



Department
for Education

The Portsmouth Aspiration Staying Close Project

Evaluation report

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**Mariela Neagu, Rees Centre, University
of Oxford and Jo Dixon, University of
York**

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Young person's summary

The Aspiration Staying Close Project

Portsmouth City Council received funding from the Department for Education Children's Social Care Innovation Programme to create the Aspiration Staying Close project for residential care leavers. During its first 2 years, the project was evaluated by researchers at the Universities of Oxford and York with economists from York Consulting, to find out how well it was working from the views of young people and staff. The Aspiration Staying Close project:

- aimed to help young people from residential care in Portsmouth aged 16 and over to get ready to live on their own. This was needed because once young people move on from their care placements, they may lose a lot of the support they had while in care. At the time of developing the project, there were few post-care housing options in the Portsmouth area and care leavers tended to go in to a local hostel. There had often been a lack of support while in care to help them practise the skills needed for independent living. Without access to the right support, care leavers can experience difficulties after care, which can include a breakdown in their housing situations or feeling isolated or lonely
- offered support to 15 young people leaving residential care in Portsmouth to help them to be better prepared for independent living. One withdrew early, leaving a group of 14 young people, 7 of whom were unaccompanied asylum seeking young people. The young people were offered house-shares and were helped by project workers, including 2 educational psychologists who worked with them on future plans and how they might achieve them, using the 'PATH' (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope) approach
- recognised that most young people leaving residential care had experienced early trauma and separation, with unaccompanied asylum seekers needing support to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). All 14 young people were provided with the opportunity to talk to a mental health worker. In addition, young people's Staying Close key workers were trained by other experts (mental health, educational psychologists or staff with knowledge of the benefits system) so that they could better understand young people's needs and help them directly with a range of support, rather than sending them to other professionals
- young people were making positive progress by the end of the evaluation (January 2020). Ten of the 14 young people were in education, employment or training and most had remained in their house share throughout the project. Two had moved to independent living and continued to receive support

Key messages

The Portsmouth City Council Aspiration Staying Close project aimed to support young people in residential care from the Portsmouth area by providing them with a gradual and stable transition to independent living via step-down accommodation. This involved moving to house shares with other project young people and then onto independent living. The project was targeted at 2 distinct groups of young people: those aged 16 and over whose last placement was residential care, and unaccompanied asylum seekers. There were early indications that young people in the project were settling well, finding stability in accommodation and in their education, employment and training participation. For those who presented risk taking behaviour at entry to the project, there was also qualitative evidence that they were receiving the intensive support required to address and reduce their difficulties.

The project was initially designed for 9 young people, but it extended its capacity and delivered support to 15 (although 1 left after 5 months). Young people were provided with step-down accommodation in 4 house shares and bespoke support from project key workers as well as access to mental health practitioners including educational psychologists. The project used a 'team around the worker' approach, where key workers received training to better understand young people's wider needs and how to support them. This enabled staff to agree a joint approach for each young person. Interviews with project staff indicated that positive progress in implementing and running the project was supported by multi-agency commitment and working flexibly with other services, to adapt to the specific needs of young people in the project.

The engagement of young people in the project at all stages reflected the positive relationship between them and the project staff. Young people participated in weekly reviews, informal meetings with their workers, took opportunities for social interaction with their peers and staff, and were involved in decision such as the recruitment of key workers and in the decoration of the house shares. At the end of the evaluation (January 2020) all but 1 of the young people who entered the project had remained. They experienced stable accommodation and 2 who had moved on to live independently, continued to be supported by the project. Most (71%, 10) were in education, employment or training, compared with 52% of care leavers nationally. Staff interviews suggested that young people required 2 years or so to fully prepare for independent living and that intensive support had contributed to their progress.

A cost analysis suggested that the estimated annual savings from the Aspiration Staying Close project could be between £957,000 and £1,003,000.

Most young people were still in their project accommodation at endpoint, therefore ongoing monitoring is needed to understand the project's longer-term impact on residential care leavers.

Executive summary

Introduction

The Portsmouth Aspiration Staying Close project is 1 of 8 Staying Close projects that were implemented across England via Round 2 of the Department for Education's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (Innovation Programme). The project began in November 2017. This report covers the independent mixed-methods evaluation of the project, which was commissioned by the Department for Education. It describes the facilitators and challenges encountered in setting up and operating the project, explores evidence of early impact on outcomes for the young people and includes a cost analysis.

The project

The Aspiration Staying Close project was designed to provide a package of support to 2 distinct groups of residential care leavers; unaccompanied asylum seekers (those arriving in the country without adult support), and late entrants to care (those coming into care aged 14 or over). The latter group expanded to include all young people leaving residential care. It provided step-down supported accommodation from care into 4 house shares for project young people, intensive Staying Close key worker support, and access to educational psychologists and mental health workers. The project aimed to:

- increase the proportion of young people who remain in the same accommodation for over 12 months, reduce the proportion of young people leaving residential care who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), and reduce homelessness, involvement in crime and the number of young people who are suffering from emotional distress
- provide holistic support with independent living and education, employment and training (EET), and provide timely access to mental health support
- introduce a staff training programme and team around the worker approach to improve staff skills and knowledge (such as, the impact of trauma and separation) to improve direct support for young people and use learning from the project to shape the wider assessment and support offer available to all care leavers in the local authority

A cohort of 14 young people aged 17 to 20 was supported by the project during the evaluation of pilot. The duration of support (since moving to project accommodation), during the evaluation timeframe varied from 6 to 18 months and was ongoing for all 14 at evaluation endpoint.

The evaluation

The evaluation included 3 components: a process evaluation to understand the implementation and operation of the project, an outcomes evaluation to understand experiences of young people and an economic evaluation using a cost analysis approach to explore costs and benefits associated with the project.

The evaluation took place from April 2018 to March 2020 and is based on data collected between June 2018 and January 2020. This included 28 interviews comprising 9 staff interviews (including the project manager and a senior manager in the local authority at baseline and at evaluation endpoint, key workers and specialist staff at midpoint and endpoint) and interviews with 8 young people at midpoint and 11 at endpoint. The endpoint interviews with project young people were conducted by a peer researcher from another Innovation Programme project who had received training and support from the evaluation team. In addition, a focus group with care-experienced young people took place at the start of the evaluation and a theory of change workshop with project stakeholders took place in November 2018. The Staying Close staff working directly with young people completed a survey at endpoint. Project monitoring data for young people was shared with the evaluation team. Challenges for the evaluation included the relatively small sample, variable duration of the intervention in the evaluation timeframe and the lack of a comparison group, which limited scope to assess change in outcomes. Qualitative data provided an early indication of the contribution of the project to young people's progress.

Key findings

The level of preparation for independent living prior to entering the project had been low, and young people reported having few opportunities to practise skills while in care. Staff recognised that more substantive work by the project was needed for the young people to acquire basic skills. This included work to address self-motivation and routine (for example, making sure they got out of bed on time in the morning), before other skills development activities could be undertaken. Qualitative data suggested that the young people required about 2 years of support to build the level of skills and confidence necessary for independent living and that preparation needed to begin earlier, whilst young people were still in their care placements.

The project staff identified that the level of trauma and disruption experienced by the young people was high and necessitated different types of support for the 2 groups in the project. The unaccompanied asylum seeking group had particular needs associated with the uncertainty of their legal status and right to remain in the UK. This included not being able to undertake employment before their legal status allowed and the impact of separation from their families. They required specific

support with legal aid applications, supporting social interaction, and finding vocational training or language courses.

At endpoint, there appeared to be a good level of stability in accommodation and EET participation for all young people in the project. All but 2 were still in their project accommodation. These 2 had moved on to independent living and were continuing to be supported by the project. Overall, young people reported a positive experience with regard to the level of support they had received through the project. Qualitative findings suggested that young people's direct access to mental health support when needed and intensive key worker support, alongside training for staff on the impact of adverse childhood experiences, had contributed to young people's engagement in the project support package, and in stability in their accommodation.

The Innovation Programme funding, as well as the commitment of Portsmouth City Council and buy-in from the multi-agency stakeholders, were important factors in enabling project key workers to cooperate with other professionals and to be able to provide informed advice and intensive support to the young people. Flexibility and responsive needs-led approaches enabled the project to tailor support, including providing on-site or floating support and out of hours support as needed. This enabled the young people to receive the intensity of personal support they required.

A cost analysis suggested that the estimated annual savings from the Aspiration Staying Close project could be between £957,000 and £1,003,000.

Lessons and implications

The project consulted with and engaged young people in a range of project decisions (such as the types of support provided by the project and staff recruitment). Young people felt listened to and staff used an individualised approach to respond to their needs. Interviews showed that young people were building trusting and positive relationships with the staff through intensive and informal support, which together with the provision of on-site and outreach support and access to mental health experts, facilitated young people's progress across a range of outcome areas.

Portsmouth City Council is continuing the project provision for the foreseeable future and managers noted that they were considering extending the practice developed within the Aspiration Staying Close project to other care leavers in the local authority. They felt that the project had contributed to improved cooperation between agencies, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and housing providers.

Ongoing monitoring of progress or further evaluation would help to understand the longer-term impact of the Aspiration project on outcomes for these young people.

1. Introduction

Research shows that many care leavers are at risk of poor outcomes during their journeys to independent adulthood, including housing instability, homelessness, not being in education, employment or training (NEET) and having poor mental wellbeing (Mendes and Snow 2016, Dixon and Lee, 2015). These risks may be greater for early leavers who move from their care placements aged 16 to 17 in comparison to those who remain in care placements until 18 (Munro et al 2012, Dixon et al 2006). Care leavers report experiences of isolation and loneliness after care (Dixon and Baker 2016) and studies of marginalised adults show over-representation of care leavers amongst those homeless and long-term unemployed (Atkinson and Hyde, 2019). Young people leaving residential care can face greater challenges than those leaving from foster placements. This might reflect a tendency for residential care to accommodate young people with complex needs or those who come into care late and fail to settle in foster placements – scenarios identified in the leaving care literature as risk factors for poor post-care outcomes (Stein 2006, Stein 2012). Unlike their peers in foster care who, since 2014, can formally remain with former foster carers until age 21, through Staying Put provision, there is no statutory provision for young people in residential care to stay where they are beyond 18 or remain in contact with their carers. The Narey Review (2016) identified this inequity and called for measures to test Staying Close approaches to provide ongoing support for residential care leavers. The Government has made efforts to improve the leaving care experiences of care leavers, including the new provisions in the Children and Social Care Act (2017) requiring local authorities to develop local offers for care leavers. Nevertheless, according to the recent Bright Spots ‘Your Life Beyond Care’ study, only 40% of the care leavers felt settled in their accommodation and one third felt that their accommodation was not right for them (Baker 2019). At the same time research suggests that unaccompanied asylum seekers often experience stress due to uncertainty with their financial, housing or employment situation as well as isolation and stigma (Chaise et al 2019) and may suffer from the impact of exposure to pre-migration violence and require social and spiritual support (Reed et al 2012).

