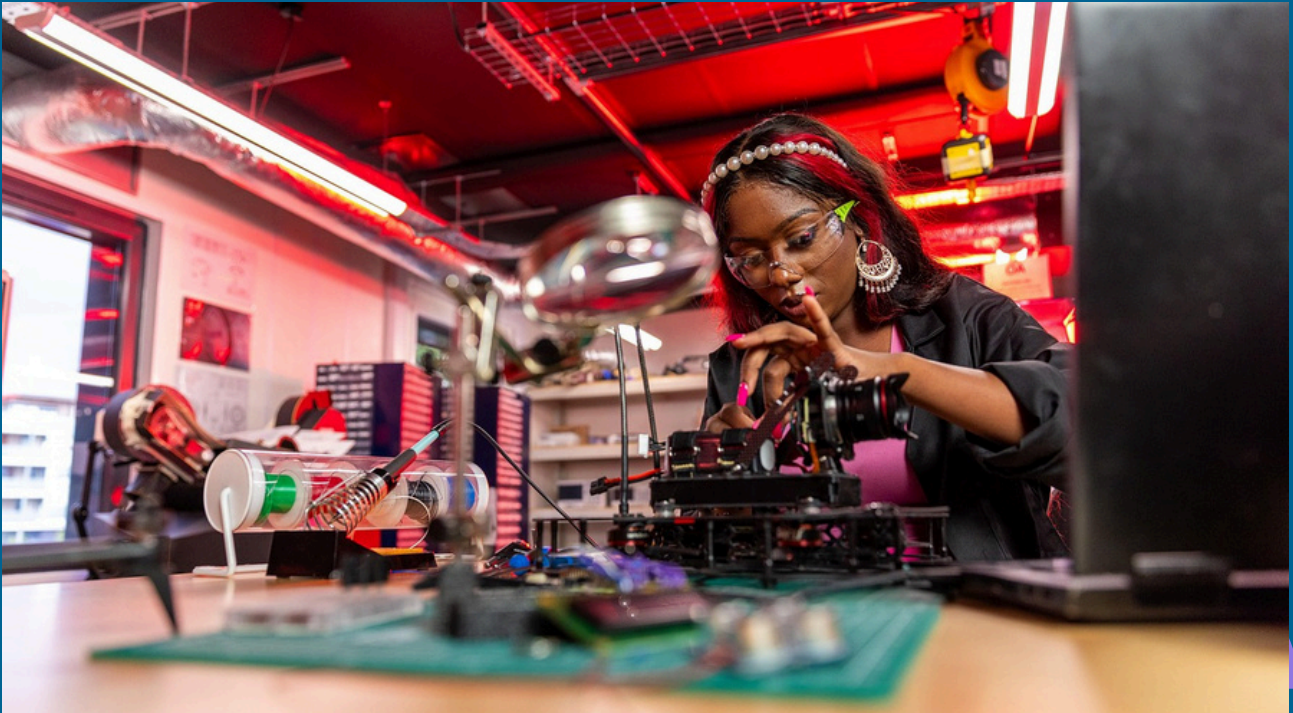




THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

April 2026



The Mercers' Company Transitions Special Initiative

Causeway Education
End of Phase 1 Evaluation Report (2019-2026)



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Executive summary

Introduction

The Mercers' Company's Transitions from Secondary Education Special Initiative began in July 2019 to support young people to make successful post-secondary transitions. The Initiative has provided funding to 15 partner organisations, with a particular focus on work that supports young people across London to expand their knowledge and experience of different pathways that build the skills valued by future employers. The first cohort of four partners completed their work with The Mercers' Company in 2022, the second cohort of four partners in 2023, and the third cohort of seven partners in 2025. Think and action-tank The Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) evaluated the work of the partners from 2019-2025, and from Spring 2025 this work passed on to UK social mobility charity Causeway Education when CfEY ceased operations.

Evaluation framework: aims and structure

In this evaluation, each of the 15 partner organisations conducted its own evaluation of the impact of its Mercers'-funded work. CfEY, and then Causeway Education, evaluated the impact of the Transitions Special Initiative as a whole. This overarching evaluation aimed to:

- describe and capture the partners' (very different) work
- explore their individual work, while also examining the Initiative from a 'bird's-eye view'
- compare outcomes across the years.

We designed an evaluation framework against which to report the headlines of the partners' reach and impact. This framework was particularly useful in structuring analysis of the partners' quantitative data, which we gathered each year via a standardised excel spreadsheet. It covered five key areas:

- Delivery (which activities the partners deliver, when and with whom)
- Self- and organisational-efficacy (young people's life and workplace skills)
- Aspirations (young people's aims for the future and where they see themselves)
- Pathway awareness (young people's knowledge and understanding of different academic and vocational pathways into work)
- Destinations (young people's post-programme places in education, training, or work)

We also conducted qualitative research. In Years 1 and 2 this took the form of five Intensive Studies on themes identified by the partners, including Covid-19 and the move to virtual delivery, youth voice, and approaches to engaging 'seldom heard' young people. This was followed by four 'Theory of Action' cycles in Years 3 to 6. These cycles included:

- gathering feedback from key stakeholders, including young people, school staff and employers;
- reflecting on findings with the partner organisations in the context of their intentions when designing their activities, the problems they were originally seeking to address, the environment in which they work, and how they intended to drive change; and
- exploring progress against targets and setting new goals for the coming year.

Each year of the evaluation ended with an opportunity for the cohorts of partners to come together and discuss their work. When their funding period ended in full, we celebrated their achievements in a Learning Symposium held at Mercers' Hall.

We identified six main positive themes from the partners’ work across the first phase of the Initiative and five shared challenges they faced:

Successes	Challenges
1. Reaching young people facing different kinds of disadvantage	1. Recruitment and retention of schools and employers
2. Building powerful partnerships and relationships	2. Staff and volunteer turnover
3. Staying highly adaptable	3. Lack of experience in or capacity for evaluation
4. Consistently boosting soft skills and raising aspirations	4. Difficulties with data sharing
5. Improving awareness and understanding of pathways	5. Wider social issues including the pandemic, a rise in the complexity and volume of young people’s needs, the cost-of-living crisis, declining budgets and rising operating costs
6. Helping young people to stay in or successfully transition to school, further or higher education, training, or employment	

Plans for the future

At the end of their funding period, each of the partners shared the ways in which they planned to continue improving their work. Common goals included:

- Refining and strengthening evaluation
- Embedding youth voice
- Maintaining engagement with young people after they complete programmes
- Better training for staff and volunteers
- Improved onboarding for employer partners

Recommendations for policy and practice

We ended our work by drafting a set of recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, which we refined in an online workshop with education policy experts, youth work practitioners, and young people with lived experience. The final recommendations are as follows:

Recommendations for practitioners		Recommendations for policymakers	
	Enhance local collaboration and build cross-sector networks – come together with schools and local employers to wraparound support		Offer longer-term, flexible funding for programmes that are supported by cross-sector networks
	Aim to start support for post-16 transitions as early as possible in a young person’s education, including repeated encounters and experiences with the world of work		Make small-scale evaluation training bursaries available to youth organisations, so they can upskill their teams
	Consider coordinating backwards mentoring and other training for employers in supporting disadvantaged youth effectively, prioritise youth voice where possible		Update guidance and training for employers – supporting disadvantaged young people effectively, practicing co-creation, offering a ‘menu’ of high-quality approaches
	Prioritise offering young people consistent support from a trusted adult where possible, ideally with trauma informed practice and/or mental health training		Make further incentives available for employers to offer advice, guidance, and training opportunities to NEET young people under 18 , with particular benefits for those adopting trauma-informed approaches, foregrounding youth voice, and providing transitions from secondary education mentoring that supports wellbeing

Introduction

Section summary: The section describes the aims and structure of the evaluation, and the work of the partner organisations.

The Transitions Special Initiative structure

The Mercers' Company's Transitions from Secondary Education Special Initiative began in July 2019 to support young people to make successful post-secondary transitions. The Initiative has provided funding to 15 partner organisations ('partners'), with a particular focus on work that supports young people across London to expand their knowledge and experience of different pathways that build the skills valued by future employers. The first cohort of four partners completed their work with The Mercers' Company in 2022, the second cohort of four partners in 2023, and the third cohort of seven partners in 2025.

