dr Alison Douthwaite. This supported them to understand the research findings and become familiar with the Risk and Opportunities Review Tool.

Risk and Opportunity Review Completion

During their work with young people, Advocates completed, reviewed and finally submitted the completed tool. The information recorded helped inform the evaluation

of the key barriers experienced by this cohort of young people as well as the key sources of connection and belonging supported in progressing towards engagement with employment outcomes.

Focus Groups

Two focus group discussions were held with the Advocates to deepen understanding of their perceptions of

- the key barriers faced by this cohort
- the impact of their support on young people
- priority sources of connection and belonging for progression towards engagement in employment outcomes
- the value of the tool in the process of support

Focus Group 1 contained 10 Advocates.

Focus Group 2 contained 7 Advocates

Impact of Support: Outputs and Outcomes

The support was highly effective in sustaining young people's engagement with employment outcomes.

	Target No.s	Actual No.s
Outputs		
Number of economically inactive people engaging with keyworker support services.	64	95
Number of socially excluded people accessing support.	64	82
Number of people supported to access basic skills courses.	64	70
Number of people accessing mental and physical health support leading to employment.	64	75
Number of people supported to engage in job-searching.	64	61
Number of people receiving support to gain employment.	64	70
Number of people receiving support to sustain employment.	64	69
Number of effective engagements between keyworkers and additional services.	64	76
Outcomes		
Number of people sustaining engagement with keyworker support and additional services	64	82
Increased active or sustained participants of UKSPF beneficiaries in increased employability through the development of interpersonal skills	64	78
Increased proportion of participants with basic skills (English, Maths, digital and ESOL)	19	44

Key barriers

Personal	Self-medicating/ drug use County Lines Offending Probation Exploitation Anti-social behaviour Mental health Anxiety Low Mood Eating Disorder Self-Harm Suicidal ideation Abuse Domestic Violence ACES Childhood Trauma Attachment difficulties Gender identity Traveller Asylum Seeker CLA – adopted/ fostered Homeless	Autism SEND ADHD Neurodivergence Monotropic Elective/ Selective mutism Communication difficulties Learning difficulties Learning Needs/Processing SEMH Organisational/exec function Diagnosed/ Not diagnosed/ Late diagnosed/ suspected Health Conditions Hospitalisation Chronic Fatigue Mobility Fixed mindset Difficulties with change Fear of failure Low motivation	Agoraphobia Not leaving house Social anxiety Difficulties with large groups Low self-worth Shame Low confidence Rejects 1:1 support Lack of trust Dysregulation Outbursts Personal Hygiene Lack of routine Poor sleep Gaming Grief
Family	Lack of family Interaction limited to family Single parent family Family breakdown Difficult relationship with a parent/volatile Difficult relationship with siblings Absent parent/ issues around contact with parents Lives with Grandparents Foster parents Care experienced Care leaver Siblings with challenges Parental MH difficulties Parental health problems Parental disabilities	Difficult/busy living arrangements or home environment Parent not emotionally available Parent not understanding needs Parent struggling to cope Overprotective or overbearing parent Socioeconomic deprivation/ Low income Family member in prison Parental drug use	Bereavement Cultural difference Language barriers/ESL Religious background

Social	Isolation No relationships outside home Only online interaction Doesn't leave house Doesn't view friendship and social interaction as important Social skills undeveloped	Difficulties with peer relationships Vulnerable to exploitation Unhealthy peer relationships Limited friendships Health conditions limited peer connection Being NEET damaging peer connection	Bullying experienced Difficult relationships with adults/ lack of trust of supporting adults
Institutional	Low attendance Dropped out Removed from school Excluded Felt unsupported Felt picked on Bullied	Course or setting inappropriate/unsuitable No hospital learning EOTAS package Couldn't cope in mainstream environment Dislikes online learning PRU education	Needs not met No support for EHCP Setting couldn't meet need Negative view of education Academics cause pressure/ anxiety
Structural	No transport Poor transport links Rural location Reliant on parent for transport Can't afford bus Can't cope with public transport Can't access public transport	Lack of MH support Lack of accommodation Lack of employment opportunities Difficulties finding suitable setting/provision nearby	Racism Discrimination Homophobia Lockdown English and Maths requirement Time