This project initially aimed to address the needs of 2 groups of residential care-experienced young people in Portsmouth; those who had entered care as older adolescents aged 14 or over (although this was subsequently extended to include residential care leavers who had entered care sooner), and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. As that latter group were aged 18 and over during the evaluation, they are referred to as unaccompanied asylum seekers, in this report.

2. Overview of the project

Project context and description

Project context

Portsmouth is one of the most densely populated cities outside London, with pockets of deprivation that are amongst the highest in the UK. Over the past few years, Portsmouth has seen an increase in the number of young people entering care and a significant increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers from 45 in 2017 to 101 in 2019 (DfE, 2019). Two of the 3 residential units in the city closed in recent years and the proportion of looked after children in residential care in the city is lower than the national average (4% compared with 9%). Housing provision in the city is increasingly in short supply, not least because of the impact of the university and its growing populations, and is expensive. Portsmouth council commissioned a private housing provider who, by the end of 2019, was providing 8 houses for local care leavers. The number of care leavers in the city increased from 115 to 123 between 2017 and 2019 and the number in suitable accommodation (defined by DfE as [safe, secure and affordable](#)) increased from 75 to 84. Whilst 55 care leavers were in education or employment, 40 were NEET in 2019. Discussions with project staff indicated that most care leavers in the authority move into local hostels and a local consultation had showed that young people were poorly prepared for independent living. They noted that given the high level of needs of young people, some were unable to sustain their hostel accommodation, where regulations were strict and young people risked losing their tenancy agreement at the first breach of regulation, leading to evictions, housing instability and in some cases, homelessness.

Project aims and intended outcomes

The Aspiration Staying Close project aimed to address these gaps by providing bespoke, intensive support and step-down supported accommodation. It was 1 of 8 Staying Close projects piloted in England via Round 2 of the Innovation Programme. It began in November 2017 and the first young people moved in to their project accommodation in June 2018. The original project aims were to:

- increase the proportion of residential care leavers who remain in the same accommodation for more than 12 months and reduce the number of care leavers who are homeless
- reduce the proportion of residential care leavers who are NEET
- reduce the number suffering from emotional distress

- reduce crisis episodes for young people due to homelessness, mental health crises and poverty

Following the revision of the initial theory of change (see Figure 2, appendix 1) in 2018, an agreed set of outcomes for the project within the evaluation timeframe, were for young people to:

1. live independently in suitable accommodation
2. be in education, employment or training
3. able to manage money by prioritising spending
4. have 1 or 2 positive relationships
5. practise self-regulation via understanding and setting boundaries
6. be able to access professional help when needed

The project aimed to achieve these by working holistically with each young person to provide them with step-down accommodation in 4 project house shares, alongside bespoke emotional, therapeutic and practical life-skills support from an allocated key worker and access to mental health practitioners. Progress towards achieving these was supported and measured via the PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope), a person centred, multi-agency assessment and planning tool.¹

The supported accommodation provision comprised house shares in 2 2-bed houses and 2 5-bed houses. The aim was to provide stability and opportunities to prepare young people for their move to independent living after 12 months. The young people were allocated a project key worker and had access to a mental health practitioner and 2 educational psychologists who helped them identify aspirations using the PATH. The 3 project key workers received training from the mental health experts to better understand and support the young people, as described below. The project introduced on-site support for the indigenous young people by having staff based in the houses. Staff worked on a rota from 8am to 9pm (on-site or via outreach) and in a flexible manner as needed.

The project also aimed to improve the skills of staff working directly with young people through delivery of a training programme (including in the use of the PATH)

¹ The project's educational psychologists used the PATH tool, a person-centre assessment and planning tool developed by Jack Pearpoint, Marsha Forest and John O'Brien. It is an approach designed for long term planning to be reviewed regularly. Using the PATH process enables people to understand and take control of their situation. In order for a PATH to be successful the young person will need to have established a secure relationship with some of the people they invite to be part of the process, so the environment is a safe space in which they can share personal information and dreams. For further information see Pearpoint et al (1998) and Wood et al (2019).

and the introduction of a team around the worker approach. This involved project key workers (who were trained personal advisers (PAs)) receiving training from the Educational Psychologists and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The aim was both to upskill key workers so that they could better recognise and support the needs of young people and make support more accessible to young people. For example, the project manager noted that young people had initially been less willing or able (due to college commitments) to access support from the mental health worker and the educational psychologists than envisaged. Upskilling the key workers enabled young people to access individualised support at a time that suited them, while the project was able to draw less on the time of the mental health specialists. This approach was one of the key components of this project, providing expert support to key workers from a range of professionals, to enable them to offer a wider range of support and advice to their young people, while reducing the number of professionals in direct contact with young people.

Once the young people moved into the project accommodation, a considerable amount of time was spent building relationships between young people and staff. Young people met their key workers twice a week, once for a formal meeting and once for an informal meeting (for example going out for coffee). This approach was introduced following consultations with the young people in the project and helped to build a relationship based on mutual trust. Key workers had a small caseload (4 to 5 young people) to provide time to carry out close and consistent support. Young people were also encouraged to make use of peer support. Some of the activities initially included in the project, such as the use of family group conferencing and the development of an independent living tool, were not implemented following consultation with the young people and the revision of the original theory of change. An additional 5-bed house was secured and enabled the project to expand the number of young people it could support. Portsmouth City Council intends to continue the project provision for the foreseeable future.

Theory of change

A theory of change workshop was conducted by the evaluation team in November 2018 and was attended by 5 participants involved with Aspiration Staying Close project (including the project manager, key workers and therapist, and a housing provider from outside the project). It provided a good opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on the aims of the project and how they might be achieved. The discussions led to a revision of the original theory of change (see Figure 1, appendix 1) and agreement of a revised theory of change, that set out 6 intended outcomes to be achieved and measured within the evaluation timeframe, as listed on page 13 and shown and in Figure 2, appendix 1. These are discussed further in chapter 5.

3. Overview of the evaluation

Evaluation aims

The 8 Staying Close projects were evaluated at individual project level by evaluation teams from the Universities of Oxford, York and Manchester Metropolitan (MMU). A common evaluation plan was designed by the evaluation teams to ensure cross-project consistency in aims, methods, research questions, data collection and analysis. This will assist comparison of project implementation and experiences and outcomes for young people participating in the Staying Close projects.

This evaluation aimed to describe the model of Staying Close developed and delivered by the Aspiration Staying Close project, including how it was working in practice and if and how it was having an impact on outcomes for young people. A cost analysis was carried out by economists from York Consulting.

Evaluation questions

A common set of research questions were agreed for the 8 Staying Close projects. The following questions relate to the implementation:

- to what extent was the planned model achieved? What was in place previously and what is needed to be in place to facilitate successful implementation?
- how were young people and other stakeholders involved in the co-production of the model?
- were support plans developed and implemented as anticipated? Has there been meaningful contact with an identified worker?
- was the staff training rolled out effectively and what was its impact from staff perspectives?

The following questions relate to outcomes and impact

- what was the impact of Staying Close on outcomes for care leavers? What proportion:
 - were in accommodation that is suitable (safe, secure and affordable) and stable (with reference to unplanned moves or disruptions in tenancies)
 - were in education, employment or training appropriate to their abilities, wishes or needs
 - were physically healthy and have good emotional health, wellbeing and resilience

- feel well supported
- were ready for independent living
- were resilient to unsafe behaviours (for example, substance misuse; missing episodes; violence; criminal justice system involvement; and unplanned early parenthood)
- report good social connections, greater social integration?

The following question relates to the economic evaluation:

- what were the costs of delivering the Aspiration Staying Close project and what are the potential cost savings?

Evaluation methods

The evaluation, which took place between April 2018 and March 2020, received ethics approval from the University of York and a data sharing agreement was signed with Portsmouth City Council in October 2018. Data collection took place between June 2018 and January 2020 and was gathered at baseline (when young people entered the project), midpoint (April – June 2019) and evaluation endpoint (January 2020).

The evaluation involved 3 components:

- a process evaluation to understand implementation and operation of the project to inform learning for sustainability and replication
- an outcome evaluation to explore the project's impact on outcomes achieved over time and the experiences of young people supported by the project
- an economic evaluation using a cost analysis to explore costs and potential saving associated with the project

These were underpinned by the following approaches:

- a contribution analysis framework² to understand whether and how elements of the Aspiration Staying Close project contributed to the proposed outcomes

² Contribution analyses is a methodological approach used in the absence of a viable experimental design, and where it is, therefore, not possible to attribute observed results (outcomes) to the intervention being evaluated. It uses the project theory of change to examine the plausibility of the intervention (for example, the activities undertaken) in achieving the expected outcomes, taking into account other influencing factors that can be gathered via qualitative and quantitative project data and other existing research and available data to consider the likely contribution of the project to any change in outcomes.