Think and action-tank The Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) evaluated the work of the partners from 2019-2025, and from Spring 2025 this work passed on to UK social mobility charity Causeway Education when CfEY ceased operations. Causeway Education supports young people from low-income backgrounds to access competitive universities, apprenticeships, and careers by providing guidance and training, making its work highly aligned with the goals of the Transitions Special Initiative. Additionally, two members of the leadership team at CfEY transferred to Causeway when the evaluation changed hands, ensuring consistency and continuity in the delivery of the work.

The Initiative's timeline of evaluation support is shaded in purple in Table 1.

Table 1: Timeline of evaluation support for the Transitions Special Initiative

Cohort	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
1						
2						
3						

The partner organisations

Details of each of the partner organisations' work are given in Table 2.

Figure 1: The three partner cohorts

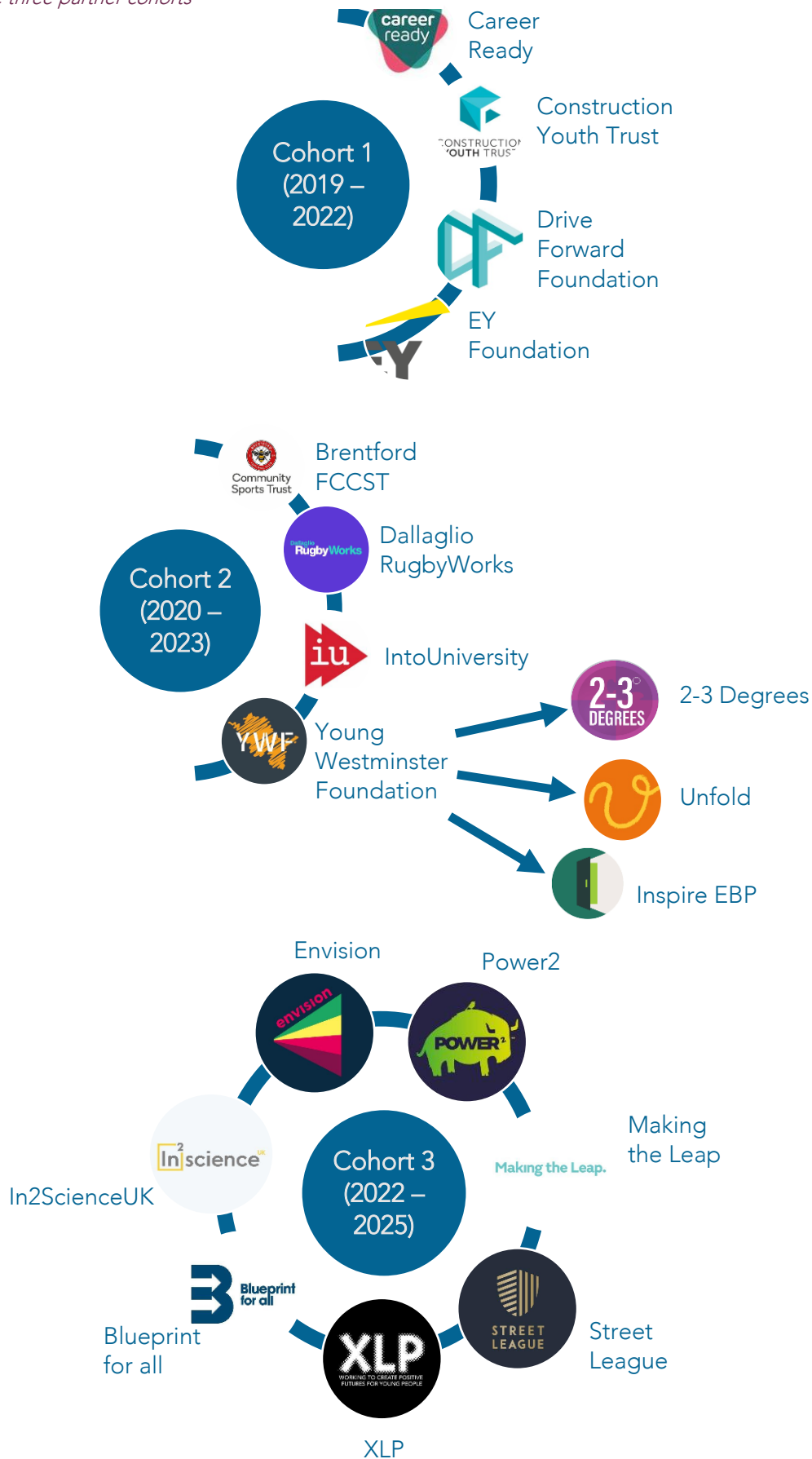


Table 2: Details of the partner organisations' work¹

Organisation ²	Organisation type and focus
Career Ready	A social mobility charity providing whole-school, careers-focused interventions for 11- to 18-year-olds, alongside one-to-one activities (e.g. mentoring and paid internships) and small-group activities for young people who face barriers transitioning from education into the world of work.
Construction Youth Trust (CYT)	A charity providing activities such as one-to-one coaching and work placements to help 15-16-year-olds particularly at risk of becoming 'NEET' (not in education, employment, or training) after leaving school, with a focus on skills relevant to the construction industry.
Drive Forward Foundation (DFF)	A non-profit organisation providing one-to-one and group support to care-experienced young people aged 15 to 18, to help them make positive decisions about their future and assist them in the process of leaving the care system.
EY Foundation	An independent charity bringing young people from low-income backgrounds together with employers to deliver high-quality employability skills training, paid work experience, and mentoring, which aims to raise aspirations, boost confidence, and enhance knowledge and skills for success in the workplace.
Brentford FC Community Sports Trust (FCCST)	A sports trust offering a portfolio of programmes in education, employability, sports participation, health, and community engagement. The trust works with a wide range of young people, including young carers and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
Dallaglio RugbyWorks	A charity offering a three-year employability skills programme that aims to help teenagers aged 14 to 17 who are outside of mainstream education or at risk of exclusion, to transition successfully from secondary education into a career that matches their skills and interests. It uses the values of rugby, and sport in general, to ensure that disadvantaged young people who are disengaged from learning get the best opportunities to build a positive and productive future.
IntoUniversity	An education charity delivering impact-driven programmes through a network of learning centres that inspire young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve their full potential. Students participate in a holistic programme of support, designed to build on aspirations, broaden horizons, improve attainment, develop soft skills, and provide experience of the world of work
Young Westminster Foundation	A cross-sector charity working in partnership with businesses, public sector organisations, individuals, and major funders to strengthen services for young people growing up in Westminster. Young Westminster Foundation supports a membership of local youth clubs and organisations through grants, training, and networking opportunities. For this project, Young Westminster Foundation worked with three delivery partners: 2-3 Degrees, Unfold, and Inspire! Education Business Partnership.

¹ Details describe the partners' work as it was during their involvement in the Transitions Special Initiative.

² Cohort 1 in purple, Cohort 2 in orange, and Cohort 3 in green.

<p>Blueprint for All</p>	<p>A charity that aims to build careers, enrich society, and support communities through a range of programmes. Blueprint for All supports young people aged nine to 30 from underrepresented backgrounds by providing careers advice, supporting skills development, and offering opportunities to achieve qualifications, among other activities.</p>
<p>Envision</p>	<p>A charity that helps young people from less-advantaged backgrounds build their Essential Skills by delivering social action projects in their schools and communities. They do so by partnering young people from Key Stages 4 and 5 with Envision Programme Coordinators, and mentors from local partner businesses who support skills development and help advance social action projects.</p>
<p>In2scienceUK</p>	<p>In2scienceUK is a social mobility charity dedicated to helping young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds all over the UK gain access to STEM degrees and careers. Through their First-Year University Mentoring Programme, they support young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds as they transition to university to do their undergraduate STEM degrees. The programme matches young people with a near-peer mentor, a young person in their second year of university or beyond, who supports the mentee in their first year at university.</p>
<p>Making the Leap</p>	<p>Making The Leap is a social mobility charity that aims to transform the futures of young people from less-advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. They provide training to raise young people's aspirations, develop their skills, confidence, and outlook, and give them the chance to succeed in their chosen career. In addition to their direct delivery, Making the Leap use what they learn to raise awareness of the importance of social mobility among UK businesses and organisations, and encourage them to take action to improve it.</p>
<p>Power 2</p>	<p>Power2 unleashes the power of children and young people so that they can build happy and fulfilling lives. With its support, they improve their wellbeing, re-engage with school and learning, build networks and access opportunities. The Power2 Advance programme supports young people in the care system to improve their wellbeing and develop independent living and employability skills. The Teens and Toddlers programme supports young people to develop key transferable skills important for employability and gain crucial work experience, by spending 16 weeks mentoring a toddler in a local nursery.</p>
<p>Street League</p>	<p>Street League uses the power of sport to tackle poverty and give young people the opportunities they need to succeed in life and the workplace. Through a range of programmes, staff support young people to overcome practical and personal barriers to employment.</p>
<p>XLP</p>	<p>XLP operates across London, working with young people through education, mentoring, employability, community youth work, sports, and the arts. Its mission is to create positive futures for young people growing up in inner-city communities. Some of these young people may struggle daily with issues such as family breakdown, unemployment, and educational failure, and may be living in areas that experience high levels of anti-social behaviour and gang violence. Through positive, long-term relationships, XLP hopes to restore young people's trust in people, nurture the belief that things can change, encourage positive goal setting, and the drive to achieve those goals.</p>