Table 1 details the full range of risk factors recorded on the Risk and Opportunities tool as negatively impacting progression to economic outcomes for these young people. Barriers which were notably common in terms of appearing on large numbers of the grids completed and submitted were:

Isolation. Different forms of social isolation were recorded on forms:

1. Not leaving the home
2. Peer interaction limited to online – dominance of online experiences
3. All friends having moved on to new places and young person feeling stuck or left behind
4. Health conditions or SEND needs constraining access to settings outside home

Undiagnosed/Unmet SEND Needs. 27 of the risk review tools noted neurodiversity of some form, whether autism, ADHD, recently diagnosed or suspected. 3 forms noted selective mutism. Hearing loss, brain injury, Muscular Dystrophy, Chronic Fatigue, Endometriosis, slow processing, planning and writing are other conditions and personal challenges relating to SEND needs.

Family Circumstances.

A lack of access to opportunity related to transport. This was reflected in 5 different ways:

1. Rurality or geographical isolation and limited or non-existent public transport
2. Reliance on parents/others for transport restricting engagement and development of independence
3. Socio-economic deprivation making transport unaffordable
4. Difficulties coping with public transport due to sensory needs, health, mental health, social anxiety and fear of reprisals/attack
5. Public transport being inaccessible due to physical disability, mobility or health conditions

Focus Group Findings

Discussions with the Advocates gave an opportunity to deepen understanding of the key barriers, and particularly the interaction of the key risk factors in the lives of the young people they support.

Exploring whether there might be any commonality in terms of the interplay between the risk factors impacting the trajectories of young people from the different cohorts recruited was on focus area for discussion.

Young People with Special Education Needs and Disabilities

Trajectories for this group of young people were described as being impacted by a complex interplay of structural, institutional, personal challenges and familial circumstances which then impact social relationship challenges.

One pattern touched upon in discussion related to young people with SEND who had strong academic skills and who coped within the familiar setting of their school with the support in place there, but who find themselves unable to function and cope as things change and outside that setting. Having coped in school, an EHCP is not in place, so onward settings are not alerted to any additional needs and, when things go wrong, there is no evidence or funding for the additional support they need to re-engage.

“I’m working perennially with young people who should have EHCPs and weren’t advocated for in a timely manner, so they get to the point where they drop out of school and then they are not attached to an organisation and its quite hard to get them back into college at that point without the EHCPs”

Advocate A2

What initially appears as an institutional failure to seek support, however, was seen to be shaped by systemic and structural factors. Because evidence of difficulties coping in mainstream settings, or failure to progress academically are the prompts for seeking support in the form of an EHCP, there is no trigger or immediately obvious need. As one advocate explained:

“If somebody is diagnosed with autism and they are ‘high functioning’ which generally means they don’t cause anybody any problem, they’re academic, why would we apply for an EHCP for somebody if they’re hitting all the markers?” **Advocate L2**

This was understood to negatively impact this cohort later when they struggle to cope with changes and transition and/or move on without having developed certain skills that they will need to thrive at later stages in their journey. An example of the former situation was shared:

“I have a young person that I’m working with... and he is able to mask, he is intelligent, he’s able to follow instruction, he would even be in a play if you told him to, because that’s the instructions he needed to follow, but actually now the teacher has gone off sick and can’t let them know when they’re coming back and he just can’t deal with that, the uncertainty, the unknown of that which means he’s literally gone from really high attendance to almost zero.” Advocate L2

This highlights the very contextual and precarious nature of ‘coping’ and ‘progressing’ for some of these students and how a change which may appear comparatively trivial to staff can lead to a dramatic decline in wellbeing, engagement and attendance. It is not difficult to imagine how intensely challenging transition to a new setting would be for a young person in this situation, whose reliance on familiar staff and routines in a place that meets their needs would be.

Another way that a lack of diagnosis or formal acknowledgement of additional learning needs was seen to impact this cohort was that they were not supported to develop certain life skills that are necessary to thrive in later stages. These include life skills that may not be explicitly taught in mainstream settings and are assumed to be developed outside school, while school focuses tightly on academic preparation for next steps. Where students in a special school setting are more likely to receive help with these types of skills, students who ‘cope’ in a mainstream setting are less so.