- before and after analysis of the proposed outcomes, drawn from project monitoring data and evaluation data on accommodation and EET circumstances and wellbeing at baseline and endpoint
- participatory approach comprising co-production and peer research, engaging with young people leaving residential care both as service users and as peer researchers, to understand the experiences of young people accessing the Aspiration Staying Close project

The following data was collected (see appendix 2 for an overview of data collection):

- 1 focus group with 5 non-project care leavers to understand the experiences of leaving care in the area prior to the project starting
- a theory of change workshop with 5 stakeholders to understand the aims, outcomes and contribution of the project
- 9 staff interviews including the project and local authority senior managers at baseline and evaluation endpoint, key workers and specialist staff at baseline or midpoint and endpoint to understand to what extent the planned developments were achieved, the involvement of the young people in the co-production of the model, the quality of the contact between young people and their key workers, the contribution of training to staff knowledge
- a survey with key workers to understand their work and the impact of the training on their work
- a total of 19 interviews with young people (8 at midpoint and 11 at endpoint) to understand their perspectives on accommodation and support received, their resilience to unsafe behaviours and readiness for independent living
- child level data via project monitoring and evaluation measures including Good Childhood Index (GCI) and Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well Being Scale (SWEMWBS) at baseline and endpoint to explore the young people's placement stability, health, emotional wellbeing, education, training or employment status and involvement in unsafe behaviours or risk
- monthly catch up calls with the project manager to understand the implementation of project activities and document review to understand the local context for care leavers
- financial data for the cost analysis evaluation

Changes to evaluation methods

There were few changes to the evaluation plan. Given the small number of key workers, we opted for interviews at midpoint instead of a survey, which enabled us to gather more detailed information, and conducted an additional staff survey at endpoint. The number of interviews with young people were increased to reflect the increased number entering the Aspiration Staying Close project. There are no longer plans to conduct a thematic analysis of all 8 pilot projects, as was initially proposed. This has had minimal impact on individual project evaluation data. The GCI and SWEMWBS (which is recommended for samples of at least 30) were intended to be used at thematic level for the 8 Staying Close projects. Analysis at individual project level for a sample of 14 is, therefore, considerably limited and provides only a tentative illustration of wellbeing for young people in this project.

Limitations of the evaluation

This was a small, time-limited pilot project and the evaluation methods were tailored accordingly. The main limitations were the small sample size and the variation in the duration of project intervention by the end of the evaluation (from 6 to 18 months). It was agreed with the DfE at the evaluation design stage that a comparison group would not be constructed, due to the small cohort size. For these reasons, statistical analysis was limited to descriptive data and it was not possible to confidently attribute changes in outcomes to the project. Qualitative data from staff and young people, however, provided some understanding of how the project contributed to young people's progress and experiences.

The evaluation followed the progress of 14 project young people during the early stages of their transitions from residential care in to the Aspiration project's supported accommodation. All but 2 of the young people remained in the project's supported accommodation at endpoint. It is, therefore, too soon to fully explore the longer-term impact of the project on young people's abilities to manage and sustain positive independent living beyond the project's accommodation. Further project monitoring or evaluation activity will be needed to assess the impact on longer term outcomes such as accommodation stability and satisfaction, participation in EET, emotional, mental and financial wellbeing, resilience to risk taking behaviour and social integration as this first cohort of young people move on to independent living.

4. Implementation evaluation

Methods summary

The implementation evaluation explored the extent to which the Aspiration Staying Close project was achieving its aims and the factors that enabled or inhibited its progress in the first 2 years. Findings are based on data from 28 interviews (9 with staff at different time points and 19 with young people at midpoint and endpoint), a focus group with young people at baseline and a survey of key workers at endpoint.

Findings

Project implementation and delivery

Interviews with staff showed that the Portsmouth Staying Close project was operating successfully and working towards achieving its aims. Some of the project's intended components had been removed (as noted earlier) and some had been adapted as the project evolved to meet young people's needs. The project was continuing to provide support to its young people and was accepting new referrals as those from the initial cohort moved on to independent living. At evaluation endpoint, Portsmouth City Council was reviewing its policy for care leavers on the basis of learning from the project, with an aim to extending this type of support to all care leavers from residential care in the area. Findings from interviews with staff and young people suggested that several factors had been key enablers for project progress. These included consulting with young people at every stage of the project and adapting to their needs; the team around the worker approach, which involved other professionals providing training to key workers to help them to better respond to their needs; and collaborative working with other services.

Facilitators for project progress

Co-production

Co-production with young people was a core component of the project. The local authority participation worker had consulted with local care leavers in the initial design of the project to ensure that it met the needs of the target group, that is to increase and improve on existing post-care accommodation options and provide needs-led support from an allocated work. A key concern of care leavers during the consultation was the limited availability of safe and suitable post-care accommodation, which resulted in many living in hostels after care, often from the age of 16.

The project continued to engage in consultation with young people throughout the implementation and running of the project to ensure that the Aspiration support offer was meaningful and relevant to the particular needs of those it was working with. For example, young people talked of contributing to the development of house rules, having a say in decorating their properties, and being involved in recruitment of project staff. Project staff considered this to have contributed to the positive relationships that had developed between young people and their key workers, as well as increasing young people's confidence:

“it's enabled young people to have the opportunity to have their say, have their opinions listened to, which for some of them has been really helpful to build their confidence and self-esteem.”

The opportunities for consultation and participation in the project, and the project's ability and resources (through the Innovation Programme funding) to be responsive to issues as they arose, was a particular strength and is likely to have contributed to the buy-in and continued engagement of the young people who were supported by the project.

Flexibility and needs-led approach

A flexible approach was adopted throughout the project in the work with the young people. In addition to the supported house shares, the Aspiration Staying Close project continued to adapt to the support needs of the young people. For example, it became apparent that the indigenous group had a higher level of needs than the unaccompanied asylum seeking group. In response, the project introduced daytime on-site support in the house share to ensure that young people felt safe and well supported by staff. On occasion, this was increased to out of hours on-site support if issues arose, such as difficulties with house guests staying late, as staff explained:

“We envisaged support would largely be provided outside of their home. Actually it's largely provided in their home, staff going around, spending significant periods of the day and evening with young people, engaging them, cooking with them.”

The unaccompanied asylum seekers displayed more competent independent living skills, and lived in a house with floating support (flexible, home or outreach support). Overall, however, project young people, were found to have lower levels of independent living skills than initially anticipated by the project, which required more time to address. Young people reported a lack of opportunities to develop and practise basic life skills while they were in care, including cooking and cleaning (see chapter 6 for young people's comments). Several staff members commented that the highly regulated conditions and requirements of children's homes, which focus on safety, can limit opportunities for young people to become involved in or take responsibility for house chores and other independent living skills. One professional

working with the project explained that young people in care may feel disempowered by the number of staff doing things for them, only to lose support suddenly at age 18:

“These kids have often had very little responsibility placed on them... a lot of it has been taken away from them. We’ve taken them out of really tough situations where they’ve had to live on their wits. Then we take all that power and that responsibility away from them and we do it all for them. At the other end [they’re] back out into society and [we] go, ‘You can get on with it yourself now’, and this is what we’re seeing, it’s quite scary for them to have to make their own decisions and they’re used to handing a problem over to a member of staff and having it taken away from them.”

Project staff acknowledged that preparation for independent living was taking longer than anticipated, required more intensive support and that some young people may not be ready to move on to independent living within 12 months of moving into their project accommodation. Indeed, the project manager suggested that 2 years was more realistic for some young people, depending on their level of needs. The project also adopted a “zero failure” approach towards supporting project young people. For example, should a serious accommodation breach ever arise, the young person would not be evicted from their property, but continue to be supported to move to provision that better suited their needs and receive ongoing support from the project.

The level of flexibility evident in the project’s approach to meeting young people’s needs was reflected in the duration of the intervention, and in levels of continued engagement with (and from) young people, with only 1 exiting the project during the first 2 years.

Referral and recruitment routes

The Aspiration Staying Close project was a local authority-run project and this provided direct access to children’s social care professionals who could refer young people to the project, once they were made aware of the provision. This enabled the project to exceed its initial target of 9 young people. Recruitment to the project began in March 2018 and young people began moving in from June 2018, providing a good amount of time during the pilot stage for relationships between young people and the key workers to be built, and between the project and other services to develop. The project and local authority managers acknowledged that ongoing work was needed to maintain referrals to the project and that “forward planning” was needed so that potential referrals could be identified sooner to enable a gradual and planned step-down into the project: “getting the social workers to plan ahead and think ‘oh, I’ve got somebody, then doing referrals... thinking about Staying Close much earlier, [avoid] referrals that are based on a crisis.” (Manager)

Scope to provide intensive support

The Innovation Programme funding was identified as an important factor in enabling the intensive key worker approach, mental health support and flexibility to respond accordingly to the needs of young people. The Aspiration Staying Close project was able to employ 3 key workers, each having a lower caseload (4 or 5) compared with standard practice amongst PAs, and who were able to work out of hours. In addition to working with young people formally and informally, it allowed them to work closely with other professionals and agencies to provide informed advice and bespoke, intensive support to the young people.

Multi-agency working

Another key enabler of the project was the commitment of Portsmouth City Council and the support and buy-in of the multi-agency partners, including educational psychologists, CAMHS and housing providers. Group supervision and training of the key workers by the mental health experts, as part of the team around the worker approach, were considered by staff to have helped them “tremendously” to better understand the needs and behaviours of the young people they were working with. It also enabled them to provide streamlined, holistic, consistent and timely support as needed, by reducing the number of other professionals and services directly in contact with young people. An educational psychologist noted that as young people began to build trusting relationships with project key workers, they became more inclined to engage with the wider project support, including the mental health experts. Project and local authority managers considered the project to provide learning for extending the type of support to all care leavers in the area.

Challenges to project progress

Staff recruitment

Recruitment of staff was an initial challenge. The project manager worked with the key workers to ensure they received the necessary support and training and were aware of the flexible work schedules (including evening work). One key worker went on long-term leave, which reduced young people’s access to an allocated worker, so responsibilities were shared between the manager and the other 2 key workers.

Providing accommodation

Delays were experienced while undertaking renovation works for the 2 2-bed houses and consequently the houses became available 6 months later than planned. In the meantime, a further 5-bed house was found, which continued to be used by the project and allowed it to increase its capacity to work with 14 young people. The project is considering a longer lease for its project accommodation.

The general housing shortage in the area meant there were limited move-on options for young people, particularly those perceived as vulnerable or reliant on benefits, as landlords were able to exercise more restrictive criteria for potential tenants. Closer involvement with housing associations and providers in the future will help to identify sufficient housing choices and availability for young people moving from the project's supported accommodation, as well as the wider leaving care cohort in the area.

Limitations

Implementation findings are based on the views of those directly involved in the Aspiration Staying Close project. Future evaluations might gather the views of staff from other related services, such as leaving care workers and housing providers.