Evaluation framework: aims and structure

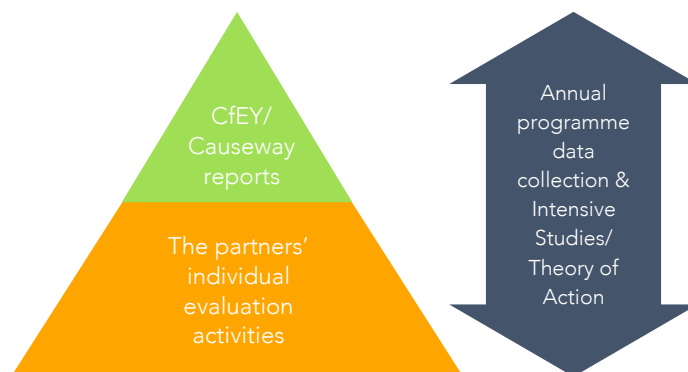
In this evaluation, each of the 15 partner organisations conducted its own evaluation of the impact of its Mercers'- funded work. CfEY, and then Causeway Education, evaluated the impact of the Transitions Special Initiative as a whole.

Evaluation aims

This overarching evaluation aimed to:

- describe and capture the partners' (very different) work
- explore their individual work, while also examining the Initiative from a 'bird's-eye view'
- compare outcomes across the years.

Figure 2: Evaluation aims



Evaluation framework

In collaboration with The Mercers' Company and the four Cohort 1 partners, CfEY previously designed a framework against which to report the headlines of the partners' reach and impact.

This framework explored the Initiative's impact in relation to the following five areas:

- Delivery (which activities the partners deliver, when and with whom)
- Self- and organisational- efficacy (young people's life and workplace skills)
- Aspirations (young people's aims for the future and where they see themselves)
- Pathway awareness (young people's knowledge and understanding of different academic and vocational pathways into work)
- Destinations (young people's post-programme places in education, training, or work)

More detail about each of these sections is included below in Table 3.

This framework enabled some comparison of findings across the partners' programmes, while also considering their different modes of delivery and impact. In particular, it was useful in structuring analysis of the partners' quantitative data, which was gathered each year via a standardised excel spreadsheet. Many of the partners had limited time and resources for evaluation, so we only requested that they submit data to this evaluation if they were already gathering it for their own internal evaluations. CfEY, and then Causeway, synthesised and analysed this data to present as complete a picture as possible of the overarching impact of the Initiative. We refined categories in the programme data spreadsheet over time to best fit the partners' data collection approaches, and they were also invited to submit any additional data they wanted, if they felt it was relevant but did not fit into the categories already specified. Some of the partners still struggled to submit complete

datasets, often due to limited capacity of staff and a strong focus on delivery. CfEY and Causeway reported on the information provided.

DELIVERY (2022-23)												IMPACT (2022-23)											
Young People						Schools/Colleges			Employers			Young people						Schools/Colleges					
Rate of participation	No. of young people who engaged in at least one of the activities	Age of young people on the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Number of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Number of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)	Proportion of young people who participated in the programme (e.g. 16-18 or 19-24)					

Figure 3: Programme data sharing spreadsheet

REACH	IMPACT				
Delivery	Overall satisfaction	Self- and organisational- efficacy	Aspirations	Pathway awareness	Destinations
Name of organisation Name of programme(s) List of activities delivered through the programme (e.g. 'employer mentoring') Names of local authorities operating in Start dates of activities delivered (mm/yy) End dates of activities delivered (mm/yy) Brief description of target beneficiaries Target no. of young people Actual no. of young people No. of young people who dropped out Ages of young people on the programme (e.g. '15', or '14 to 16') Number of male students Number of female students Number of non-binary, gender fluid, genderqueer, agender, bigender, or other gender students on the programme (or undisclosed gender) Proportion of students from BAME backgrounds (%) Proportion of students eligible for free school meals (%) Proportion of students who are care- experienced (%) Target no. of schools/colleges involved Actual no. of schools/colleges involved Target no. of employers involved Actual no. of employers involved	Proportion of young people who say they are satisfied with the programme (%) Proportion of schools that report being satisfied with the programme (%) Proportion of schools that say they would support the programme again in the future (%) Proportion of employers who report being satisfied with the programme (%) Proportion of employers who say they would support the programme again in the future (%)	Proportion of young people who say they have acquired new soft skills from the programme (e.g. confidence) (%) Proportion of young people who say they have acquired new workplace skills from the programme (e.g. timekeeping) (%)	Proportion of young people who say they feel more positive about the future after taking part in the programme (%)	Proportion of young people who say their awareness of different pathways after school has improved after taking part in the programme (%) Proportion of young people who say their networks have grown during the programme (%)	Proportion of young people who make meaningful transitions after the programme (e.g. into FE, HE, employment, self-employment, training) (%)

Evaluation structure

When partner organisations joined the Initiative, they took part in one-to-one meetings which helped us to understand their work. We asked them about:

- their aims and goals
- specifics of their delivery, such as location, project team, activities, and timelines
- any anticipated challenges
- their existing internal evaluation work
- their data security policies and processes
- their preferences around support during the evaluation

Following this induction process, each annual evaluation cycle included a kick-off meeting with all the partners who were currently receiving funding. These meetings reminded everyone of aims and plans for the year and highlighted any refinements to the evaluation cycle compared to previous years. We briefed the partners on next steps, and they had the chance to share any questions, thoughts, or problems.

We then conducted qualitative research, alongside the quantitative data gathering and analysis described above. In the first two years of the Initiative, our qualitative research was comprised of five Intensive Studies, exploring key themes identified by the partners. These studies drew on information and feedback gathered from young people on the programmes and the adults supporting them, through a variety of methods including Appreciative Inquiry, Listening Circles, focus groups and interviews. The themes were:

- How should we (and our stakeholders, including employers) inspire and engage 'seldom heard' and/or disengaged young people?
- The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic
- Virtual Delivery
- Youth Voice
- Transition Points in a Young Person's Life

While these studies gathered interesting insights, the partners found that they placed significant demands on their limited time. Considering this, in Years 3 to 6 of the Initiative we adopted a new more streamlined methodology rooted in the 'Theory of Action' (ToA) approach, described in an article by Professor Chris Brown (Brown, 2020).

The thinking behind this approach was based on the idea that, when making decisions about what changes should occur to improve programme delivery, it is important to acknowledge the reasons specific innovations were chosen or developed, the problem they were originally seeking to address, the context in which they are taking place, and how they are intended to result in change. After this, exploring outcomes and learnings from the delivery of programme activities, alongside practitioners on the ground, drives thinking around how to make improvements and set longer-term sustainable aspirations and goals for growth.

We adapted the ToA approach to follow the structure outlined below:

Figure 4: ToA structure



In Phase 1 we shared online questionnaires with the partners, to be answered by their programme staff, young people, and wider stakeholders such as school staff, employers, or mentors. Respondents provided open text responses about their participation in and experiences of the programmes.

