

Evaluation Report: Youth Specialist Programme

SHORT VERSION

Independent report from the Brathay Trust Research Hub 2016

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The Brathay Trust operates a Research Hub at the heart of practice, working with practitioners to ensure a critical, enquiring and evidence-informed approach to practice. The Research Hub has become a leader in the sector for championing the evidence agenda in youth practice as well as at policy level. It is one of three initial national early adopters for the national Centre for Youth Impact <http://www.youthimpact.uk/>



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1. Introduction

The Brathay Trust Research Hub was commissioned by The Eikon Charity, following a competitive tender exercise, to undertake an independent evaluation of their Youth Specialist Programme, which was delivered in five schools in Surrey at the time of the field work in late 2015/early 2016. Youth Specialists are embedded within the school community, aim to provide a universal service and deliver a variety of programmes to meet young people's needs.

The evaluation had three aims:

1. To obtain and summarise robust evidence of the impact and benefits of the Youth Specialist Programme on Eikon's aims of improving young people's emotional wellbeing and resilience
2. To provide insights on how Eikon staff can further develop their support for young people
3. To offer advice on how Eikon can develop a framework for continuing evaluation of the charity's work

This summary mainly focuses on the first aim, but includes a synopsis of the conclusions and recommendations in relation to the second and third aims. The full research reports and appendices are available on request from The Eikon Charity.

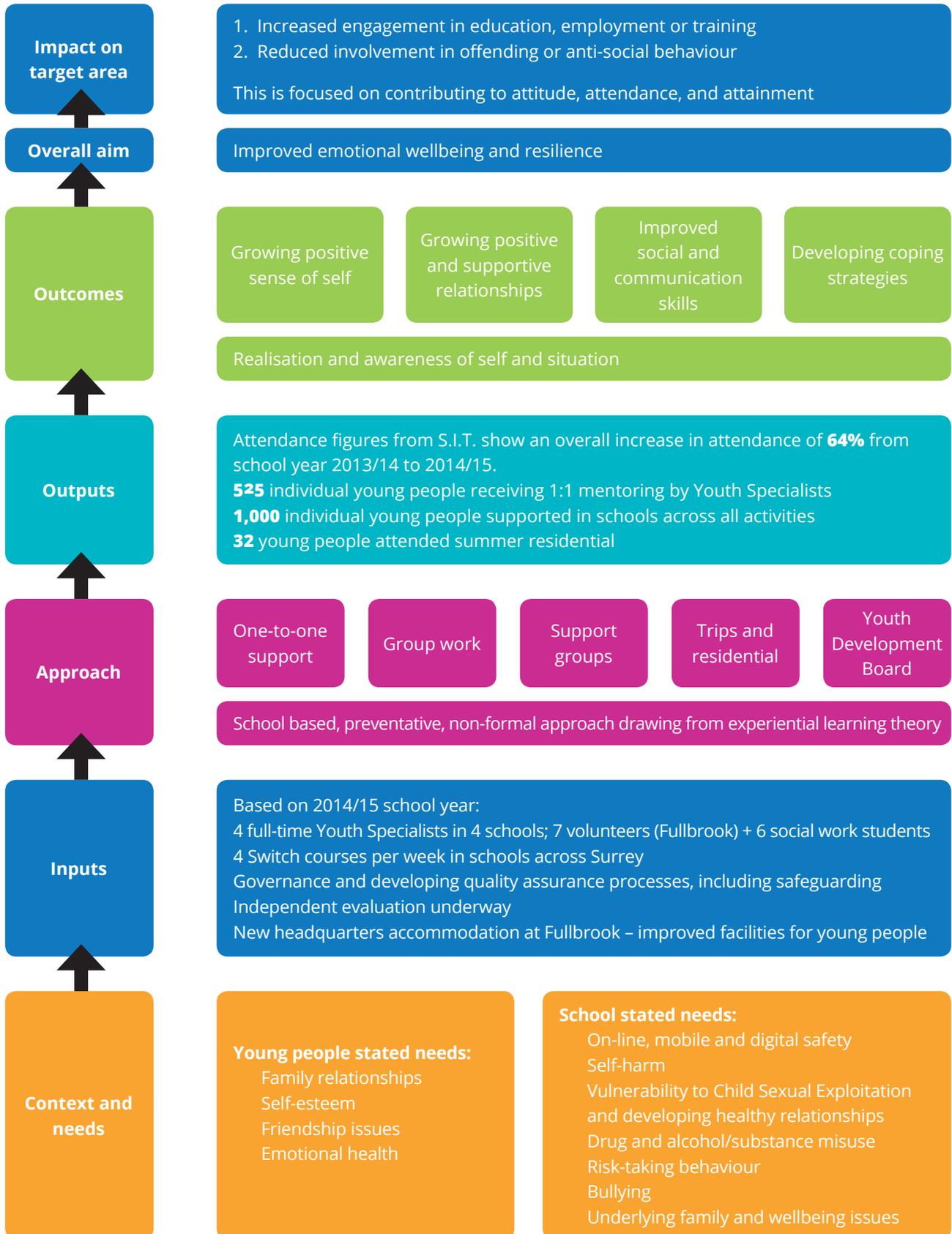
The research team undertook five main phases of work:

1. A literature review of the knowledge base associated with similar programmes
2. Desk-based analysis of documents provided by Eikon, for example current reports, case studies and information management data
3. Primary research with key stakeholders, including young people and alumni (see below). Methods used were an online alumni survey, interviews, focus groups and observation.
4. Primary research with Youth Specialist staff from Eikon
5. Primary research with school and community contacts

Alumni: young people who had previously participated in the programme, between one and ten years ago – provided critical evidence, because they showed a perspective beyond the life of the programme and its immediate impact. Of particular significance was how the alumni data reflected the data from current young people. This provides confidence that the current young people's impact data is reliable, and that the impact they state has a lasting effect. It reduces concerns of "participant pleasing" which is often found in research, where people say what they think they want you to hear, because they are still involved with the programme. It also allays fears that programmes are "quick fixes" and do not have longitudinal impacts.

A theory of change was produced by the evaluation team mapping the programme design and was used as a framework to evidence the logic and impact of the programme:

Youth Specialist Programme theory of change map



2. EVIDENCE OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S NEEDS

2.1 Needs reported by young people and alumni

Young people currently in school and alumni consistently reported five key needs:

- a. Family relationships:** including divorce and family break-up, responsibilities of young carers and relationship/communication difficulties with parent(s).
- b. Self-esteem:** a lack of self-esteem and low confidence appeared to be cross-cutting issue affecting social skills, developing friendships and engagement at school.
- c. Friendship issues:** including not being listened to, feeling isolated and seeking more friends that understood and were supportive
- d. Behavioural issues:** difficulties were described as “doing stupid things” or being “in trouble”. Young people talked of difficulties with keeping emotions in check and needing help with anger and releasing emotions in a positive way
- e. Emotional health:** including problems with anxiety, depression, panic attacks, self-harm, suicidal thoughts and sleep, also stress around exams and homework

Often young people presented with **multiple needs** across their home, school and social life, for example:



In year 11 ... I think I might have had a down period or something like that ... like with exams and stuff [what] was happening at home and stuff, was happening here with friends ...

Female, Year 13



School staff suggested I talk to [Youth Specialist] regarding issues at home that were affecting my psychological state and college enjoyment/ learning to the point I nearly walked out and wasn't planning on coming back.

Alumni B

Significant evidence was gathered on each of the five areas of need and is detailed in Appendix 5 of the full research report.