Conclusions

The main points that emerged from the implementation evaluation were:

- Innovation Programme funding provided scope for the pilot project to adopt a flexible and needs-led approach during its development and implementation
- the project benefited from adopting a co-production approach. Care leavers were consulted on project design and project young people were involved in ongoing decisions about staff recruitment, house decoration and contributing to the development of house rules and policies, which aimed to engender a sense of ownership and community. This appeared to facilitate engagement from young people, demonstrated by all but 1 remaining with the project
- consistent with existing research evidence, the project had identified, through consultation and getting to know their young people, the need for earlier and more holistic and hands-on preparation for independent living for young people leaving care. Young people require opportunities to practise basic skills as well as develop practical and emotional competence to meet the responsibilities of adult life prior to making the transition from care
- the staff training and team around the worker approach appeared to work well for staff, offering access to multi-disciplinary expertise and equipping them with wider skills and knowledge to better understand and support young people. Staff suggested that having a consistent and direct source of holistic support from a key worker was beneficial to young people with high levels of need, rather than involving several different professionals at once
- Portsmouth County Council considered that the project had provided learning for the local authority in how best to collaborate with other agencies such as housing, Educational Psychology and CAMHS to facilitate care leavers' swift access to support in a manner and at a time that meets their needs

5. Outcomes evaluation

This was a small scale evaluation of a pilot project with a small number of young people. As such, we would not expect to provide conclusive evidence on its impact on outcomes at this stage. Findings reflect young people's experiences and progress towards achieving outcomes and their views on the support they received.

Methods summary

Findings draw on quantitative and qualitative data for 14 young people in the project. At baseline and endpoint individual level data on characteristics and outcomes in accommodation stability, EET and risk of offending and homelessness were gathered and the GCI and SWEMWBS measures of wellbeing were completed by young people. Additionally, qualitative face to face interviews were conducted with young people and the professionals working with them at midpoint and endpoint, to explore perspectives on how young people were supported by the Aspiration project.

Findings

At the evaluation endpoint project young people were aged 18 to 23 years. They had entered the project accommodation at various time points during the evaluation timeframe. The average number of months in the project was 14 with a range of 6 to 18 months. Findings are based on outcome areas identified in the project's theory of change and the original project proposal. These outcomes are discussed separately below (see chapter 6 for young people's comments about support).

A strength of the project was the individualised, needs-led support. For example, project staff noted that the unaccompanied asylum seekers had more competent independent living skills and that the type of support they needed was different to that of the other project young people. The needs of unaccompanied asylum seekers were related to the uncertainty of their legal status, being unable to be in contact with their families or to work before their legal status allowed it. Support therefore, focused on help with legal aid, social interaction, vocational training or language courses, and opportunities to pursue religious activities, such as attending mosque, which was considered by key workers to be a positive factor in their progress. Support for the other young people, meanwhile focused more on help to develop a routine and independent living skills.

Accommodation

Data indicated a positive level of stability for young people since moving into the project accommodation. On average, young people had experienced 4 placement

moves before entering the project, however, most (71%,10) had not moved between baseline (on entering the project) and evaluation endpoint some 6 to 18 months later. While 4 had lived in their accommodation between 6 and 8 months, 10 had done so for over 1 year. There was no evidence of homelessness during that timeframe. Three young people had experienced 1 move and another had experienced 2 moves. This included a young person who moved between project houses and 2 young people who had moved as planned, to live independently in their own tenancies, with continued project support, by the evaluation endpoint.

The majority of young people (86%,12) remained in project accommodation by evaluation endpoint and had not, therefore, transitioned to independent accommodation. There was some indication that they had remained in project accommodation longer than originally anticipated, in order that their needs could be met and suitable move-on independent tenancies could be secured.³ Reports from young people showed that they generally appreciated the project accommodation. All but 2 said they were happy or very happy with where they were living. Some, however, indicated that sharing common spaces could be a challenge, particularly in relation to keeping them clean, and the location of one of the houses away from the city centre was reported as an issue for some of the unaccompanied asylum seekers, who had social connections in the city centre and felt remote from these.

Participation in college, training or meaningful employment

At baseline the majority of young people (86%, 11) were in education, with some still in compulsory provision. Young people had been supported to continue in EET over time and most (71%, 10) were in EET by the evaluation endpoint, while 4 (29%) were NEET. This compares favourably to data for all care leavers aged 19 to 21 in the local authority, 45% of whom were in EET, and to 52% of care leavers nationally (DfE 2019). Of those in the project in EET, half (5) were in further education, 3 (30%) were in full time employment and 2 (20%) were in work experience. Project key workers continued to work with those who were NEET to identify opportunities.

Comments from the project staff identified 2 factors that influenced EET choices. First, most unaccompanied asylum seekers in the project could not work whilst their status was being decided, and therefore tended to be in education. A second factor was that the high accommodation rental levels in the city and low wages for young people, could present a hurdle for young people taking up employment opportunities

³ The original project plan proposed that young people would remain in the project's supported house shares for approximately 12 months, after which they would be supported to find and transition to independent accommodation, with ongoing support from the project.

that might better fit their needs and circumstances, for example, that were short term or involved variable hours, as doing so could impact on housing and other benefits:

“There may be jobs out there that people could do for a few hours a week just to you know, slowly get into the work system, but at the moment there’s no incentive for them to do that because they wouldn’t have any more money.” (Project worker)

Positive relationships

A focus of project work was building trusting relationships between staff and young people and helping young people to navigate wider relationships and improve their confidence and self-esteem. The approach employed by the educational psychologists and the use of the PATH, aimed to empower the young people to identify their aspirations and to choose whom they wanted to involve in achieving their goals, including, in some cases, professionals from other services. For example, project staff considered a young person’s experience at college to have improved after their college tutor was made aware of their circumstances and the impact that trauma had on their capacity to fully participate in college.

In addition to intensive key worker support, young people had access to support from a mental health worker and the educational psychologists attached to the project, should they wish. Work undertaken by the project team included supporting young people to negotiate safe and positive relationships.

Qualitative data from staff and young people indicated that key workers had built close and trusting relationships with the young people, which had helped maintain young people’s engagement with support, such as 1 young person, who commented that “they care about how we feel, a lot, which helps to be comfortable to be able to speak to them, you know they’re always going to be there”. This had been enhanced by opportunities for informal conversations and activities between staff and young people (such as going into town for coffee or for a meal), which contributed to creating a positive relationship with them. The majority of young people talked positively of the project workers, “whatever problem I have [worker] sorts it out for me” and the support they had received “there when I need it”. One welcomed the workers’ approach: “because they don’t want to force their help on us, they would like us to go to them, which is independence”.

Developing emotional and practical life skills

Interviews with the young people suggested that most of them had made or were making progress towards developing the skills to move on to independent living. Most young people maintained or improved their budgeting skills but those young people who relied on benefits struggled with managing money and in some cases

the project stepped in to help them, via a project welfare budget, for example purchasing food for the household or a mobile phone for a young person.

Staff reports suggested that the level of trauma that young people had experienced and a lack of early preparation meant that more substantive work was required for them to acquire the emotional and practical competence for independent living. Support with basic skills, self-motivation and routine (for example, making sure they got out of bed in the morning) was, therefore, needed before other skills-development activities could be undertaken. Young people also reported that they needed additional support in order to develop skills such as cooking, cleaning, budgeting and time management. Consequently, individual and group work with the young people took longer than expected. This suggested that being in care, with its focus on safeguarding and addressing young people's difficulties, can be experienced as overprotective and disempowering. For example, in previous placements young people's rooms had been tidied for them and meals cooked by staff. Qualitative data from staff indicated that young people from residential care may need 2 years to build the level of skills and confidence needed for independent living, and that work to prepare them should start earlier, as suggested by the young people who attended the focus group.

Key workers were able to undertake practical support around basic independent skills such as cooking, house maintenance and money management. There was some evidence of key workers adopting creative approaches to encouraging young people to take responsibility for their living spaces. For example, the project manager described how key workers had worked with one young person to encourage her to keep her room tidy:

“It became [health and safety] issue when she refused to clean her room, she was finally told [staff] would have to clean it for her. She was fine with this. They did so and created a hotel-like room with candles and animals made from towels on her bed. They also took photos of the before and after. She was delighted with her new room. She hadn't lived in an environment before where she had had to keep her room reasonably tidy. Room cleaning interventions seemed to have worked. She is cleaning her room of her own volition... attending college 2 out of 3 days.”

The professionals and many of the young people regarded the PATH approach (see chapter 2) as a useful tool for planning their transition to adult life and an enjoyable way for the young people to address topics that can create anxiety such as setting goals or aspirations. PATH is a creative planning tool that uses both process and graphic facilitation to create a shared vision of a positive future. It draws on people's ability to visualise different futures and to plan backwards from a future vision or dream and to think about how that vision can come into being. The approach is designed for long term planning and to be reviewed regularly.

Involving the young people in decisions such as elements of home decoration, creating house rules and taking part in staff recruitment was appreciated by the young people and it contributed to a sense of belonging and improved self-esteem.

Young people's mental health, wellbeing and risk

- Mental health and wellbeing

Information gathered from project monitoring data, showed that just under half of the group (43%, 6) were identified as having mental health needs at endpoint (mainly low mood), 4 of whom were receiving support from a mental health practitioner. Wellbeing and mental health difficulties are likely to require longer-term specialist intervention to enable needs to be addressed.

Analysis of the GCI and SWEMWBS was limited due to the small sample size and variable duration of project intervention (6 to 18 months).⁴ Consequently, the measures did not contribute any statistical evidence of change in young people's wellbeing or life satisfaction by evaluation endpoint.

A preliminary look at the scores for the 14 Aspiration young people provided a tentative indication that wellbeing had remained fairly static between entering the project and evaluation endpoint (see Tables 2 and 3, appendix 3).

- Risk

There was some evidence of risk behaviour and difficulties in the sample, which for some had reduced over time. Monitoring data showed that 3 (21%) young people had been involved with criminal activity prior to joining the project, which for 2, had ceased by endpoint. In addition, 4 (29%) young people were identified as being involved with substance misuse throughout, which was being addressed with support from the project team and a drugs counsellor. A further 3 (21%), who were identified as having such difficulties at baseline, had no reported drug misuse at endpoint.