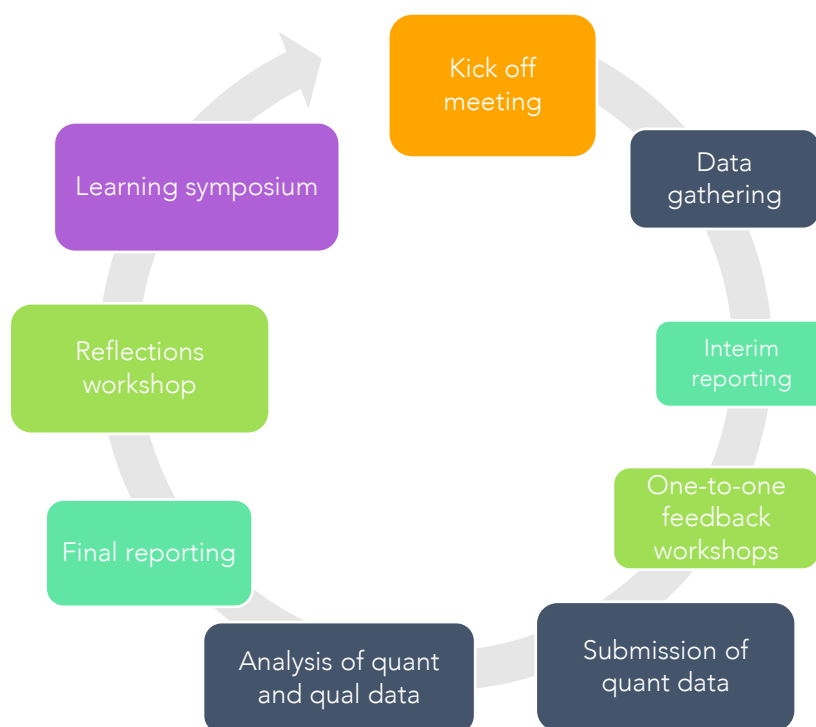
In Phase 2 we convened one-to-one feedback workshops with programme staff from each of the partner organisations, where we reviewed findings from Phase 1 and reflected on what these meant for future delivery. (After the first annual ToA cycle, we encouraged partners to also use the one-to-one feedback workshops to reflect on progress in the areas for improvement identified the previous year).

In Phase 3 we analysed the findings from both the questionnaires and workshop discussions. We identified possible programme modifications for each of the partners as well as making overarching recommendations for the whole cohort.

In Phase 4 we produced our end of year report to The Mercers' Company, summarising our findings and detailing how the partners might move forward with their work in the year to come.

All participants gave informed consent to engage with the research. After the data gathering for the Intensive Studies or Theory of Action throughout Spring and into Summer, data was analysed and the final reporting process carried out. Across every year, we also offered the partners individual support and ad-hoc guidance in relation to their own evaluations, as required.

Figure 5: Annual evaluation cycle – quantitative and qualitative data



From 2023, we introduced a reflections workshop into the end of each cycle, bringing all the partners together again to look back at their work across the year, share their progress with each other, troubleshoot problems and plan next steps. These workshops provided an important opportunity for the partners to network with each other, which was especially fruitful when Cohorts 2 and 3 were both actively involved due to their overlapping funding periods. The partners shared contact details and gave each other feedback and advice on shared challenges, such as connecting with schools or using CRM systems to manage data.

In Autumn 2022, 2023, and 2025, CfEY/Causeway Education and The Mercers' Company held Learning Symposia at Mercers' Hall in London, to celebrate the work of each cohort as it ended and share learnings with attendees from across the education and youth sectors. Partners planned for these events in their Reflections Workshops and had an active role in choosing themes to discuss and speakers to put forward.

The final of these symposia took place in November 2025 and included three panel discussions on 'Care and Connection: supporting wellbeing and relationship building with young people', 'What next? Sustaining the Transition', and 'Youth voice in action: co-creating with young people'. Alongside programme staff from each of the Cohort 3 partner organisations, a mentee from In2scienceUK and Youth Board Trustee from Envision, panellists also included staff and young people from former grantees Career Ready and Construction Youth Trust, and an apprentice and representative from Channel 4. Attendees received a booklet with discussion prompts to encourage them to share ideas with each other between the panel presentations and were given opportunities to ask questions.

Successes

This section summarises positive themes from across the first phase of the Transitions from Secondary Education Special Initiative. These include:

1. Reaching young people facing different kinds of disadvantage
2. Building powerful partnerships and relationships
3. Staying highly adaptable
4. Consistently boosting soft skills and raising aspirations
5. Improving awareness and understanding of pathways
6. Helping young people to stay in or successfully transition to school, further or higher education, training, or employment

1. Reaching young people facing different kinds of disadvantage

Across the six years of the initiative, the 15 partners reached high numbers of young people in need of support. The annual quantitative programme data submissions consistently showed that the partners' work was reaching significant numbers of young people who were eligible for free school meals, from BAME backgrounds, or care experienced.

"I want to be a lawyer but if I didn't have Career Ready ... I wouldn't be able to reach out to people to gain the experience, the internships, the work experience that I need to put me [the] extra step ahead. [These programmes reach] out to students who want and try hard to gain the qualification for the profession and gain the experience but don't necessarily have the network or the facility to do so."

Young Person - Career Ready, Cohort 1

"I just wanted to be able to learn more about everything, and to create the best possible future for myself as well, and I thought [the] Breakthrough [programme] really helped with that ... I think it is really good to just have some more support ... because people don't really talk about being in care at school ... it was just good to be able to talk to more people that are in care as well, and kind of be able to relate to other people my age."

Young Person – Drive Forward Foundation, Cohort 1

"I probably wouldn't have done all of my homework if I didn't come here because it is really chaotic in my house. I've been doing extra tasks here too, so I get to understand my subjects more."

Young person - IntoUniversity, Cohort 2

2. Building powerful partnerships and relationships

In the first year of the evaluation, we focused specifically on how to inspire and engage seldom heard young people. This research highlighted the importance of developing trusted relationships, both in terms of recruitment and programme delivery. Subsequent years of the evaluation further developed this theme, revealing the partners' success in establishing trust with young people in particular. Feedback via the online questionnaires often included young people requesting more time with specific members of staff who had supported them.

"Even in these difficult times, [during Covid, programme staff have] stayed in contact and really reassured us that, just because this has happened, they've not dropped us and they're still with us until the very last step."

Young Person - Construction Youth Trust, Cohort 1

Similarly, while recruiting schools and employers to support their programmes could be challenging, once onboard the partners created some strong, lasting relationships.

"For a teacher to just say 'I'm going to promote this to the head of year, I'm going to promote this to the head teacher. I really want the Mercers' programme to come and impact our students' - that was fantastic."

Programme staff - Street League, Cohort 3

3. Staying highly adaptable

Monitoring the work of the partners throughout the pandemic showed their impressive adaptability in the face of significant unprecedented challenges. All the partners funded during this period were able to continue supporting young people, by diversifying to offer blended modes of delivery, designing new resources, and liaising with key workers such as medical professionals and teachers.

"I think our long-term sustainability is strengthened by what we've done over the last year ... We have three forms of delivering and working now."

Programme staff - Career Ready, Cohort 1

The impact of the pandemic was still felt by subsequent cohorts long after lockdowns had ended and the height of the pandemic passed. The partners continue to respond to young people's needs as they presented to them, for example, finding more in-person workplace opportunities for young people who had missed out on them due to lockdown restrictions. Young people reported their appreciation of the variety of opportunities that were provided for them post-pandemic, even though the partners were forced to reintroduce face-to-face delivery gradually, in accordance with government guidelines.

Some of the partners pivoted their delivery to specifically focus on basic skills and wellbeing, over and above their original intention to build employability skills. This decision was made on the basis that the disadvantaged young people they were working with hadn't developed

that grounding yet and needed to establish it first, before they were able to work on preparing more practically for transitions.

“The well-being and mental health support for young people is so decimated now. Five years ago or so the local authorities would be arranging that support for their young people or putting them onto CAMHS ... Nowadays they can't because support is not there ... we were really pleased to be able to give the young people that wellbeing mental health support they needed, but it wasn't necessarily what the programme was originally intended to do. It had some great impact, just not the same outcomes and impact that we originally planned at the start.”

Programme Staff - Power2, Cohort 3

Other ways the partners demonstrated flexibility were by adjusting the timelines of their programmes to fit around school timetables as best as possible. By lengthening or compressing schedules, starting earlier in the term, working around half term breaks, holidays, or exam periods, and even flexing within the school day at short notice, they were able to reach more young people and sustain their relationships with busy schools. They also streamlined and structured their work to make it more accessible to employers who supported them.

“They leave their computer; they go into the boardroom. They're facilitated in a session by one of us for two hours. They have that impact. It's very digestible, very accessible, and very minimal time out of their busy day.”

Programme staff - Envision, Cohort 3

Overall, the nature of The Mercers' Company funding model supported these responsive and agile approaches to delivery. The trust that was placed in the partners to understand the needs of the young people they worked with and adapt their work to meet these needs (sometimes beyond or outside of the funding criteria), was highly valued by the partners and benefited their stakeholders.