2.2 Needs reported by schools

School and other professionals contacted by the research team emphasised significant needs around emotional well-being, self-awareness and communication and social skills. Professional stakeholders also emphasised safeguarding vulnerabilities, in particular:

- Online, mobile and digital safety
- Self-harm
- Vulnerability to child sexual exploitation
- Drug, alcohol and other substance misuse
- Bullying
- Underlying family instability

These needs were seen as having a direct detrimental impact on educational attainment, for example:

“These are issues that have a direct impact on the student's ability to engage with their education and make progress.

School contact

2.3 Overcoming blockers to young people's development

The Youth Specialist Programme is based on the critical assumption that the key needs set out above act as “blockers” for young people in engaging fully with their education, employment or training. This was well articulated by one alumni participant:

“I felt at the time that most adults (outside of the programme) did not have time to listen to my problems or simply told me “it would work itself out eventually”, and all they wanted to know is that you were focused on your school work - which was incredibly hard to do if you had other issues going on.

Alumni C

The programme is 'preventative', tackling these blockers before they negatively affect young people's lives. It was also described as catching problems in time before they escalated, and where necessary facilitating referral on to specialist agencies. For example:



I think if I didn't have [Youth Specialist] because then I probably wouldn't have been referred to CAMHS, it might have got a whole lot worse so they got it in time.

Female, Year 10

The benefit of an 'early intervention' approach to address the ever-increasing demands on the school pastoral team was universally agreed. One school reported that approximately 17% of the student population was known to the designated safeguarding team for reasons such as sending explicit texts or suffering abuse or domestic violence. For example:



The school puts great emphasis on pastoral support. Increasing need for support that school could not supply. [Home-School Link Worker] workload was increasing and role broadening – meant that there was a need for a Youth Specialist to pick up on these needs before they escalated, e.g. going missing from home.

School Contact (from notes)

3. EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

3.1 Evidence from the literature review

The evaluation team undertook an extensive review of the relevant research literature, and found much theory and evidence to underpin the value of Eikon's Youth Specialist Programme:

Evidence on youth work in schools: Literature suggests Youth Workers are well placed in schools to support young people, particularly those who are temporarily or chronically disengaged with formal education. They can offer a more subtle, non-formal approach to re-engage through group work and relationship building activities.¹

The Youth Work curriculum depends on process, facilitation, creativity and the establishment of a trusting relationship between the young person and Youth Worker over time², with the Youth Worker actively seeking to point the balance of power in the direction of the young person³. The Scottish Government's Curriculum for Excellence⁴ advocates improving outcomes for young people through school and Youth Work partnerships. The Curriculum for Excellence supports Dewey's work in the 1930s on experiential learning, understanding students' actual experiences⁵.

Empowerment: Non-formal learning can provide an effective way to increase motivation and self-esteem in young people, promoting critical reflection⁶. Festeu and Humberstone⁶ also suggest that non-formal learning should emphasise empowerment. This is supported by the European Commission's (2015) publication on Youth Work (p. 152):

*Empowerment is defined as a 'multidimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues they define as important.'*⁷

Experiential and informal learning: Experiential learning theory prioritises personal experience and uses a variety of methods and techniques (one-to-one's, trips, residential, group work). Youth Work provided through informal and non-formal learning supports "learning through life as it is lived"⁸ with the life experience of the young person central to this^{9, 10, 11}. This serves as a theoretical underpinning to the Youth Specialist work.

One-to-one relationships: Trevithick (2005)¹² believes the relationship between the practitioner and young person is central to achieving change.

There are situations where relationship building is central to the task of establishing a 'corrective relationship': a reparative experience that is created to compensate for previous unsatisfactory or painful relationships and failures (p. 148).

Tarling et al. (2001)¹³ found young people felt they could interact with their Youth Worker better than they could with a Parent/Guardian or Teacher as they did not see them as an authority figure. This serves as critical justification of the one-to-one element of the Youth Specialist Programme.

Trips, residential and outdoor activities provide a new environment where participants are equal and existing barriers and hierarchies can be broken down. Participants can create a new community away from their normal distractions that gives them time and space to address their goals within a supportive environment. The Learning Away initiative found that residential can promote student-teacher/adult relationships which in turn result in improved learner engagement. Residential can also improve resilience, self-confidence and wellbeing, and can improve students' engagement¹⁴.