There was no evidence of young people going missing at endpoint, compared to 2 (14%) young people at baseline and whilst 6 (43%) had been identified as at risk of CSE or criminal exploitation at baseline, this had reduced to 2 (14%) at endpoint.

- Support

The qualitative data from young people and project staff indicated that the support provided by the Aspiration Staying Close project was generally appreciated as

⁴ SWEMWBS is designed for samples of 30 or more. Data was collected for a combined analysis across all Staying Close projects. Analysis is not possible for this project due to the sample size (14).

positive by both groups of young people. The multi-disciplinary approach of the educational psychologists, mental health experts and the project staff provided young people with needs-led, individualised support, which appeared to be supporting young people to contain risk behaviour and having a generally positive effect on their progress (see chapter 6), as 1 project worker described:

“[Young person] was involved in criminal activity, doing this, that and the other. This is his home, if he wants to go out he can do that outside, but he’s not even done that. He came in... about a month ago ... unwashed and looking dreadful, and you see him now, he’s eating, he’s showering, his room is lovely and tidy.”

Interviews with staff and young people suggested that project support to help find a settled homelife, begin addressing other needs via direct access to timely mental health support and key workers being trained on the impact of adverse childhood experiences, was contributing to young people’s stability in accommodation and EET. In turn, it is possible that this contributed to containing exposure to risk, such as homelessness and criminal activity, though further exploration is needed.

Interviews with project staff also indicated that providing specialist support via the project was a more flexible, timely and accessible option for young people. For example, having specialists on hand meant that young people were not caught up in lengthy waiting lists for CAMHS or high thresholds for adult mental health services, and as they got to know staff, they became more inclined to engage with different types of support, as the mental health worker commented: “I think the reason the role works is because it’s very flexible, whatever is needed at the time.”

There was little evidence of contact with previous carers, other than an occasional text and for some young people who continued to live close to the children’s home, occasionally calling in to say hello. Young people were mostly supported to integrate with local connections such as family, friends or new social networks.

Existing evidence base

Existing literature on the risk and protective factors for positive transitions from care to independent adulthood suggest that the Aspiration model (aims, inputs and activities) as set out in the theory of change (appendix 1), was a plausible approach towards achieving the proposed outcomes for young people leaving residential care. Evidence shows that care leavers are often poorly prepared and can lack the independent living skills and the emotional and practical support to take on the responsibilities of independent living at a young age. This can lead to post-care accommodation instability, breakdown and for around one-third of care leavers, episodes of homelessness (Dixon and Lee 2015, Gill 2017, Baker 2019), which can

impact on other outcomes such as wellbeing and EET. Evidence also shows high levels of emotional and mental health needs within the care population (Meltzer et al 2003). The provision of stable accommodation that young people are happy with and that is considered suitable for their needs can be a protective factor that can mediate the impact of earlier difficulties and is associated with positive mental wellbeing and life satisfaction (Wade and Dixon, 2006). Studies also identify the importance of having at least 1 positive and supportive relationship to guide young people through the transition from care and on whom they can rely (Parry and Weatherhead 2014).

The Aspiration Staying Close project was offering a gradual and supported transition to independent living by providing young people with stable, supported accommodation, consistent workers and access to mental health experts, to support their practical and emotional needs. This approach appeared to provide young people a degree of post-care stability and certainty within which they were given time, individualised support and opportunities to make mistakes and learn, and to develop the practical and emotional skills to better manage the journey towards independent living. Evidence from local and national leaving care statistics, meanwhile, suggested that the Aspiration Staying Close cohort compared well, with a higher proportion in EET.

Plausibility findings

The extent to which the project contributed to these outcomes is restricted mostly to the qualitative data from professionals and young people involved in the project. Analysis, however, provided evidence that young people in the project were experiencing stability in both their accommodation settings and in their participation in EET and some had experienced a reduction in risk behaviour. Though difficult to measure the contribution of the project to these outcomes (due to the limitations discussed below), the qualitative data and on-going engagement of the group with project support, indicates that young people welcomed the intensive and bespoke support from key workers and the multi-disciplinary team of professionals that worked with the project to support them. The local authority lead noted that the project's ability to provide "such intensity and consistency" in support was a key factor in its impact on young people, and something that was not possible in usual leaving care support due to PA caseloads.

Limitations

The sample size and variable duration of the intervention, limited statistical analysis. This, and the lack of a comparison group, meant that it was not possible to attribute results to the project. Data, however, suggest that the project has contributed to positive experiences and early progress. It is too soon to assess longer-term impact.

Conclusions

The qualitative data (interviews with professionals and young people) showed that young people were settling well and showing early signs of progress across a range of outcome areas and that they were happy with the support from the project.

The main conclusions from the outcomes evaluation were:

- the Aspiration Staying Close project appears to have contributed positively to vulnerable young people avoiding risks such as homelessness, unemployment, and for some of them, reducing addiction and involvement with the criminal justice system by providing intensive support and work to enhance their self-esteem
- young people had higher levels of needs than expected, with differing types and levels of needs across the two groups of young people. Provision of individualised and consistent support from the intensive key worker and wider team appeared to help young people to establish trusting relationships and enable needs to be identified and addressed
- most young people were in EET at baseline and endpoint, suggesting that they had been supported to maintain participation and engagement. The use of the PATH to raise aspirations and plan routes to achieving them and the input of the educational psychologists were identified as important facilitators of young people's progress
- most young people had experienced placement instability prior to moving into the project but had subsequently found stability, remaining in the same accommodation between 6 and 18 months after leaving residential care. Two young people who had moved on to their own tenancies were continuing to receive support from the project, staying close to the project support networks
- the local authority manager and project staff considered that key factors in the project's impact on young people's progress and engagement with support, was the ability to provide "such intensity and consistency" of input (including out of hours contact), which was not easily attainable in usual leaving care practice due to PA caseloads and work patterns, and also the accessible, timely support from mental health specialists
- a longer follow-up would enable opportunities to fully assess and understand the impact of the project support on young people's progress after moving to independent living

6. Voices of young people

Methods summary

The evaluation used a participatory design to enable young people to be consulted throughout the evaluation timeframe. This included a focus group with 5 young people at baseline to explore the issues facing residential care leavers in the local area. Eight project young people took part in face to face interviews with the evaluation researcher at midpoint and 11 were interviewed at endpoint by a peer researcher (appendix 4 provides 2 case studies, illustrating young people's experiences of the project). The peer researcher, a care-experienced young person from another Innovation Programme project, along with 1 young person from the Aspiration project and young people from other Staying Close projects, attended a 2-day research skills training workshop run by the University of York evaluation team.

Findings

- Participation and co-production

Young people were involved in decisions from the point of their referral to the Aspiration Staying Close project. One young person was a member of the project steering committee and qualitative data showed that young people were consulted on project design and house management. They participated in staff recruitment and some met with Ofsted inspectors to talk about their experiences, during the Ofsted inspection. Young people co-produced the house rules and guest policy and helped decide the decoration of the properties. This helped instil a sense of ownership of the shared accommodation. They were also taken for a group meal to help build trust and positive relationships with staff, and create a space for informal conversations.

The local authority had consulted with local care leavers in the design of the project, and had responded to young people's concerns about insufficient safe and suitable post-care accommodation for them. Often the only option was to live in a hostel after care, which young people at the evaluation focus group considered unsuitable:

“Basically, it's just a building for homeless people. That's literally what it is ... people that do drugs, drink every day, cause dramas. Think about it, where's the fairness ... we go through years of foster care, all of us in residential units, and then we're put in a homeless shelter. I mean, come on, what does that say about social services? Our kids are well looked after till they're 18, then after that they're homeless.” (Focus group participant)

- Independent living skills

Some young people commented on the lack of opportunities to develop independent

living skills and to prepare for leaving care:

“When I moved into a children’s home there was a cleaner that used to clean the bedrooms, there was a cook that used to cook your food and you had to ask for what you want. You weren’t allowed to do anything. Everything was all locked down. You weren’t allowed to shower in school time.” (Young person)

Since entering the project, most of the young people interviewed felt that they had acquired more skills for independent living. This included cooking as well as managing money and planning on a tight budget, as described by 1 young person:

“It does happen sometimes at the end of the month... I get a little bit run out but I try to borrow some food and stuff. When I’m seeing that I’m running out of money I try to buy food and the things that I need, so I keep them or save them and then when the time I don’t have the money, I eat them.” (Young person)

Young people also mentioned working through the PATH with project staff, which was helping them to develop skills, set goals and plan for the future:

“I’m pretty well independent on everything else except from the cleaning and cooking. I’ve been supported and thinking of planning ahead with some of the goals I want to achieve in the future.” (Young person)

Another described how the key worker was helping them with their motivation:

“I haven’t got that get up and go. I need to find that again. And my keyworker is helping me find it. I’m a lot better, I feel more happier in myself. I’m doing a lot more things, just active things, like tidying up, doing my washing, like opening my curtains, doing my hoovering, like it’s good.” (Young person)

- Project support

Data from young people showed that they appreciated the level of support received from the project and the fact that members of staff worked on-site or via outreach, were on rota from 8am to 9pm, and worked flexibly when needed, as one young person described: “[Workers], being by my side if I need to talk to them they’re there, I can just pop in and say hi, have a good laugh with them.” Others also appreciated the friendly and informal approach they had with workers: “Staff are nice, like they will happily sit and talk with you and stuff like that.” Some young people described a sense of trust that their workers would be there to support them: “ If I wanted any support I know [key workers] would support me 100%,” and for another: “if I have a problem or I need something that needs doing I’ll go and talk to [key worker] and see if they can help me. And 9 times out of 10 they do, it’s brilliant.”