4. Consistently boosting soft skills and raising aspirations

Young people, programme staff and other stakeholders including school staff and employers regularly shared feedback that emphasized the powerful positive impact that the programmes had on young people's soft skills.

“[It has] helped me with my anger. It's now easier to control my temper and know when just to leave it and walk away.”

Young person - Dallaglio RugbyWorks, Cohort 2

“I am more focused in class and less disruptive. I have not been in internal exclusion for the past two terms as I wanted to make sure I could attend Street League.”

Young person - Street League, Cohort 2

In the post-pandemic environment, it became clear that this impact was especially important. In writing about their research into how disadvantage shaped young people's education and wellbeing during the pandemic in September last year, Professor Vanessa Lawrence, Professor Craig Morgan, Dr Gemma Knowles & Dr Sharli Paphitis from the Qualitative Applied Health Research Centre and ESRC Centre for Society and Mental Health highlighted the issue of "mounting disadvantage" during Covid-19: "Students from less affluent families described how difficult circumstances, such as financial worries, caring responsibilities, concerns around vulnerable family members, and a lack of access to quiet study spaces, sapped their energy and their ability to perform at school. These stressors did not just affect their grades; they undermined their confidence and optimism for the future" ((Lawrence et al., 2025, para. 3). Despite this, in every year of our evaluation of the partners' mercials-funded work since 2020 the disadvantaged young people they supported mentioned a positive impact on their confidence.

"They are getting their self-esteem being impacted positively ... [T]heir sense of self and their self-esteem is being developed through this programme ... it is doing what it set out to do which was to give them a broad experience that will help them to focus on their futures and hopefully that focus will then secure their present for them a little bit more."
School staff - Drive Forward Foundation, Cohort 2

"Students feel affirmed, heard, inspired, and motivated. Teachers will regularly say that students who normally do not participate or speak up have felt confident to express their voice, get involved and share their great ideas."
Employer - Blueprint for All, Cohort 3

"It made me feel more motivated to achieve what I want to."
Young person – Young Westminster Foundation, Cohort 3

"The programme generates an optimism and energy in the young people who attend, and by the end of the day so many signed up for future events such as work experience and mentoring which I witnessed."
Employer – Young Westminster Foundation, Cohort 3

Young people faced many setbacks during the pandemic and the UK's repeated lockdowns, from loss of learning and social experiences to bereavement and family hardship. The partners' work in helping to boost soft skills such as young people's confidence, communication, and motivation helped to rebuild a crucial grounding that set them up to be better prepared for future transitions.

5. Improving awareness and understanding of pathways

Year on year both the quantitative and qualitative data gathered showed that young people across the partners' programmes were gaining awareness and understanding of a range of pathways into education, training, or employment.

"It has allowed me to be more open to ideas and to go to places which I would never have been if it were up to me. This gave me a new insight to different industries ... which I am so grateful for as these opportunities are not available for every young person in the country."
Young person - Brentford FCCST, Cohort 2

"These activities have given me an insight into the work life, something students hardly see. It allowed me to view life differently outside of school and gain a better understanding of what I aspire to do in the future."
Young person - Making the Leap, Cohort 3

This was achieved through a range of activities, including assemblies, workshops, mentoring, career taster days, site visits, and work experience.

It allowed me to become [a] confident person and helped me to face challenges no matter how difficult it is. It also expands my knowledge, allowing me to share my opinion with others. It is also a free space where I can open up without anyone [being] judged."
Young person - Drive Forward Foundation, Cohort 2

"The placement day helped me decide which sector I would like to specialise in (as I was torn between biology, psychology and neuroscience) and also allowed me to gain an insight into professional research life. During the tour of the labs and whilst talking to the scientists, I was able to see what type of career path I could enter, which actually motivated me to do well in my A-levels. Before this experience, I did not have many opportunities in STEM ... applying to this was probably one of the best decisions I have made towards my educational life."
Young person - In2scienceUK, Cohort 3

"I joined the program in year 12 (October 2022) and have had amazing experiences that I never thought I would have. The program provided me different sessions that allowed me to develop the skills I lacked throughout secondary school, which improved my chances of gaining work experience and even a job. Through the program I took part in a Barclays Insight Workshop which allowed me to understand the different options that are available beyond just university."
Young person - Making the Leap, Cohort 3

6. Helping young people to stay in or successfully transition to school, further or higher education, training, or employment

The partners' programmes consistently supported young people to stay in their current stage of education, transition successfully to the next stage, or find training or employment. This was evidenced by the yearly destinations data that was shared as part of our annual quantitative data gathering process, and through direct qualitative feedback from the young people in their own words.

"It has been the biggest impact on my life. I get help with my homework. I meet new people. And I get lots of other opportunities from coming to Academic Support, for example I have been invited to apply to boarding school for sixth form, which is very helpful. I've become more organised. I've become a better listener and speaker ... I've been able to mature. I'm less frantic and childlike."

Young person – IntoUniversity, Cohort 2

"They have helped reduce my time getting set out of class, they have given me a better understanding how my behaviour can affect myself and others around me."

Young person – Brentford FCCST, Cohort 2

"I feel better about the transition from sixth form to university, as I was unsure about what I wanted to do and how I would be able to do what I wanted, but this programme helped me open my options and make a plan with detailed steps on how I can reach my goals. It has increased my confidence for life after sixth form."

Young person – Making the Leap, Cohort 3

This positive impact was perhaps most powerfully felt in the Learning Symposia, when alumni from some of the partners' programmes who work either in training or work returned to join our panel discussions. They shared their experiences and learnings from taking part in their Mercers'-funded work and were also able to give meaningful advice for other young people and practitioners in the transitions space.

Challenges

Section summary: This section summarises common challenges that the partners faced in their work over the first phase of the Initiative. These included:

1. Recruitment and retention of schools and employers
2. Staff and volunteer turnover
3. Lack of experience in or capacity for evaluation
4. Difficulties with data sharing
5. Wider social issues

1. Recruitment and retention of schools and employers

Across the cohorts, the partners found it difficult to recruit and retain both schools and employer partners for their programmes. This was in part due to the political and social climate they were operating in. For schools, years of austerity, followed by the pandemic and cost of living crisis have led to financial hardship, ever-decreasing support from local authority services and an increased need to support families above and beyond providing their children's education (Struthers, 2021). A 2022 report on 'The priorities and challenges facing our schools' by the National Governance Association found that for all regions, school types and phases, school funding was the biggest challenge for schools and trust, followed by the attainment of disadvantaged children, then staff wellbeing including workload. Other issues included support for pupils with special educational needs (a problem which has become increasingly severe) and COVID-19 recovery (Fearon & Henson, 2022, p.5). This context made it difficult for the partner organisations to secure steady partnerships with schools, even when they were offering to help their students, as staff were so short of time and resources that it was a challenge to engage with external activities.

Last year, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Youth Employment Report into how to support employers to engage with the Government's Youth Guarantee Scheme found a variety of factors affecting employer engagement with youth employment activities as well. These included limited capacity, especially amongst SMEs; the fragmented and difficult to navigate UK's skills and employment landscape; anxiety around practical aspects of the work, such as effective safeguarding; and a lack of alignment with business priorities or operating models (APPG for Youth Employment, 2025, pp. 24-27).

The partners had to work hard to overcome these barriers. For example, Dallaglio RugbyWorks in Cohort 2 put significant time and effort into ensuring their safeguarding procedures were highly effective in supporting their work with vulnerable young people in pupil referral units. This helped to reassure school staff and other stakeholders that the responsibility for this had already been dealt with effectively.

2. Staff and volunteer turnover

Alongside challenges with recruiting and retaining schools and employer partners to support their programmes, staff and volunteer turnover was an additional barrier to smooth delivery for the partner organisations. During each cohort's funding period, we saw key contacts leave. It was heartening to see that a small number had moved between the partner organisations when taking up new roles, but even this resulted in a need for time consuming hiring processes or further training.

These workforce issues were reflected in the 2025 National Youth Sector Census, which found that just under half of respondents (44%) felt staff recruitment was a main challenge for their organisation, while over a third (33%) said the same about volunteer recruitment (36%), and over a quarter about staff retention (26%) (National Youth Agency, 2025).

"Volunteers can be tricky to recruit. Like young people, they can drop out at the last minute unfortunately."

Programme staff - EY Foundation, Cohort 3

Some of the partners had made changes to try to manage this challenge and create more continuity for young people. XLP in Cohort 3, for example, employed a dedicated Volunteer Manager to improve engagement and retention.