In describing the steps that they undertake to help young people develop the skills they need to access employment, the Advocates highlighted the breadth of practical experiences they had to facilitate for young people before coming anywhere near what might traditionally be understood as work-related skills:

“some of those basic life skills are missing, catching a bus, getting in a car with trusted professional...we do quite a lot of work with just catching a bus, here’s some change, go and pay for a ticket...in the opportunities that schools are offering, there’s a lack of talk to young people, of experiences for young people that will open to, that are options for later” Advocate S2

“at that younger age when you go through the education system, it’s all geared to you will go and do this and you will go on this course and you will go and do that whereas what I’ve really welcomed on this is we can go at really small steps, so actually we can just talk about let’s get you going to the local caf, and sitting in a group, or lets go get you outside and go for a walk and building in those little bits which is something which was probably overlooked in education.” Advocate K2

This highlights ways in which the current system’s emphasis on maximising life chances through driving up academic standards in school may be negatively impacting outcomes for this cohort of young people. It also illustrates a lack of flexibility in an education system which demands very narrow sets of evidence to qualify for and access any extra or different provision:

“Our system is the box, unless you have piece of paper that tells us you aren’t in the box, you fall in line with everyone else...the mainstream system doesn’t meet the needs of most of our pupils.” Advocate K2

Early Leavers

All the young people in this cohort have fallen through any intended safety nets, leaving them outside the system of supports that might help them re-engage and progress towards employment.

The fact that these young people are older was seen to present additional barriers. Having not made a successful transition post-16 created additional personal challenges around self-concept and self-worth. This failure to follow a standard transition point also led to complications resulting from them being considered ‘adults’ in relation to some statutory processes and support structures, but still not having made any steps into independence in other ways. This was seen to lead to a complex interplay between personal, structural and institutional factors and family circumstances. As one advocate explained:

“there’s a lot of pressure because they are older, a lot of mine are 18 plus...they feel like they should be meeting certain criteria but aren’t because of other influences and they feel the pressure, I feel like that is a factor and a lot of that has come from family circumstances.” Advocate F1

The Advocates described how disengagement from education and training leads to remaining at home and how this can lead to isolation and result in the young person becoming ‘stuck’ there, something they need to support the young person and family to overcome.

The award of benefits for young people in this cohort and was described as complicating the transition for the young person in two ways. Firstly, in reducing the young person’s motivation to earn and secondly, for families facing socio-economic disadvantage, in providing a vital part of the family income meaning the young person’s trajectory becomes further enmeshed with the family wellbeing.

“a real area of need is that transition ... it (the financial support) is not seen as the child’s money, but it’s seen as the family’s money which isn’t really so, and then we come along and say oh we want them to be independent and they’re like ‘what? I’ve got used to this way of living, how do I live like that?’ It might be that they are confused as to how they’re going to survive” Advocate C1

In the first scenario, young people’s trajectory to independence is impacted as they have not moved on to live independently of the family, or stepped into adult responsibilities of work or training, but they have progressed into having their own, independent finances that they can spend as they wish. Some families saw this as an additional ‘trap,’ reducing the need for the young person to go out and become economically active and making it harder, as parents, to advocate for this:

“they’ve become really concerned about their young person receiving PIP, both of these people are getting about £500 a month of PIP and the parents are like, that’s more than enough for my young person living at home to be able to go out, buy the clothes they want and hang out with their friends and so it’s really hard to motivate them towards education and employment when they feel like they’ve got loads of money at home to do anything but actually it’s a tiny amount of money if they were living independently, it’s not going to be enough for them to transition to independence.” Advocate A2

In the second scenario, families who must continue to support their young person financially and emotionally, perhaps giving up work to meet caring responsibilities, consider their young person’s funds to be part of the family income. The future plans of these young people who have not progressed onwards to start the journey towards independence and separating from the family unit remain are tightly enmeshed with the family’s circumstances and views. For young people with SEND needs where families may have had to keep them safe from negative experiences in school and the wider world, or who may be aware their young person is ill-prepared for the next phase of life, were felt to sometimes resist or misunderstand Advocate’s efforts to encourage use of the funding to encourage the young person towards next steps outside the home.

Advocate L2 explained that “one of mine has got top end of PIP, well a few of them have, and then the parents have to give up work, so then that becomes part of the parents’ income.” Having had to give up work to supervise the young person at home once they stopped attending, the family income was reduced and this benefit supplemented that, rather than being used to support the young person’s next steps.