Interviews with young people also showed that the therapeutic input of the project team made a difference to their personal development and mental health needs, as indicated by young people's accounts of their support from the project:

"[Project] has introduced me to [therapist], she'll sit there and she'll talk to me about my past, which is my main problem, even though your past is what makes you who you are. She is helping me see what parts make me who I am rather than what parts made me a problem. And then I've got [worker] who speaks to me on cannabis, and since, I've cut down dramatically. I'm on the verge of completely stopping and I've been smoking for eight years." (Young person)

One young person felt that they had been able to engage with project workers and accept support, despite less successful past experiences with therapy:

"I feel like I've got enough [support] now. They've helped me. I went to counselling when I was younger... I struggled really hard to open up to people because... my trust went downhill for everyone." (Young person)

There was evidence that young people felt at home and at ease within the project:

"I would say this is the next stage of freedom. I would say that this is where you can truly find out who you are, how you can cope in the big world, and just be comfortable with yourself again, and just relax, don't feel like ... it's what they say, just because you're only here for a year doesn't mean it's not our home, you make your home where you make it. So that's really nice." (Young person)

Finally, a young person, who had moved to independent living, described how the project had made a huge difference to their life:

"I have to add that if the stay close project wasn't there for me I wouldn't be able to sort a lot of things out, but fortunately I have had support from [key worker] and I have moved my house with [the project's] help. There were many, many problems on my way to get where I am right now and with help from stay close almost everything is sorted." (Young person)

Conclusions

It was evident that young people were included in project development and able to voice their views and contribute to decisions. Such meaningful participation of young people can foster engagement as well as a sense of ownership and self-esteem. Empowering young people through needs-led, intensive support also contributed to young people's willingness to set out and work towards their goals alongside their key workers. Those interviewed, clearly valued the project.

7. Cost analysis

The cost analysis was conducted on the basis of baseline and endpoint data provided by the Aspiration Staying Close project. For a detailed explanation of the method, please see appendix 5. The analysis combines 2 data sources:

- baseline and endpoint data for 14 young people supported by the project. This data covers the following categories: EET status; placement moves (accommodation stability); drug taking behaviour; criminal activity; absconding; sexualised behaviour and CSE and physical health
- estimates from Aspiration project staff about the savings the project generates for the local authority in the form of residential care, supported accommodation and semi-independent living costs that it no longer has to pay

The advantage of this approach is that it uses real baseline and endpoint data supplied for young people who have been supported by the project. The drawback of the approach is that the baseline and endpoint data is unlikely to tell the full story about the preventative effects of the Aspiration Staying Close project. For example, a young person may have no offending behaviour in the period prior to referral and none during the period of their support through Aspiration. In the context of this cost analysis, that will show as no change or saving. However, it may be the case that without Aspiration, the young person would have fallen into a pattern of offending behaviour. As such, the preventative effect of the project may actually be significant and could have prevented the local authority, the police or other partners from incurring significant additional cost.

Method

Using proxy savings for each outcome area (see Table 6, appendix 5), for each of the 14 young people for whom baseline and endpoint data is available, provides estimated annual savings that might be attributable to Aspiration. Accurately assessing the counterfactual, and therefore attribution, is challenging, although it is unlikely that Aspiration would be the only factor influencing positive changes. Low attribution, medium attribution and high attribution adjustments have therefore, been applied, which assume that 33%, 50% and 66% respectively of any positive change observed can be attributed to Aspiration.

Results

Analysis of baseline and endpoint data provided by the Aspiration Staying Close project suggest that indicative annual savings associated with EET status, criminal activity etcetera, are relatively small when compared with the cost of delivering

Aspiration: they range from an estimated £45,797 to an estimated £91,595, depending on the assumptions that are applied about the changes observed in the data, that can be attributed to the project (see Table 1 below and appendix 5 for further details).

The estimated annual savings associated with accommodation (as described in the second bullet point above) are much larger, at £911,606. This is driven largely by savings to the local authority in the form of residential care, which are estimated at approximately £725,000 (a full breakdown is provided in Table 7 in appendix 5).

Total estimated annual savings are therefore, between £957,403 and £1,003,201 as shown in Table 1.

The project's anticipated total spend during the Innovation Programme period, excluding start-up costs that would not be incurred under a business as usual model, is £608,000. Based on the cost analysis undertaken for this evaluation (and noting that data limitations prevented a full cost-benefit analysis), the project appears to be generating a net saving to the state (see appendix 5 for further detail).

Table 1: Indicative savings

Category of cost saving	No. young people to which it applies	Total value/saving (with no attribution adjustment)	Low Attribution (33%)	Medium Attribution (50%)	High Attribution (66%)
A positive change in EET status	2	£20,932	£6,908	£10,466	£13,815
Fewer placement moves than baseline	13	£41,580	£13,721	£20,790	£27,443
Reduction in drug taking since baseline	1	£3,994	£1,318	£1,997	£2,636
Reduction in criminal activity (unrelated to drug taking or sexualised behaviour)	2	£4,144	£1,368	£2,072	£2,735

Category of cost saving	No. young people to which it applies	Total value/saving (with no attribution adjustment)	Low Attribution (33%)	Medium Attribution (50%)	High Attribution (66%)
Fewer absconding episodes than at baseline	1	£2,719	£897	£1,360	£1,795
Reduction in sexualised behaviour	5	£65,410	£21,585	£32,705	£43,171
Improvement in physical health	0	-	-	-	-
Residential care cost savings for the local authority	7	£724,542	£724,542	£724,542	£724,542
Supported accommodation cost savings for the local authority (6-month saving for 7 young people)	7	£63,700	£63,700	£63,700	£63,700
Supported accommodation cost savings for the local authority (12-month saving for 5 young people)	5	£91,000	£91,000	£91,000	£91,000
Semi-independent living cost savings for the local authority	3	£32,364	£32,364	£32,364	£32,364
Total		£1,050,385	£957,403	£980,996	£1,003,201

8. Summary of key findings on 7 practice features and 7 outcomes

Reducing risk for young people

There was no evidence of homelessness throughout and limited evidence of substance misuse and involvement with the criminal justice system amongst young people involved in the project at outset. Qualitative data suggests that the intensive and bespoke support for young people in the project may have at least contained risk, such as CSE and offending, and prevented homelessness.

Creating greater stability for young people

Most of the young people experienced stable accommodation during the evaluation (over 6–18 months), despite having experienced instability prior to the project. Findings suggest that young people were becoming more resilient and developing the necessary skills to achieve stability when they move to independent living.

Increasing wellbeing for young people

Data on young people's wellbeing was gathered using the GCI and the SWEMWBS at baseline and evaluation endpoint but results were inconclusive. Qualitative data suggests that the project (via the PATH tool and access to mental health specialists) contributed to avoidance of risks such as homelessness and addiction, and young people reported feeling well supported and settled. Some described support with motivation and being able to aspire to future goals and how to achieve them.

Increasing workforce wellbeing

Key workers received training and were supported by a team around the worker approach, which enabled them to feel supported and better equipped to respond to young people's needs. Qualitative data suggested that staff were happy with this approach, which included monthly supervision with a mental health specialist.

Generating better value for money

The cost analysis undertaken for the evaluation suggests that the estimated annual savings to the state generated by the Aspiration Staying Close project, could be between £957,000 and £1,003,000. However, a number of caveats accompany these findings, given the limitations of the evaluation (see appendix 5).

9. Conclusions and recommendations

This was a small pilot project and findings relate to the relatively early stage of young people's transitions to independent living. As such, recommendations are limited.

The key conclusions and recommendations are:

- the implementation and delivery of the Aspiration Staying Close project was successful. Portsmouth City Council will continue to provide the model of support, with some changes based on learning from the pilot. The project should continue to develop the input of the mental health and educational psychology input, based on young people's needs
- a change made during the project implementation was to train the key workers in using the PATH tool with a view to applying it in their work with future project young people. This requires monitoring and training for those using it, to ensure it is used effectively (particularly if staff change)
- the Aspiration project demonstrated the importance and effectiveness of a needs-led and responsive approach. The provision of on-site, bespoke support and engaging young people in an informal, supportive and caring manner, have been key elements in the work undertaken. The approach, together with intensive and consistent support contributed to building trusting relationships between young people and staff and is likely to have been a factor in young people's engagement with the project
- care leavers are often involved with a range of services and professionals, which can prove overwhelming and confusing. The provision of a small and consistent multi-disciplinary team approach, appeared to meet young people's needs, allowing access to a range of support in a timely manner
- the project worked with 2 distinct groups of young people with different types and levels of need. It became apparent that the services and support provided to unaccompanied asylum seekers were different from those offered to the other young people from residential care. Although the project was able to tailor support to meet these different needs, it might consider whether 2 separate projects would maximise staff expertise and outcomes for young people from each group
- the lack of adequate preparation prior to leaving care is a consistent issue in leaving care literature, which appears to stem from attempts to care and support young people by carrying out tasks for them rather than supporting them to develop skills. This highlights the need for young people to have greater and earlier opportunities to practice these skills before moving on from care and for supported accommodation projects to build in more time and

support to help young people to develop and refine them. Consultation between Ofsted and care providers to achieve a balance between health and safety and providing care and a greater level of autonomy to teenagers, might enable an environment in which they can develop and practice both the practical and emotional skills and create opportunities for them to gain self-confidence and readiness for independent living

- the PATH tool, completed by young people in co-operation with workers and people they felt close to, in which young people's soft outcomes (such as self-esteem, motivation, aspirations and confidence) are supported may be helpful and motivating for other care leavers and those working directly with them
- considering options that would enable and encourage young people in care to take part time jobs without losing benefits may stimulate them to engage in employment and increase their capability to live independently. This is particularly so for those who lack work readiness and require a more gradual introduction to employment. Closer work between the local authority and Job Centre Plus to address obstacles and provide access to a range of options for care leavers through the local offer might increase opportunities
- project young people were supported to make connections with friends and family. One project property was close by to the former children's home and young people were able to call in should they wish. Staff however, noted that with only 1 children's home in the local area, most residential care leavers came from out of area placements, and therefore the focus was often on reintegration and supporting connections in the city, rather than previous care placements. The Portsmouth Aspiration Staying Close project was, therefore, supporting young people to reconnect or build new formal and informal support networks (via project staff, house mates and others the young people identified) to stay close to as they moved into independent adulthood
- based on data from the evaluation of the pilot phase, the cost analysis suggested that the Aspiration project could generate an estimated annual saving of between £957,000 and £1,003,000
- a final recommendation is that the project team continue to gather monitoring data for young people entering the project, so that they can assess progress and generate evidence of the impact of their project on the longer-term outcomes for young people leaving residential care

Appendix 1 – Project Theory of Change

A theory of change workshop was conducted by the evaluation team in November 2018 and was attended by 5 participants involved with the Aspiration Staying Close project (including the project manager, key workers and therapist, and a housing provider from outside the project). It provided a good opportunity for stakeholders to reflect on the aims of the project and how they might be achieved. The discussions led to a revision of the original theory of change (see Figure 1) and agreement of a revised theory of change, that set out 6 intended outcomes to be achieved and measured within the evaluation timeframe, as listed on page 13 and shown in Figure 2 below. These were discussed in chapter 5.