"They could email and say 'sorry, I'm moving to another country' or 'sorry I can't do this anymore' How do you expect me to explain that to the young person? ... It can be quite heartbreaking for some of them."

Programme Staff – XLP, Cohort 3

3. Lack of experience in or capacity for evaluation

The capabilities for in-house evaluation varied significantly across the 15 partner organisations in Phase 1 of the Initiative. While some had staff members or even small teams solely responsible for measuring impact, others had small teams who were largely focused on delivery tasks and struggling to fit in evaluation tasks alongside their main work. This had implications for the evaluation, but also for their ability to take an iterative approach to improving the design and delivery of their programmes. Where smaller organisations were especially 'hand-to-mouth' they lacked the capacity to meaningfully reflect on their progress. Other partners had systems in place that were incoherent across the organisation and needed to be standardised to make the most of the data they were collecting.

4. Difficulties with data sharing

In some cases, the partners evaluation activities were hindered by complex or prohibitive data sharing processes, or by partners whose negative perceptions of data sharing led them to gatekeep useful information. This was particularly true with schools, which were often reluctant to share pupil data externally, even if it was anonymised.

This sector-wide problem of siloed data was highlighted in the 2023 Department for Education policy report 'Improving multi-agency information sharing' which stressed that: "We know that often different professionals working with children and families have information about different aspects of their lives, such as their health issues or educational attainment and attendance, but it is only when information is shared that it is possible to see the full picture of a child's life ... This holistic view can then inform the support the child receives, ensuring it is appropriate and timely." (Department for Education, 2023, p.8). The report recognised that factors such as fears of breaching data protection legislation, fragmented systems and processes and limited capacity and resources are all barriers to information sharing. Furthermore, it found that some schools had gone as far as seeking legal advice about information sharing to ease their anxieties, which in turn slowed down processes even further (Department for Education, 2023, p.63).

Facing these barriers when trying to share data with schools at times made it more difficult for the partners to gather and use the information they needed to most effectively deliver and evaluate their programmes.

5. Wider social issues

Youth organisations in England like the Mercers' partners have faced many competing pressures since 2019, which they have had to manage in order to continue supporting young people's transitions into further education, training, or work. Beyond the challenges already discussed, they have grappled with declining budgets, rising operating costs, and increasing demand for services and support (National Youth Agency, 2025).

Youth organisations have seen a sharp rise in the complexity and volume of young people's needs in recent years; driven by the pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, and widening inequalities. The Department for Culture, Media & Sport's 'Youth Matters' policy paper from 2025 noted widespread mental health challenges, anxiety about future opportunities, and a lack of trusted adults outside of the family, particularly among young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. It also highlighted a 73% fall in spending on youth facilities between 2010/11 to 2022/23, noting that nearly half of young people "spend the majority of their spare time in their bedroom" (Department for Culture, Media & Sport, 2025, Places to go and things to do section).

Meanwhile, a 2024 Youth Endowment Fund survey found that 20% of teenagers in England and Wales had been the victim of violence in the past 12 months. Two-thirds expressed concern about becoming victims, and this concern was highest among teenagers from Black and mixed ethnic backgrounds. (Youth Endowment Fund, 2024). These additional pressures in young people's lives made it more challenging for the partners to smoothly deliver their

work – but also rendered their support crucial in ensuring young people from disadvantaged backgrounds could access opportunities and avoid becoming NEET.

Overall, these challenges have made it significantly harder for youth organisations to deliver stable, high-quality support to young people moving from school into further education, training, or employment³. The barriers they have had to overcome make their achievements across Phase 1 of the Initiative even more commendable.

³ Further examples of changes in the education and youth landscape during Phase 1 of the Initiative may be found here: [Changes in the education and youth landscape 2019-2025](#)

Partners future plans

Section summary: At the end of their funding periods, the partners shared the ways in which they planned to continue improving their work in the future. Examples of common goals extending beyond involvement with the Initiative that were chosen by more than one of the partner organisations included:

1. Refining and strengthening evaluation
2. Embedding youth voice
3. Maintaining engagement with young people after they complete programmes
4. Better training for staff and volunteers
5. Improved onboarding for employer partners

1. Refining and strengthening evaluation

A number of the partners across all cohorts planned to refine and strengthen their approaches to evaluation, for example by increasing the range of data they gather, testing out new tools, coordinating evaluation across different teams, and using feedback more strategically to influence programme refinements.

2. Embedding youth voice

Throughout the evaluation of Phase 1 of the Initiative, we discussed different approaches to incorporating youth voice and the importance of amplifying seldom heard young people's voices. This became a key focus of our learning symposia and a number of the partners planned to take this forward and seek out ways to better embed youth voice in their programmes. This included incorporating young people into the planning process and exploring co-creation of activities and resources.

3. Maintaining engagement with young people after they complete programmes

A number of the partners were interested in exploring how they could continue to engage with young people after the end of their programmes. This included how to offer longer-term support to help young people sustain their transitions, and how to form or make best use of alumni networks.

4. Better training for staff and volunteers

Some of the partners were looking to enhance their volunteer and staff training to ensure young people got the most out of the sessions they offered. The evaluation found that particularly where volunteers were delivering careers sessions to young people the quality could be variable and the tone was sometimes not best suited to the age group. Therefore, they planned to offer improved briefings with clear guidance, constructive and timely feedback, and tailored training opportunities. It was generally felt that by offering this

guidance along with best practice examples this would also help improve the quality of sessions, confidence of facilitators, and in the long-term, boost retention.

5. Improved onboarding for employer partners

Across the cohorts, partners were working with employers to help their teams better understand the experiences of disadvantaged young people and the barriers that they face. Some planned to continue this work by enhancing their onboarding processes for any employer partners. They felt this would help to set realistic expectations of what to expect when working with disadvantaged young people, for example by preparing them to understand that sometimes young people are not able to take up all the opportunities offered. In some cases, partners developed memoranda of understanding to help frame working relationships with employers in advance, ensure they stayed committed to the programmes, and secure their involvement in evaluation activities in advance.

Recommendations

Section summary: This section details the process through which we drafted and refined a set of recommendations for practitioners and policymakers, including ideas to help enhance and support transitions-focused work with young people. The recommendations were based on findings and themes from across the full six years of the Initiative.

Online Recommendations Roundtable

In the final stages of this evaluation, Causeway Education drafted a set of recommendations for the future. These eight proposals aimed to highlight potential ways that practitioners could continue to enhance their work with young people and opportunities for policymakers to better support them. They were based on findings, patterns, and themes from the full six years of the Initiative and drew from practitioner and youth perspectives. To test out these emerging recommendations, we convened a group of education policy experts, youth work practitioners, and young people with lived experience to share their views on the ideas and ways they could be improved.

Attendees who were willing to be named included:





- Marley Ahmed - Assistant Manager - Communities & Partnerships, Adidas, and Career Ready Alum/Youth Board
- Ayesha Baloch - Head of Youth Employment Policy, Impetus
- Nansi Ellis – Freelance Education Policy Specialist
- Alison McIntyre - Policy Manager, Youth Futures Foundation
- Zen S. - Trainee Client-Side Quantity Surveyor, Core Five and Construction Youth Trust Alum
- Jane Samuels - Grants Programme Manager, The Mercers' Company
- Josh Woods – Freelance Researcher and PhD Student, working with Causeway Education

Roundtable participants were asked to identify the strongest and weakest recommendations and suggest reframing, consolidation, or additions, with a view to strengthening the final detail and ensuring alignment with the current post-16 policy landscape.

The draft recommendations discussed were as shown below.

Draft recommendations for practitioners

Figure 7: Draft recommendations for practitioners

	<p>Enhance local collaboration and build cross-sector networks – come together to offer wraparound support</p>
	<p>Harness technology to reduce admin burden</p>
	<p>No programmes without evaluation</p>
	<p>Consider ‘backwards’ or ‘reverse’ mentoring and other training for employers in supporting disadvantaged youth effectively⁴</p>

Focus on local collaboration and build cross-sector networks – come together to offer wraparound support for young people

During this work we saw some successful local partnerships form, with partners building long-term relationships with schools and businesses that operate in the same area. Building these connections helped some of the partners to facilitate careers experiences for young people that placed fewer demands on schools and employers. The continuity helped to build trust, clarified expectations and improved communication.