Advocate K2 echoed this experience.

“a lot of parents, because you keep your EHCP to 25 can’t you, say I’m going to keep, my son’s going to keep his EHCP til 25 and I’ll claim the benefits off that until he’s 25, so that motivation from PIP, it’s the same principle, they get x amount of money, well the parents are getting that, so why would I want my child to go and...it sounds ludicrous doesn’t it....but like why would I try and encourage him to do that, I’ll wait until they’re 25 and then we’ll try and do that....and then it’s too late.” **Advocate K2**

Advocate CA1 explained:

“sometimes we come in with really aspirational ideas about what we can move forward to and the parents are thinking, hang on a minute, we’ve been on these benefits for all these years and it is working for us you know...my child benefit will stop if they’re not in college, so we need to get them into college, but you’re like, well, is that the right thing for them right now?”

This sheds some light in ways that structural factors like benefit entitlements and age-related support entitlements for young people with SEND can impact their families’ responses to next-step options as well as young people’s own decisions and choices.

Another important interaction highlighted by Advocates related to the anxiety arising from breakdown of educational placements leading to self-protection, loss of routine, isolation and broader family anxieties around the young person. This also was understood to lead to young people furthest from engagement with work and training becoming stuck at home.

One advocate explained:

“Every single one of mine has an influence from their family whether it’s a financial one, there’s so many different influences...I’ve got one that won’t leave the house because of the family influence, I’ve got one that has got too much family influence, it’s like too strong, I’ve got a medical one where it’s like they want to but they can’t...it does kind of role down, it is trickling down, the anxieties and the factors around not going out, they are trickling down from other factors that they can’t help that they’re in.”
Advocate F1

Other advocates reiterated the mental health needs, SEND needs, material needs of parents can be significant barriers for these young people. This emphasised the difficulty of supporting the young person in isolation, and the need to support the family/parent alongside the child:

As well as ‘change’ being difficult to navigate and cope with for many of the young people in the cohort, it also appeared to be a factor that families needed support with too. Supporting the family and the young person to take small steps towards change, where not leaving the house has become a routine or entrenched habit, was understood to be vitally important, but made more difficult by the high turnover of professionals in their lives. An expectation that the advocate will not stick around for length of time required to make changes, developed as a result of past experiences, means a lack of

willingness to engage can be a self-protective mechanism for both the young person and their families.

“There have been so many people involved in their lives, so many different supports that is often like, ‘oh, another person who is going to try and fix me.’ And then the people they have met before having such short time frames, like 6 weeks together, so there’s a mentality of ‘are you going to com in my life and then go away again? That’s a barrier.” Advocate CL1

“previous experience with professionals and that trust to open up ...it being so ingrained and used to living in a certain way, its having that support network around them that can help them continue that change because a lot of the behaviours can be habitual so if there isn’t that role model also making that change, maybe wanting to keep things the same from that safety perspective... also that’s a whole new world, they don’t want their children to be disappointed or let down by a system either.”

Advocate H1

Social Relationship Barriers and Connected Belonging Priorities

“I don’t know how many times I’ve heard a young person say, ‘I just want a friend’ and that’s really sad.”

Advocate CL1

A key challenge identified for successfully supporting this cohort ‘s progression into employment was building peer connections. For each of the groups within the cohort this area was a priority, though for slightly different reasons and in slightly different ways.

Four key areas in which social relationship barriers need to be tackled to enable connection with peers were:

- Moving from online connection to in-person connection
- Supporting an understanding of healthy relationships
- Having sufficient time and longevity of support to address trust and attachment issues
- Finding settings where young people could safely meet others and build relationships

For young people who had struggled to access school, or whose issues with self-regulation or challenging behaviour meant they were isolated from informal social opportunities at school, their social development had been hampered and led to further complications in the form of isolation and agoraphobia, anti-social or criminal behaviour

“Some of our young people struggle to go to school, so they don’t have that belonging there, or they’re not allowed out at breaktime because they take things too far so they are missing out on those interactions and play with other young people.” Advocate CA1

“This year, a lot of people are really isolated...they feel left behind. A lot of them don’t leave the house from one week to the next and then that becomes one month to the next. They just walk to the end of the road, buy a vape and go back into the house. They are spending their time on snapchat and this year lots of people are really into gaming, they are up all night gaming and lose their sleep pattern... they fall into this whole where they’ve lost contact with their friends, and they just sit at home on a screen.” Advocate A2

Some young people with SEND and mental health challenges and some of those who had been involved in criminality and probation services through, for instance, County Lines involvement, were understood to have retreated into the safe space of their bedrooms and homes. Social interaction for

these young people had become reliant on online and gaming connections, often leading to developing poor sleep routines, nocturnal habits. These young people felt unsafe outside and so fulfilled belonging needs online in a way which was creating a barrier to accessing employment settings or external opportunities.