Figure 1: Original Theory of Change

Portsmouth Staying Close - Theory of Change

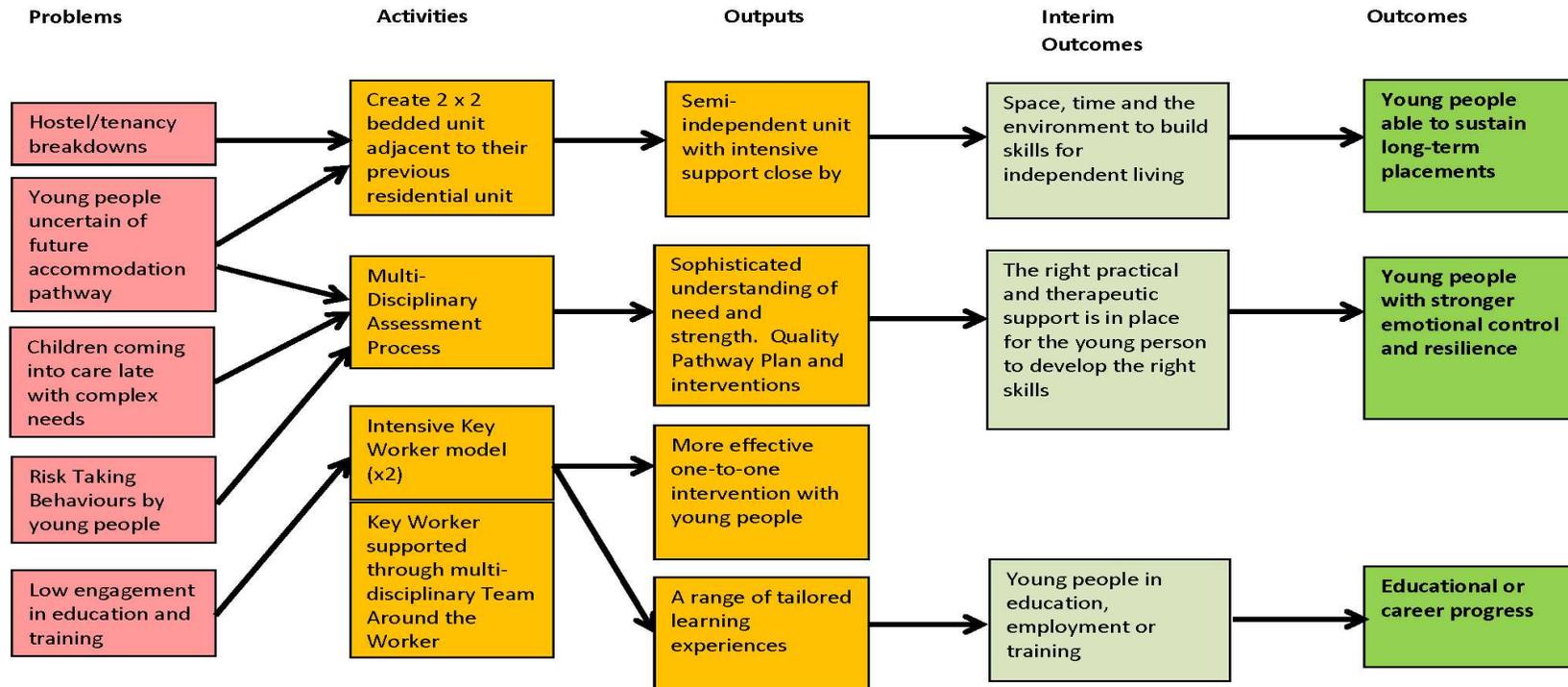
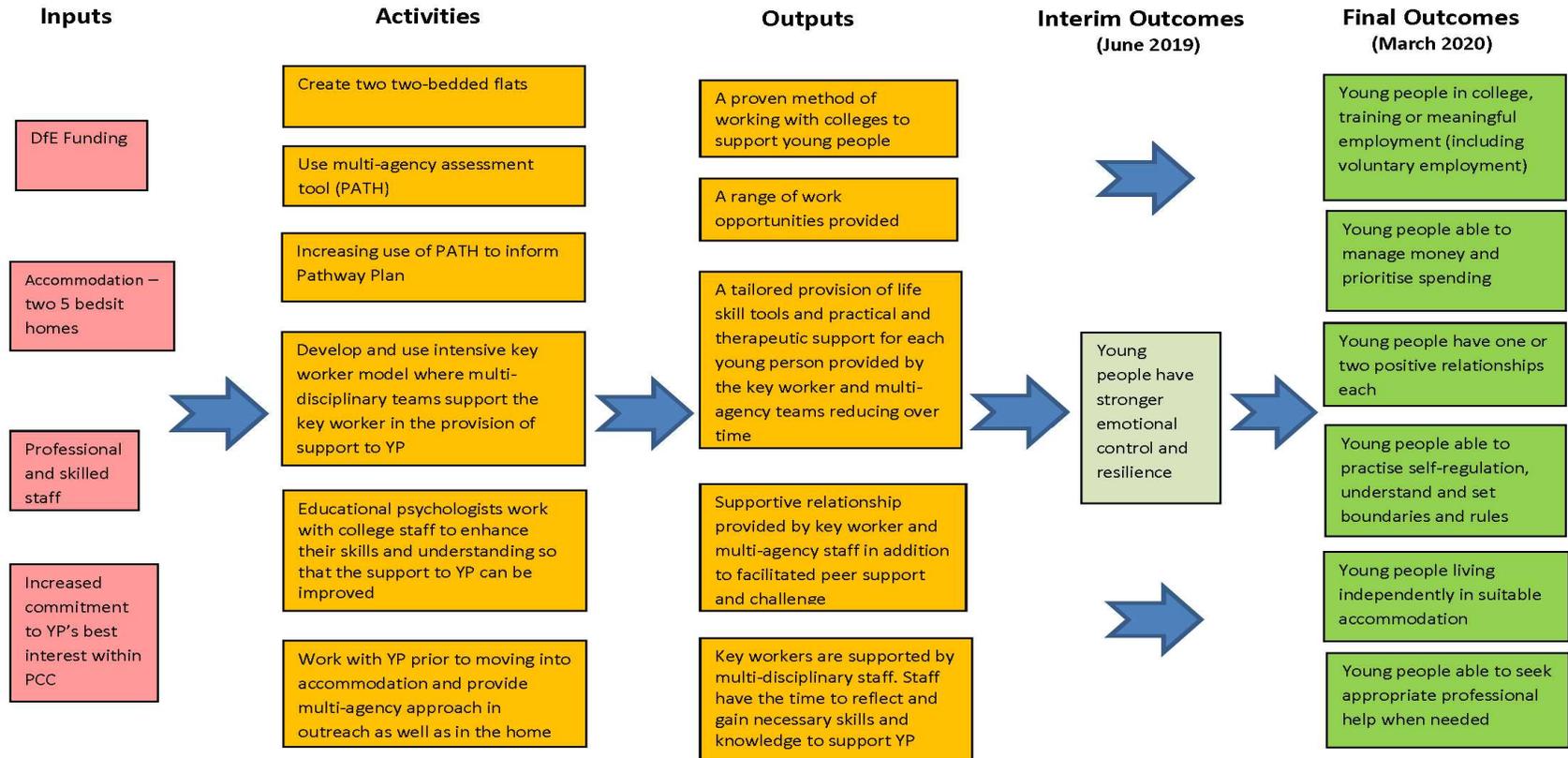


Figure 2: Revised Theory of Change

Portsmouth Aspiration Staying Close – Revised Theory of Change 2018



Appendix 2 – Data collection

Table 2: Number of participants for each data collection point

	Baseline (project start or project entry for young people)	Evaluation Midpoint (April – June 2019)	Evaluation Endpoint (Jan 2020)
Interviews - professionals	3	4	6
Survey - professionals	-	-	7
Theory of change workshop	5	-	-
Focus Group - young people	5	-	-
Interviews - young people	-	8	11
Young people's monitoring data	-	14	14
GCI	10	13	14
SWEMWBS	10	13	14

Appendix 3 – Outcomes comparison

Table 3: Outcomes of the project cohort compared with local data

Outcomes	Aspiration cohort aged 18 to 23 (endpoint)	Portsmouth care leavers aged 19 to 21	National care leavers aged 19 to 21
EET	71%	45%**	52%**
NEET	29%	33%**	39%**
Semi-independent accommodation	71%	-	14%**
Independent accommodation	14%	-	35%**
Homeless	0%	2%*	1%**
Prison/custody	0%	5%*	3%**

Data source: *Portsmouth City Council Innovation Programme application, **DfE 2019

The SWEMWBS is designed for use with a sample size in excess of 30. Data was collected from young people at baseline and endpoint to contribute to a combined sample from all 8 Staying Close projects. A full analysis was not possible for this project due to the small sample (14) and variable duration of the intervention across the sample (6 to 18 months). Completion by unaccompanied asylum seekers in English (their second language) may have been influenced by their cultural perception of concepts used by SWEMWBS. A preliminary analysis suggests little change in wellbeing within the project group over time (see Table 4), and that the mean score was slightly lower than the UK [population norms](#) for the measure (23.6).

Table 4: SWEMWBS scores

Group score	Baseline (10)	Endpoint (14)
Total score	312	315
Mean score	22.3	22.5

The GCI measure of wellbeing comprised a single overall measure of happiness with life, scored from 0 (very unhappy) to 10 (very happy). As shown in Table 5, the mean scores were lower than the UK mean of 7.8 (The Children Society 2018).

Table 5: GCI satisfaction with life as a whole

Group score	Baseline (10)	Midpoint (13)	Endpoint (14)
Total score	84	84	94
Mean score	6.4	6.4	6.7

Appendix 4 – Case studies

Two case studies were carried out to gain an understanding of young people's experiences of the Aspiration Staying Close project.