In other cases, partners saw the potential to team up with each other, to offer schools and/or employers a ‘package’ of support. For example, an organisation that specialises in working with care-experienced young people might partner with an organisation that provides trauma-informed support. They could then approach schools or employers together, rather than bringing two separate offers and duplicating demands on time and resources.

These kinds of partnerships have the potential to offer significant benefits in terms of shared resources, expertise, and systems, if sustained long term.

Harness technology to reduce admin burden

Throughout the Initiative, we saw organisations struggle with heavy admin burdens but find it difficult to use technology to lighten the load. This included struggles with new CRM systems, and siloed or inconsistent approaches across different teams. Boosting efficiency in this area could save time and resources. Support could potentially come from employer partners (with corporate social responsibility) – especially where larger businesses have well established processes in place and are willing to share their expertise.

⁴ ‘Backwards’, or ‘reverse’ mentoring, is where someone more junior mentors a senior counterpart

Create and embed a Theory of Change⁵ and Evaluation Framework for each programme

A number of the partner organisations lacked expertise or capacity to evaluate their work to a high standard and effectively use the information gathered to periodically refine their delivery. Their limited time and resources, understandably, were focused on activities with young people, meaning that evaluation sometimes became an afterthought rather than being embedded throughout their work. In some cases, data gathered was patchy or weak, and tended to be used for marketing materials or funding applications more than strategic improvements.

Developing clear, strategic, and manageable Theories of Change and Evaluation Frameworks could help youth organisations to ensure their work improves over time, as well as boosting their ability to communicate success. Seeking evaluation training for current staff or bringing in light-touch support in from outside could be helpful to get this moving.





Consider 'backwards' mentoring and other training for employers in supporting disadvantaged youth effectively

This project has provided insights into gaps in employer knowledge and understanding when it comes to offering fulfilling and supportive opportunities for disadvantaged young people. Even where employers are enthusiastic, their expectations of young people who have faced significant barriers or challenges in their lives are unrealistic, and approaches are seldom differentiated. 'Backwards', or 'reverse' mentoring, is where someone more junior mentors a senior counterpart - in this case a young person mentors an employer. This type of mentoring, or another form of direct training for the employer from a youth organisation (which could come with a fee) would be valuable. This may need to be aligned with CSR requirements to secure buy in.

⁵ A Theory of Change is a descriptive and/or visual representation of how and why desired changes are expected to happen, as a result of specific activities delivered in a particular context.

Draft recommendations for policymakers

Figure 8: Draft recommendations for policymakers

	Offer longer-term, flexible funding for programmes, reward collaboration
	Consider separate small-scale evaluation training bursaries
	Update guidance, training and accreditation for employers – supporting disadvantaged young people effectively, practicing cocreation, offering a ‘menu’ of high-quality approaches
	Offer further incentives for youth programmes to reach and support NEET young people under 18 → including adopting trauma-informed approaches, foregrounding youth voice, providing transitions mentoring that supports wellbeing

Offer longer-term, flexible funding for programmes, reward collaboration

Cycles of short-term funding mean that youth organisations can barely get programmes off the ground before they become under-resourced again and unsustainable. The organisations lose considerable time and effort to chasing funding applications and are often forced to manipulate their work to meet funding criteria, rather than being able to focus on what they know works best or what young people need most. Short-term funding can lead youth organisations to expand teams while the funding is in place to deliver the attached work, then have to make redundancies again when funding ends. Some level of longer-term or core funding, which is flexible enough to allow youth organisations to deliver what they know works best for their beneficiaries, is needed. This funding could reward collaboration, such as that described above in the recommendations for practitioners.

Consider separate small-scale evaluation training bursaries

Being able to apply for a small grant to fund an evaluation, or team evaluation training, would take some pressure off small organisations that are delivery focused and do not have the skills, time, or resources to do evaluation well on their own.

Update guidance, training, and accreditation for employers – supporting disadvantaged young people effectively, practicing co-creation, offering a ‘menu’ of high-quality approaches

Government guidance for employers on how to properly offer effective, accessible work experience and other employability support for school-age children is patchy. While some is available at school leaver/job ready level, there is less clarity around supporting school-age young people, especially those with additional needs or facing significant barriers. Advice on how to involve young people in the co-creation of work experience programmes and other high-quality career-focused activities would be beneficial for employers as part of this additional guidance.

Offer further incentives for youth programmes to reach and support NEET young people under 18, including adopting trauma-informed approaches, foregrounding youth voice, and providing transitions mentoring that supports wellbeing

While widely available support with work readiness is important, there should be specific benefits for those organisations managing to reach and help seldom heard young people who lack support and are on the edge of, or already, NEET. Organisations should also be rewarded for best practice in using trauma-informed approaches, being driven by youth voice, and supporting mental health and wellbeing.

Session overview

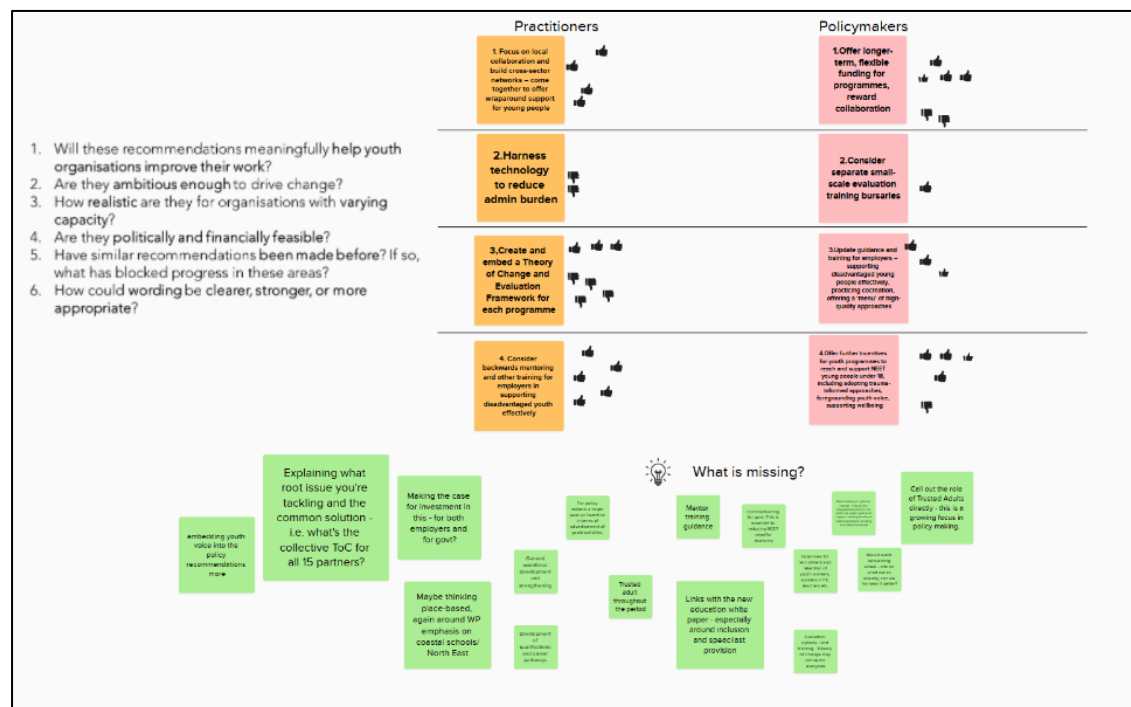
Once we introduced the session and explained the work across the six years of the Initiative, we outlined to the participants what the aims of the recommendations were:

Table 4: Aims of the recommendations

Practitioners	Policymakers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Address systemic barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve data use and partnership working 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve funding stability
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhance capacity and sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen cross-agency coordination
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop consistent approaches to supporting transitions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand equitable pathways for young people

We then invited them to use an online whiteboard to highlight with a 'thumbs up' the three recommendations they felt were strongest, a 'thumbs down' the three they felt were weakest, and an 'x' next to any they felt should be removed altogether.

Figure 6: Participants shared feedback on the recommendations using an online whiteboard



After this, we discussed the choices participants had made and the thinking behind their decisions, expanding out the conversation to include the talking points listed below:

- Will these recommendations meaningfully help youth organisations improve their work?
- Are they ambitious enough to drive change?
- How realistic are they for organisations with varying capacity?
- Are they politically and financially feasible?
- Have similar recommendations been made before? If so, what has blocked progress in these areas?
- How could wording be clearer, stronger, or more appropriate?
- Which are the strongest recommendations?
- Which need the most refinement?
- Could any be cut altogether?
- What is missing?