For those with criminal involvement it was seen to “result in people not going out all because they feel at risk or feel vulnerable.” Fear of reprisals, or of being seen by previous associates led to young people avoiding public spaces or public transport.

“not leaving the house you know, it’s safe isn’t it, going out into the outside world it is unpredictable, it’s a threat for some, so before even trying to get into some community group, like just being in public being in a space because it is unpredictable, so you walk into an unfamiliar room you’ve got all kinds of thoughts going by, all kinds of thoughts popping off in your head and you start making that jump to go into that space, and once you’re there, more often than not they’re fine, but it’s that initial, that just being in an unfamiliar, not in that safe room, screen, situation,..it’s their perception of it, it’s a perceived threat ... that has been their truth for the last 18 years.” Advocate H1

For young people in families where there was limited expectation or need to go outside, where parents did not work, or worked online themselves, there was little role modelling of relationships and connection outside or in person. With online food delivery, online shopping and opportunities for leisure online, young people often had ‘all their basic needs’ met and had a sense of belonging achieved virtually, meaning there was little motivation to go out to seek new relationships, experiences or opportunities and Advocates had to work hard to develop or introduce the value of this.

For others in this group, this comparative inexperience with peer connection and social relationships posed problems in a different way. A lack of understanding of healthy relationships, or what constituted a valuable friendship, left young people vulnerable to exploitation and recurrent involvement in criminal activity. Again, addressing this barrier was a priority in order for the young people to be able to move towards engaging with employment.

Advocate L2 unpicked this challenge and explored the reason why it poses such a challenge for young people who have experienced non-standard transitions like this cohort:

“Do the young people understand what a positive relationship is? Where are we teaching that? It’s a societal factor. Where we can, we do a lot about positive relationships. I guess it is about having confidence to call it out, that they aren’t your mate. They say they gravitate towards them because they make me feel X, Y and Z...but what they’ve done is made them throw a brick through a window or get arrested or whatever. ...if you’re in the most vulnerable groups, your trauma is heightened so much more, you don’t necessarily have the autonomy to think it through. That support we offer helps them unpick that...for me, I was able to do that myself, I threw some bricks through windows but I had that opportunity to move on to college and realise this was just a ‘friendship of convenience’ and the capability to understand that he wasn’t my mate, but the young people we support often need help exploring this.”

Where students experiencing transitions into new education settings or employment opportunities naturally come into contact with new people and peers, and can reevaluate their relationships and connections, the failed transition at this stage means the young people do not have the lived experience or opportunity to do this and remain stuck in this way too.

Identifying opportunities for them to interact with peers in a low pressure, enjoyable setting was understood to be a priority for supporting many of the young people towards employment engagement:

“We try to get them involved in our clubs and our youth clubs because then there’s a sense of belonging.” Advocate CA1

Finding clubs where there ‘[no referral](#)’ and ‘[no barrier](#)’ to attendance was acknowledged to be hard, with opportunities often funded by an organisation that restricted access to specific groups to target funding. In more rural settings this posed a problem for Advocates trying to support those furthest from EET towards employment.

Beyond peer connections, finding ways to connect the young person to some places, structures, organisations or opportunities outside the home was another key priority. The simple power of ‘getting them out of the house’ was widely discussed, but then moving beyond that to find something they could be a part of was understood to be a priority to ensure that they do not simply drop out again at when another challenge presents itself in the future:

“being able to take them so they can connect with a community that is somewhere they can make safe peer connections, and give them a structure that will be there...getting into that network so that when the funding finishes for them here in September, they’re not just dropped, they need to have a whole sort of map they can use otherwise they just sort of drop.” Advocate A2

One advocate used the analogy of a ‘[Toolbox](#)’ of local groups and strategies that they needed to help the young person develop. Connection with other places to go, places to be, things to be part of were understood to be vital to ensuring they could continue to progress towards and into employment.