Young person A came into care aged 10 and was placed in foster care until their teenage years, when they went into a children's home. At age 17, their social worker told them about the Staying Close project and they were given the opportunity to visit the house and meet the project manager. Before joining the project, A felt that their life was "going downhill" and that they were at risk of ending up homeless. By being part of the Staying Close project, A learned to cook, to keep their home tidy and how to live alongside others. A was also taught how to manage better relationships with family members. A was attending training and their aspirations were to have a house and job. At the end of the evaluation timeframe, A was preparing to move into a council flat that the Staying Close team had helped them to apply for. In their interview at endpoint, A commented that the project had helped them turn their life around: "[Staying Close project] opened my mind up for like the future. Helped me get back on track. And, yes, supported me with like appointments and all that."

Young person Z (aged 19 at the time of the interview) is an unaccompanied asylum seeker who came to England aged 15 and was placed in a children's home and then in a hostel. Z did not enjoy their time there as they felt that they were "surrounded by dodgy people". While there, Z's social worker told them about the Staying Close project. While part of the project, Z was supported with an application for their right to remain in the UK and their key worker made the travel arrangements for Z to attend court and supported Z emotionally during that time of stress and anxiety. Z's application was accepted. Z qualified in their chosen profession and accessed a mentoring programme, as a result of which Z opened their own business whilst part of the project. At the end of the evaluation, Z was living independently and continued to have support from the project, including help to manage the bills when business was not going so well. Z explained that the Staying Close support had helped significantly: "The project is doing the right thing for the care leavers and I think there is 2 ways for the care leavers, which is either they get to hostel and become a benefit taker or go to Staying Close project and listen to advice from them and be successful. I can say that if I wasn't in stay close project, my life would be completely different."

Appendix 5 – Cost analysis evaluation

Evaluation Limitations

The cohort of young people supported by the Aspiration Staying Close project through the Innovation Programme was small: 14 young people were provided support both at baseline and endpoint.

As a consequence of the cohort size, it was agreed with the DfE at the evaluation design stage that a comparison group would not be constructed. This was the correct decision in terms of methodological rigour, although it does mean that the evaluation has not been able to incorporate any objective counterfactual analysis.

A subjective counterfactual – based on conversations with the Aspiration team combined with qualitative insight gathered during the evaluation – has been included within the Cost Analysis section of this report.

It is based on 2 data sources:

- baseline and endpoint data supplied by 14 young people
- estimates from Aspiration project staff about the savings the project generates for the local authority in the form of residential care, supported accommodation and semi-independent living costs that it no longer has to pay

The advantage of this approach is that it uses real baseline and endpoint data supplied by young people who have been supported by the project. The drawback of the approach is that the baseline and endpoint data are insufficient to provide evidence on the preventative effects the Aspiration Staying Close project in relation to harmful behaviours. For example, a young person may have no offending behaviour before referral and none during the period of their support through Aspiration. In the context of this cost analysis, that will show as no change or saving. However, it may be the case that without Aspiration, that young person would have fallen into a pattern of offending behaviour. As such, the preventative effect of the project may actually be significant and could have prevented the local authority, the police or other partners from incurring significant additional cost.

The variables below have been included for the following reasons:

- It was agreed with project staff that Portsmouth Aspiration has the potential to have a positive impact on these variables
- Baseline and endpoint data is available for each of them (for 14 young people supported by the project)

The baseline and endpoint variables that were in the cost analysis included:

- education, employment or training status
- placement moves (accommodation stability)
- drug-taking behaviour
- criminal activity
- absconding
- sexualised behaviour and CSE
- physical health

In addition to the above, this approach also includes feedback on the likely savings to the local authority in the form of residential placement, supported accommodation and semi-independent living costs avoided.

Taking the variables first, the approach has been to:

- compare the baseline and endpoint status for each of the 14 young people and for each of the variables listed
- where there has been a positive change (for example where a young person had a history of absconding before being referred to the project but has not done so since being supported by Aspiration), assign a proxy saving. These proxy savings, including their sources, are shown in Table 6 on the following page. They were discussed and agreed with project staff during the evaluation period.

Table 6: Proxy savings for baseline and endpoint data

Category of cost saving	Proxy change (per young person)	Proxy saving (per young person for 1 year)	Source
A positive change in education, employment or training status	The young person has not become NEET	£10,466	Average annual cost to the exchequer of a NEET young person. Based on Youth Unemployment: the crisis we cannot afford (ACEVO Commission on Youth Unemployment, 2012) and adjusted for inflation.
Fewer placement moves than prior to referral	One or more placement moves have been avoided	£2,310 per placement move	Median cost of a placement move. Based on Costs and Consequences of Placing Children in Care (Ward, Holmes and Soper, 2008) and adjusted for inflation.
Reduction in drug taking	The young person reduces/stops their substance misuse and does not require a treatment programme	£3,994	Average annual savings resulting from reductions in drug-related offending and health and social care costs as a result of delivery of a structured, effective treatment programme. Based on Estimating the crime reduction benefits of drug treatment and recovery (National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, 2012) and adjusted for inflation.
Reduction in criminal activity (unrelated to drug taking or sexualised behaviour)	The young person has not offended. An average of 2 prevented offences has been assumed	£4,144	Average cost per incident of crime (across all types of crime). Based on The Economic and Social Costs of Crime, Second Edition and adjusted for inflation.
Fewer absconding episodes	The young person has absconded 1 fewer times than prior to referral	£2,719	Average cost of a missing person's investigation.

Category of cost saving	Proxy change (per young person)	Proxy saving (per young person for 1 year)	Source
			Based on Establishing the Cost of Missing Persons Investigations (Greene & Paces, 2012) and adjusted for inflation.
Reduction in sexualised behaviour	One sexualised behaviour-related offence has been avoided	£13,082	Average cost of a court event for sexual offences, NAO Analysis, based on CIPFA, Home Office, Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board Data, 2011 (and adjusted for inflation).
Improvement in physical health	The young person visits their GP less frequently. Three fewer appointments have been assumed	£67	Average cost of a GP appointment. Based on Unit Costs of Health & Social Care 2018 (Curtis, 2018) and adjusted for inflation and 15-minute minimum consultations, continuity of care through 'micro-teams', and an end to isolated working: this is the future of general practice (Royal College of General Practitioners, 2019).

The above enables us to calculate, for each of the 14 young people for whom baseline and endpoint data is available, estimated annual savings that might be attributable to Aspiration. Accurately assessing the counterfactual, and therefore attribution, is challenging, although it is unlikely that Aspiration would be the only factor influencing positive changes. Low attribution, medium attribution and high attribution adjustments have therefore been applied, which assume that 33%, 50% and 66% respectively of any positive change observed can be attributed to Aspiration.

In terms of placement activity, project staff estimated that, had Aspiration not existed:

- 7 of the young people they supported would have remained in local authority residential care for an average of 6 months each and would then have moved into local authority supported accommodation for an average of 6 months each
- 5 of the young people would have been local authority supported accommodation for an average of at least 12 months each
- 3 of the young people would have been in local authority-funded semi-independent living for an average of at least 12 months each

The costs to the state associated with the above are shown in Table 7 below. These are based on data supplied by the local authority (for residential care and supported accommodation costs) and data published by Barnardo's (for semi-independent living costs).

Table 7: Proxy savings for residential care and supported accommodation

Category of cost saving	Proxy change (per young person)	Proxy saving (per young person)	Source
Residential care cost savings for the local authority	Due to Aspiration, a young person moves out of local authority residential care 6 months sooner than they would otherwise have done	£103,506	Average cost of a 6 month placement in local residential care home for children. Based on data provided by Portsmouth Council.
Supported accommodation cost savings for the local authority	Due to Aspiration, a young person does not enter local authority supported accommodation (6 and 12 month figures are shown opposite in line	£9,100 (6 months) £18,200 (12 months)	Average cost of a 6 and 12 month placement in local authority supported accommodation for care leavers.

Category of cost saving	Proxy change (per young person)	Proxy saving (per young person)	Source
	with the first and second bullet points above)		Based on data provided by Portsmouth Council.
Semi-independent living cost savings for the local authority	Due to Aspiration, a young person does not enter local authority-funded semi-independent living (it is assumed they would otherwise have been in semi-independent living for at least 12 months)	£10,788	Average cost of one year semi-independent/semi-supported living (includes arrangement cost). Based on The costs of not caring: supporting English care leavers into independence (Barnardo's, 2014) and adjusted for inflation.

Results

Table 1 on page 38 shows the indicative savings calculated through this approach for each of the low attribution, medium attribution and high attribution scenarios. The key points are that:

- indicative savings associated with the baseline and endpoint data are relatively small compared with the cost of delivering Aspiration: they range from £45,797 in a low attribution scenario to £91,595 in a high attribution scenario
- the large majority of the indicative savings referred to above are accounted for by reductions in placement moves and reductions in the risk of sexualised behaviour or child sexual exploitation (CSE). The baseline data shows an average of 4.4 placement moves per young person, compared with 0.3 moves during the Aspiration support period. A risk of CSE or sexualised behaviour had been flagged for 5 young people on entry to Aspiration, but that risk was only present for 1 of those young people at the endpoint
- placement cost savings account for the vast majority of the total indicative savings: these don't vary according to the different attribution settings because they are

already based on the assumption that Aspiration is responsible for the full saving. The indicative savings shown on the previous page are for a 1 year period. With the exception of residential care costs, it is feasible that all of them could persist for longer (residential care costs cannot because it is assumed that the young people would have left local authority residential care after 6 months). Table 8 below therefore, shows the 2 and 3 year indicative savings. These have been calculated by applying the government's standard discount rate of 3.5% to the one year savings

Table 8: Two year and 3 year indicative savings

	Low Attribution (33%)	Medium Attribution (50%)	High Attribution (66%)
2 year indicative savings	£1,081,453	£1,168,950	£1,251,300
3 year indicative savings	£1,201,161	£1,350,326	£1,490,717

The project's anticipated total spend during the Innovation Programme period, excluding start-up costs that would not be incurred under a business as usual model, is £608,000. Based on the results from this approach, the project would be generating a net saving to the state in each of the low, medium and high attribution scenarios. However, the significant assumptions and limitations involved in the calculation of these results should be noted.

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CSC.Research@education.gov.uk or www.education.gov.uk/contactus