3.2 Evidence of impact on young people

The evaluation found causal evidence of the positive outcomes of Eikon's work in meeting the needs of young people. The aim of improving wellbeing and resilience was achieved through helping young people to:

- **Develop their awareness of themselves and the situation they are in**
- **Be more positive about themselves**
- **Improve their social and communication skills**
- **Develop strategies for coping with difficult situations and feelings**
- **Grow more positive and supportive relationships**

The first outcome of Eikon's work, helping young people to develop their awareness of themselves and their situation, was found to be the foundation of the other outcomes. Learning, growth and changes in behaviour have to be realised for oneself and cannot be told or "done to" young people. Significant evidence was found of critical elements of this unique approach, including the way Youth Specialists worked, and the specific activities and techniques they used. Significant qualitative evidence was found from a variety of sources, but especially from young people and alumni, for example:

“It was valuable and a very much needed service for me at the time, I felt that without that support I may have ended up going down paths that could have affected me long term, or for life.

Alumni I

3.2.1 Improved attitude

An improved attitude to school was found in motivation, participation/engagement and behaviour. Some described the relationship between improvement in behaviour and feeling calmer, happier and in control of themselves since working through their concerns with the Youth Specialist and developing strategies and skills. There was also reference made to the improvement in their disciplinary record, e.g. being sent out of class on fewer occasions.

“I was storming out and they told me to go see Eikon, I left there a lot calmer so I could realise maybe walking out of college wasn't going to be my best idea and instead I could work through everything. I think I would have disappeared off [without Eikon] and not made anything of myself... the problems are still there but I'm dealing with and getting on with my life better which I wouldn't have done before [Eikon].

Alumni B

3.2.2 Improved attendance

Young people reported a greater willingness to attend and stay in school. For example:

“ Not in as much trouble. Never wanted to come to school, because wound up by something. Now it stops me taking it out on teachers or other kids. I wouldn't come to school if didn't have to, but I'm happier now, so it's not as big a deal to come to school. Not in trouble, better mood, have a good day. All links to help at home – they know they're not going to get a phone call from school, so less stress at home.

Male, Year 9 (from notes)

3.2.3 Improved performance and attainment at school

A number of young people reported that their grades had improved and felt positive about future exams and improved attainment. For example:

“ I managed to go to uni, I now have a job I enjoy and am considering other career options, I have a much better more open relationship with my family ... I don't think I would be where I am now without the help I had from the programme. I am more confident socially and in a work environment – I still don't like conflict very much but I am a lot better at dealing with things now rather than burying my head in the sand.

Alumni B

Some current young people predicted that the development of social, communication, team and leadership skills would enhance their future job opportunities, suggesting a growing confidence and aspiration. Furthermore, some had the opportunity to take on public speaking and leadership roles within Eikon.

3.3 Improved emotional well-being and resilience

Considerable evidence was found demonstrating Eikon's overall aim of improving emotional wellbeing and resilience to cope in life. This was often expressed as one or more specific outcomes, culminating in a holistic sense of wellbeing:

“ I learnt how to **communicate** better with others it gave me **confidence** and it simply made me feel like I was **not alone**. From being part of the programme, I gained a number of **new friends**, adopted an **improved attitude** and became a wholly happier person.

Alumni C

“ It helped me become the person I am today. [Youth Specialist] helped me deal with issues that could have affected my whole life. I was worried about the consequences of my past actions and he helped me to think logically and practically and to deal with the situations rather than worry about them.

Alumni G

Young people stressed the importance of feeling accepted and having permission to talk about any issue at Eikon, no matter how small or large:

“ I think the most important things I gained from attending Eikon were that I felt I had people on my side, when before it felt like it was me against the world. Just knowing there were people like [Eikon staff] who would actually have time for me, gave me comfort.