Participants acknowledged the value and potential in long-term, place-based relationships as essential infrastructure for post-16 transitions work. Local hubs that bring together youth organisations, schools, employers, and young people were suggested.

There was an emphasis on recognising current burdens that sit with practitioner organisations, such the frequent need for fundraising. For smaller charities in particular, these tasks take time and energy away from programme delivery. Participants discussed the need for funders, policymakers and even employer partners to understand these challenges and provides support where possible. Participants placed emphasis on the benefits of longer-term, flexible funding, including collaborative and match-funding models. In a best-case scenario, this would also include explicit investment for in-house evaluation capacity.

Strengthening employers' understanding of work with disadvantaged young people was also widely supported. Participants acknowledged that even supportive businesses that were motivated and had plenty of resources could still struggle to deliver opportunities that were appropriately designed and differentiated.

Other points were raised that were not directly covered in the draft recommendations, including issues around staff recruitment and retention and the importance of the role of consistent, trusted adults.

Key discussion themes

Strengthening collaboration and local partnerships

There was strong support for the idea of focusing on long-term, place-based collaboration between schools, employers, and youth organisations. Participants felt that these kinds of partnerships could offer sustained, high-quality experiences to greater numbers of young people, strengthen and consolidate the number of overlapping offers that schools and employers receive from youth organisations, and create an environment where partnerships can grow beyond basic funding and volunteering opportunities.

Within such partnerships, it becomes possible to better share systems, expertise, and relationships and to leverage the unique strengths of employers and youth organisations. There were several suggestions that the benefits of longer term, deeper, collaborative partnerships would support other practitioner and policymaker recommendations.

Improving evaluation skills and capacity

There was a mixed response to the practitioner recommendation of embedding Theories of Change and evaluation frameworks. While it was acknowledged that goal setting and impact measurement were essential for long-term efficacy, some participants felt there were potential risks in requiring organisations to systematise their delivery such as increasing the workload of already stretched delivery staff. Others also cautioned that placing this expectation on practitioners would risk “beating people over the head with something they can’t yet do”. It was suggested that it should be policymakers’ responsibility to facilitate better evaluation of youth programmes, by offering greater support for overstretched and underfunded youth programmes.

“We need to create capacity and investment in evaluations and monitoring programmes, and it can’t just be left up to practitioners.”

Roundtable participant

Small bursaries or capacity-building grants for developing evaluation skills and resources were generally supported. Participants also suggested that co-creating a collective Theory of Change for the Transitions Special Initiative, or perhaps for individual cohorts, could be an interesting way to draw organisations together, and upskill their teams in evaluation practice at the same time.

Funding models

Participants agreed that funding can be a significant constraint for providing sustained and efficient programmes. Short cycles, changing priorities and prescribed outcomes all limited the ability of delivery organisations to focus on delivering what works best for their beneficiaries. Several participants highlighted the amount of time and resources that small organisations had to put into continuous fundraising.

"With the cutting of UKSPF [UK Shared Prosperity Fund], for example, this is a real kind of fear for practitioners and delivery partners in particular. The fact that there is no long-term funding, there are funding cliff edges, and they can't hire someone for more ... [than] a contract for a year, for example, because they don't know if they will have funding at that point."

Roundtable participant

Despite the general agreement that longer-term, flexible funding, would enable more activities that support young people's post-16 transitions, there was a recognition that asking for more money can seem at best optimistic and at worst fruitless. Accordingly, there were suggestions to couple this recommendation with more creative proposals, including the idea of incentives that reduce competition and support collaboration. Other suggestions included matched funding pots that leverage employer contributions and funding criteria that recognise the higher costs of working with smaller, potentially more challenging cohorts rather than high-volume participant programmes.

"I don't think we should shy away from asking for funding. I mean, I know it's tricky to do it, but I think if you're putting this to policymakers, they need to hear that things aren't going to move unless there's funding for them."

Roundtable participant

Employer engagement and 'backwards' mentoring

There was considerable support for 'backwards' mentoring and other training and guidance to improve the ways employers work with disadvantaged young people. Participants acknowledged that there is often the motivation and/or obligation for employers to offer some kind of outreach activity, but perhaps not the expertise or capacity to do so effectively. They noted that employers also face a confusing and fractured landscape of guidance. Whilst there is a lot of advice and support available online and through other organisations, it is not clearly centralised, nor particularly practical for application.

"The group that needs incentivising are employers, in my mind... one of the key barriers... is the fact that employers aren't incentivised to bring in young people."

Roundtable participant

'Backwards' mentoring was suggested as a high-impact approach that could provide better programmes whilst strengthening capacity and deepening partnerships. The roundtable participants stressed that effective mentoring does require structured support and training for both mentors and mentees, and that having relatable near-peer role models can be particularly powerful for first-generation and working-class young people navigating unfamiliar fields.

"I can't emphasise how important I think backwards mentoring is."

Roundtable participant

Early and sustained interventions

Participants emphasised that meaningful preparation for post-16 transitions must start well before age 16 and must include repeated encounters with employers and professionals, not just at the point of decision. This aligned with the call for longer-term, localised partnerships or hubs and longer-term funding.

"I do feel like for myself... even before you kind of hit that 16-to-18 bracket, it was integral for me to kind of have someone in my life that ... I could kind of look at and aspire to maybe be like."

Roundtable participant

Harnessing technology to reduce admin burden









This recommendation was viewed as a valuable suggestion, but too operational and specific to stand out as a final recommendation from Phase 1 of the Initiative. Whilst there are improvements and efficiencies to be made here, roundtable participants suggested that it would be better for the partner organisations to tackle this individually, in the way that works best for their unique circumstances. They also suggested that support with harnessing technology could be a byproduct of the recommendation to build local cross-sector networks, if employers or other partners were willing to share expertise and best practice with organisations that had weaker skills or less capacity.

Final recommendations

Causeway Education refined the draft recommendations based on feedback from the participants in the Online Recommendations Roundtable. This included moving responsibility for funding evaluation activities onto policymakers, to relieve pressure on already stretched youth work delivery teams and removing the focus on using technology to reduce the admin burden. We also specified that funding for programmes should be targeted towards those building cross-sector networks, and we retargeted the suggestion for further incentives to reach and support NEET young people at employers rather than youth organisations, as participants noted that many youth organisations are already working on reaching seldom heard young people while employers are less likely to support them.

We introduced two new recommendations for practitioners based on our roundtable discussions, including ensuring that support for post-16 transitions begins as early as possible in a young person's education and includes repeated encounters with the world of work. This aligns with the government's requirement for young people in Years 7 to 9 at school to be able to access one week's worth of work experience activities and those in Year 10 and 11 to have a week's worth of work placement (Department for Education, 2025). We also added the recommendation for practitioners to prioritise offering young people consistent support from a trusted adult where possible, ideally with trauma informed practice and/or mental health training. This reflects the ongoing crisis in young people's mental health, and the requests from young people working with the partners across Phase 1 for more time with the key adults supporting them.

Figure 9: The finalised recommendations for practitioners and policymakers

Recommendations for practitioners		Recommendations for policymakers	
 <p>Enhance local collaboration and build cross-sector networks – come together with schools and local employers to offer wraparound support</p>		<p>Offer longer-term, flexible funding for programmes that are supported by cross-sector networks</p>	
 <p>Aim to start support for post-16 transitions as early as possible in a young person’s education, including repeated encounters and experiences with the world of work</p>		<p>Make small-scale evaluation training bursaries available to youth organisations, so they can upskill their teams</p>	
 <p>Consider coordinating backwards mentoring and other training for employers in supporting disadvantaged youth effectively, prioritise youth voice where possible</p>		<p>Update guidance and training for employers – including on supporting disadvantaged young people effectively, practicing co-creation, and offering a ‘menu’ of high-quality approaches</p>	
 <p>Prioritise offering young people consistent support from a trusted adult where possible, ideally with trauma informed practice and/or mental health training</p>		<p>Make further incentives available for employers to offer advice, guidance, and training opportunities to NEET young people under 18, with particular benefits for those adopting trauma-informed approaches, foregrounding youth voice, and providing transitions from secondary education mentoring that supports wellbeing</p>	

Thanks

Causeway Education would like to thank all those involved in the evaluation process for Phase 1 of the Transitions from Secondary Education Special Initiative.

We congratulate the partners on all their achievements in supporting disadvantaged young people in challenging times and wish them the best for the future.

We also thank The Mercers' Company for this opportunity to explore the fascinating insights of the Initiative and look forward to following the progress of Phase 2.

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