Family Circumstances, socio-economic deprivation and pressure

Another interesting risk pattern which emerged from focus groups was the cumulative nature of pressure experienced by those facing multiple, complex barriers. This appeared to be particularly marked for those living in socio-economic deprivation and with social anxiety.

Living in a cluttered home, for instance, added further difficulties for young people trying to leave the home and access opportunities in public. For young people with mental health challenges, the burden of time was large as they may spend 2 hours putting on make up to feel ready to meet somebody. For others, not being able to find clean clothes, or have food available to take with them were practical but real challenges which added burdens to what may appear a simple task of going to an appointment.

“I was in a conversation with a young person about planning a journey for an opportunity and she said to me ‘I’ve been asking my Mum for a washing basket,’...there’s no space for washing, so I haven’t actually got any clothes to go...the house is very cluttered, a lot of families we work with the house is very cluttered, and that is very heavy mentally.” Advocate S1

This was reiterated by others who described how they had to support young people in preparing to leave the house for a journey:

“I’ll have to remind him like its cold outside, you’re going to need a coat, or its raining...and like sensible shoes...simple things that we take for granted ”Advocate E1

As well as relating to basic life skills which have not been developed, these challenges also reflect an additional mental burden that these young people are contending with.

Reducing the burden can be an important strategy in helping this cohort of young people take a next step. Advocates talked about the importance of remembering that “*some young people work at KFC, its not their career for ever, and it doesn’t have the weight to it.*” Remembering the ‘camaraderie’ of being in a workplace, the belonging that can come from being part of a gang there, was highlighted as an important message to carry forwards when supporting these young people to employment outcomes.

One advocate raised questions about the quality and breadth of careers advice that the young people received when they were at school. She asked, “*is it careers guidance, or is it course guidance?*” The weight of choosing a ‘career’ may be counter-productive for young people experiencing multiple barriers and high anxiety about this transition.

Individual Identity Development

The focus group discussion raised some interesting questions about the impact of nonstandard transitions, or experiences of early leaving or drop out, on individual identity development and the ways this can lead to NEET outcomes.

For young people not following an academic pathway, there was a related expectation that you should make choices about your future career at an earlier stage than is expected for those on more academic and traditional pathways:

“more vulnerable young people have to have a sense of what they want to do much earlier than more academic young people.” Advocate R2.

Advocates described their work in supporting young people in terms of reconnecting the young person with their interests or happiness. The notion of approaching the issue of engaging with opportunities and work in way that ‘*doesn’t have the weight to it*’ was seen to be important, reducing the pressure associated with what has come to feel like a burdensome choice for the young person.

One advocate identified the strategy of asking “*what brings you joy? Or what do you like doing?*” as a valuable way in for these young people. It helped them answer in ways which brought out another ‘*side of themselves*’ which is not necessarily shown. Another advocate referred to ‘*masking*’ to describe the way that young people might ‘present’ themselves to the supporting advocate. Certainly for young people who have struggled in having their needs met in educational settings, who advocates described as being ‘*thrown off kilter*’ by being asked about themselves and their plans after many years of ‘*not feeling heard, not feeling listened to,*’ talking honestly about their hopes and motivations rather than having the focus on what is being expected of them, may reframe the support in useful ways.

In exploring the intersection between the individual identity development of the young people and the social identity aspects of their experiences, one advocate voiced the feeling that there was ‘something important about being able to separate your identity as an individual from your career.’ Others echoed this, reflecting on the value of ‘*ordinary jobs*’ which allow people to ‘*fulfil their passion*’ in other ways, through ‘*volunteering, local football club, community involvement.*’ Remembering that validation and belonging come through other channels to and that employment can just meet the economic and financial needs for some, while being a source of connection, belonging and meaning for others, was

understood to be a helpful way to approach the support for this cohort. For young people who have become defined, at least in policy framing and support structures, by their status as NEETs or economically inactive individuals, this more holistic view may offer different ways to think about the role of employment in their personal lives.