Alumni C

3.3.1 “Growing up”: increased self-realisation and awareness

Young people frequently discussed a growing realisation or awareness of self and situation. Some articulated the significance of realising something for yourself (rather than being told) and how any benefits would be slower if you didn't realise it for yourself. For example, one young man described how he “*realised I need to improve*” and stated this in opposition to how he would react negatively to being “*told*” to improve.

It was therefore concluded that this is a “foundational outcome” of the Youth Specialist Programme and links directly to the underpinning philosophy and theory of the programme (see literature review section above). It is the basis on which the other outcomes are attained (see Appendix 7 of the full research report). For example, a young person needs to realise their anger or anxiety, before they will entertain taking on coping strategies to control this in the future.

Young people described this as “growing up”, in that they were challenging assumptions and learning lessons for themselves. Young people expressed this as feeling like a completely different person after being involved in the Youth Specialist Programme:

“ I realised I need to up my game. I realised what was better for me. This is quite nice! Not getting in trouble. I realised the benefits and it carried on, getting a bit better and a bit better. It would have been a lot slower if I didn't realise this for myself.

Male, year 9 (from notes)

3.3.2 Building a positive sense of self – increased confidence and self-esteem

Young people commonly expressed how their time with a Youth Specialist had given them more self-belief and the courage to speak up and give an opinion:

“It gave me the courage to stand up for myself and it made me start to believe in myself again. It made me feel like I mattered.

Female, 16-18

They also said they felt more confident to get out there and try more activities.

3.3.3 Developing positive and supportive relationships

A key theme for young people was the importance of developing positive and supportive networks, linked to developing awareness of potentially negative relationships. For example:

“I probably would've still been in a bad place. I would've still been hanging around with the wrong people doing ... things that you shouldn't really be doing.

Female, 16-18

Young people said they felt able to develop positive relationships after support from the Youth Specialist because they felt understood, felt “normal” and less isolated. They also valued opportunities offered by Eikon, for example young carers' groups in the schools, lunch clubs, and trips and residential, as a way to make new friends. The value of time away was a recurring theme.

Of particular note was the impact on other significant relationships with friends, teachers and especially family. Stronger bonds with family members, and the restoration and maintenance of relationships with parents were a frequently stated outcome of the programme. Youth Specialists encouraged communication with the parents and/or agreed that conversations would take place to discuss difficulties and progress for the young person. The importance of this was evidenced by current young people, but also by several Alumni, justifying this further.

3.3.4 Improved social and communication skills

Social and communication skills were also a significant outcome for young people. Evidence from young people suggested improvements in the basics of understanding others (not judging them before you get to know them); teamwork; listening; the value of helping others.

3.3.5 Developing coping strategies

As they were helped by Youth Specialists to develop awareness of themselves, young people made more informed choices, feeling able to say “no” and being bold enough to remove themselves from risky environments and negative influences. Instances of diversion from substance use and moving away from the “wrong people” were shared, together with a sense of getting themselves on track with the support of Eikon. Examples were also given of more specific coping strategies that enabled young people to achieve this:

- **Relaxation and breathing techniques**
- **Reflection and thinking through situations**
- **Problem solving**
- **Strategies for reducing anger**
- **Expressing emotion positively**



It definitely gave me new coping mechanisms. It taught me how to express myself, instead of keeping things bottled up and then eventually bursting.

Alumni C

Developing coping strategies was seen to build resilience and a toolkit for young people to take into their day-to-day lives.

3.4 The value of the Youth Specialist within the school

The Youth Specialist Programme was recognised as a valuable service by schools and other partners. It was seen as enhancing the pastoral support provided by schools, through more specialised support to vulnerable young people. The programme was found to give greater access to those in need and help prevent young people falling through the gaps.



The role of a Youth Specialist or equivalent in school is invaluable ... it is so important because it identifies a lot of very vulnerable young people that would fall through the cracks if it wasn't for the support that was offered.

Partner

School contacts felt the Youth Specialists had contributed greatly to the schools. Several reported that they and school colleagues observed changes in emotional well-being and behaviour in a number of young people attending sessions with Eikon. In some cases, they noted that consistent, on-going support from the Youth Specialist Programme resulted in growing self-realisation of the risks young people were taking:



A lot of the time young people don't realise they are putting themselves at risk ... and I think she's realised she's got more important things to set her mind to, with things like GCSEs coming up ...

School contact

The ease and access of having a Youth Specialist situated within the school, the numbers of young people that could participate and the levels of privacy, were without question. For example:



Relationship with support worker and opportunity to have regular sessions. Convenience of Eikon being at school.

Alumni D



Nice that it was at school – sometimes I'd come into school in a right mess, so nice to have someone at school who knows the whole situation, as others don't understand.

Young person (from notes)

The creation of a safe, relaxing and welcoming space was a repeated theme for the young people and alumni; being allowed to cry, being given hot chocolate and a biscuit.

The Youth Specialist role depended on a close relationship with school staff, in particular the pastoral leads, to prioritise and plan, troubleshoot and work together on training needs and safeguarding issues (three out of the five schools had developed the role to include safeguarding responsibilities).



I feel that ... the Youth Specialist position, Eikon allows you to develop that in a way that is appropriate to your school. I think it's a real strength ...

School contact



If I wasn't fully integrated into the school the job wouldn't work... the staff briefing is invaluable.

Youth Specialist

See also Appendix 8 in the full research report.

4. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE YOUTH SPECIALIST PROGRAMME'S DESIGN

The research findings concerning impact were mapped onto a “theory of change framework” (see end of report), which demonstrates the rationale of the programme in diagrammatic form and how it achieves its long-term goals. The framework for Eikon summarises the evidence to show that the Youth Specialist programme contributes to the critical agendas of:

- **Increased engagement in education, employment or training**
- **Reduced involvement in offending or anti-social behaviour**

The theory of change framework can also help to support continuing evaluation of Eikon's work - highlighting the mechanisms of change that can be measured and help in selecting appropriate measures to test effectiveness.

(For more information, see Appendix 2 of the full research report).

5. RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Appendix 6 of the full research report presents a detailed discussion of the cost-effectiveness of Eikon's youth specialist programme, and the assumptions and data on which it is based. In summary, it can be postulated that every £1 invested in Youth Specialists will save between £1.50 and £5.00 (and in some circumstances significantly more, depending on the cost of the service not needed) on a range of services including:

- **Pupil Referral Units**
- **Primary care mental health services**
- **Statutory Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)**
- **Specialist inpatient services for drug treatment**
- **Care homes for children**
- **Youth offending institutions**
- **Welfare benefits**

For more information, please contact The Eikon Charity or Brathay Trust.

6. EVIDENCE ON THE DELIVERY MODEL

6.1 The role of the Youth Specialist

Key words and phrases used to describe the approach taken by Youth Specialists, included:

- **Relationship building**
- **Creating safety and trust**
- **Listening**
- **Talking through issues and developing action plans;**
- **Independent (not an authority figure, not “Miss”)**
- **Sign-posting;**
- **Honest; open, realistic – giving hard messages**
- **Information giver; mentoring and guidance**
- **Friendly and relaxed**

6.2 Activities and techniques

The greatest body of evidence attributing particular activity to outcomes was appointment-based one-to-one sessions with the Youth Specialist, together with drop-in and informal individual contact, lunch-clubs (including groups for young carers, art groups and non-specific clubs) and targeted programmes addressing issues such as anger management or social skills. To a slightly lesser extent, young people detailed trips, residentials and participation in the Youth Development Board.

It is important to note the underlying importance of fun and play. Young people often attributed outcomes specifically to having fun and being distracted from the stress and anxiety of their difficulties, in particular approaching exams. For example, at one young carers' weekly lunch club, information and awareness-raising (e.g. creating a poster about ADHD) was integrated with playing games, sharing and enjoying the moment.