What is making the difference in an effective transition

The things that were understood to make a difference in enabling a successful transition to employment outcomes will need further exploration over time. However, the key features identified during the focus groups were:

- Time (sufficient time and longer term support)
- Pace
- Finding the motivation
- Low pressure approaches
- Recognising and celebrating small steps
- Ensuring the young person feels heard and is supported to speak up and trust their intuition.
- Furnishing them with both connections and strategies: The toolbox

While most of these have been dealt with in the previous sections, those that have not been explored are included below:

Time

A key feature enabling the success of the approach was the time available to support the young person. Many advocates highlighted short term interventions as ineffective for these young people with more complex challenges.

“I’ve also found that, working with SomersetWorks, having that long trajectory has been really good. People aren’t used to that, they’re used to having six weeks and we’re going to do this, we’re going to fix you. I think there is something powerful in knowing there is someone there for you and even if you don’t show us straight away, that person is still going to be there, there’s this unconditional support that will be there for you when you’re ready.” Advocate A2

Pace The Advocates recognised that their desire and enthusiasm to support young people, plus the time pressures of some funding for support and reporting deadlines, can inadvertently lead them to rush in with when this can be counterproductive. Being able to go at the pace of the young person was understood to be vital in sustaining their engagement, while having a clear mechanism, in the form of the support of journey map and distance travelled scale, helped maintain focus and progression.

“not having someone who had their back and believed in them like ever really, suddenly having someone who does, they are baffled by it – they seem to wonder how do I respond to this? They’ve never really been supported or believed in...but we really want to help so we might go in too fast, and you might have to take it slower, take your foot off the gas a bit, to give them time...to breathe...they might not have ever made a relationship like this with anybody.” Advocate H1

They also recognised that the early stages were the hardest and took the longest. In relation to the pathway to change, those furthest from engagement were understood to need significant time often to

build the trust and connection. The final stages, once connection was established, to progressing into employment outcomes was then much faster often:

“The first part of the journey is the longest and the hardest and the slowest and then the solution at the end, which is where they want to go, is quite quick. The speed that they move up that pathway ...once their welfare is taken care of, their confidence is up, the sense of themselves, their connection is in place and off they go...” Advocate D2

Having the longer time frame allowed them to adapt their pace to support the young person

Finding the Motivation

After establishing trust and supporting the young person’s welfare, finding the young person’s motivation or spark was another key step towards successful transition. In the earlier section on individual identity, the kinds of questions most likely to support this were discussed. But advocates also illustrated the sort of self-confidence building interactions they experiences as leading to change for young people.

“I think the other really empowering element is about capturing motivation. So, their intrinsic motivation, if you manage to grab that and find it and enable that, then that can be a huge driver for leaps forward. Massive leaps forward. But it is about, you know, it's about nurturing, finding, testing, capturing that.” Advocate S1.

Again, the time taken, not just to establish trust, but to find the motivation was understood to be important.

Another advocate’s explanation of their role in the interim highlights the way the faith, trust and dependability of the advocate over time can support the young person to find this: *“some have that intrinsic motivation, but the advocates generally hold that hope while the young person can’t see if for themselves. Until they see a little spark and then you almost hand over the hope.”*

Another advocate highlighted two forms of response for young people *“people go either away or towards. Either they will be motivated to get the thing, or they will be driven by not wanting something . If they don’t have that drive away from, then you’ll need to find the spark to motivate them to go towards.”*

Value of the Risk Review and Opportunities Tool for advocates

Feedback from the Advocates during the focus group indicated that they found the tool valuable in the way that it encouraged reflection and helped them see the bigger picture.

They described the process of completing the grid as helping them to get all of the information out of their heads, onto a page where they could look at it and start to prioritise and hold it all in mind.

It supported a holistic view of the young person through encouraging them to also consider factors across all five areas of risk and start to think about how the multiple things might be interacting to impact the young person

Finally, it was understood to help ensure that support provided relates closely to the young person’s personal needs, ensuring it was well informed and tailored.

Next Steps

Further integrating the tool within the case management system will help advocates logistically in terms of centralising the information.

Continued tracking and reviewing of the young people's trajectories to deepen understanding of the opportunities for connection and belonging which make the difference to their outcomes.

Focus groups with young people to explore their perceptions of what makes a difference in terms of their outcomes will deepen understanding of effective processes and priorities. Given that research highlights young people and adults point to different domains of risk as most significant, it will be valuable to explore whether this remains the case in the context of 1:1 highly personalised support where the advocates and young people develop strong working relationships.