6.3 Opportunities for improvement

The evaluation team has produced a separate report on the challenges and opportunities for future development of the youth specialist programmes, which includes discussion of important issues raised during the research, in particular:

- **Publicity**
- **Referrals and access**
- **Confidentiality and safeguarding**
- **The boundaries of practice of the Youth Specialists**
- **Management, infrastructure and communication**

Recommendations include:

- **Access to services by young people:** although there was a range of responses to the barriers associated with participating in the Youth Specialist Programme (e.g. stigma), in the main they seemed to be manageable for young people. However, it is suggested that future evaluations canvas the views of young people not taking up services at the point of referral or disengaging from the programme.
- Evidence suggests that young people value informal and day to day drop-in access to the Youth Specialist, beyond the formal group work or one-to-one sessions. However, this needs further investigation regarding time, resources, workload and the priorities of each programme.
- **The boundaries of the role of the Youth Specialist** need to be clarified to all stakeholders - what it is and what it is not. This is obviously difficult, as it appears to be bespoke to the context and needs of the school, as well as the skills, experience and qualifications of the Youth Specialist themselves. What may aid this is the development of a core model of approach, perhaps using the theory of change, evidence on approach and literature review (see Appendix 3).
- **Discussions should continue regarding safeguarding, confidentiality** and information sharing policies, in order to clarify the position placed on Youth Specialists in schools acting in loco parentis and draw up procedures and thresholds of disclosure that are clear and understandable to young people, parents and professionals.
- **Group work programmes** for young people were valued across all stakeholders, with a request to develop more. Both formal programmes, e.g. anger management courses, and informal clubs and groups, e.g. lunch clubs for exam stress, were felt to be an effective method for improving outcomes for young people.
- **Communication systems with schools** should be review continually to ensure that concerns are being picked up and addressed.
- **Further enhancing partnership working:** Eikon should develop a model showing how they work alongside, and contribute to, Children's Services, the Youth Support Service and Community Youth Services.

7. PROPOSED FUTURE EVALUATION FRAMEWORK

The evaluation team also produced a report in relation to the third aim of the research, to provide advice on the state of the current evidence base and a proposed evaluation framework. The aim is to evidence the theory of change, with particular attention being paid to:

- a)** The collection of hard outcome data, contextual information and measures that allow for consistency and comparison to a wider population of young people, and
- b)** The triangulation of qualitative feedback, including self-reported feedback from young people and the observations of professionals (Youth Specialists, school staff and partner agencies).

The many recommendations include:

- More and improved data capture on the needs of more vulnerable young people including changes to the Registration and Assessment document
- Continuing to collect contextual information regarding boroughs, catchment areas and schools
- Collecting qualitative feedback on the development of a core model for the role of Youth Specialist
- Testing the approach of the Youth Specialist Programme by canvassing the views of young people not taking up services at the point of referral or disengaging from the programme.
- Developing templates for the five point scales used to measure the impact of the various interventions
- Collecting qualitative observations on young people's outcomes and progress from multiple sources; including the Youth Specialist, school staff and young person, and drawing out the main themes against the outcomes and overall aim.

It is suggested that Eikon should pilot a tested and recognised measure to gauge well-being on a universal basis both at an early stage in the young person's relationship with the Youth Specialist Programme and at a review and/or end point. Such measures ensure robustness is built in and allow the programme to compare findings against a wider population of young people in England or internationally. This could be piloted in one school and borough.

It is recommended that data on school attendance, behaviour, educational attainment, police contact and risk factors is collected for young people prior to referral in the programme and following participation. Protocols and data protection agreements will need to be satisfied with young people, participating schools and statutory services and it is suggested that this strategy is piloted in one school and borough as a starting point.

It is also recommended that Eikon continues to seek qualitative feedback from a sample of alumni to enhance learning on how the approach of the Youth Specialists benefits young people in the longer term.

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