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**Doncaster's Alternative Provision
(*Big Picture Doncaster and Vega
College*) Evaluation**

Final Report

June 2024



**City of
Doncaster
Council**

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Project details and acknowledgements

Title	Doncaster Alternative Provision (Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College) Evaluation
Client	City of Doncaster Council
Project number	23205
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We are very grateful to the team at City of Doncaster Council (CDC) who helped us liaise with stakeholders and ensured we had access to the necessary data.

We would like to thank the teams at Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College who, despite being extremely busy delivering education to children and young people (CYP), took the time to help support the evaluation.

Finally, we are particularly grateful to our research participants who gave their time to share their experiences and insight. We must mention the CYP who spoke to us – it was a pleasure to meet them and hear about how they have experienced the alternative provision.



Executive Summary

This evaluation was commissioned by City of Doncaster Council to address three key aims;

Aim 1: Evaluate the impact of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College as a model of delivery for children and young people (CYP).

Aim 2: Evaluate the process of implementing the Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College model of delivery for CYP.

Aim 3: Analyse the efficacy and successfulness of a Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting.

In meeting these aims we analysed a range of information sources, including; an evidence review of existing literature, interviews with key stakeholders and parents/carers, online surveys with delivery staff, schools, work place providers and parents/carers, workshops with CYP, available data on outcomes and analysis of individual learning plans.

Our key findings and recommendations are detailed below.

Aim 1 – Evaluate the impact of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College as a model of delivery for children and young people.



Image 1 – How Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College achieve outcomes for CYP.

The below image presents the outcomes achieved by Big Picture Doncaster and Vega college, how those outcomes were achieved (mechanisms) and in what contexts.



Outcome 1 - Students have increased engagement with learning (in and outside the classroom).

BPD and Vega have increased the proportion of successful outcomes achieved year on year. These outcomes include improved attendance, students achieving good progress on learning plans, students being reintegrated into mainstream school (BPD) and students engaging with work placements and developing workplace skills.

Attendance data for a random sample of students shows that attendance is higher at BPD and Vega compared to mainstream school. The impact of this improved engagement can be seen in the predicted GCSE grades for Vega students and the fact 5 of the 7 students we spoke to had secured college places for September 2024. These outcomes were corroborated by the majority of school stakeholders who completed our survey.

Outcome 2- Students understand more about themselves and their triggers/concerns and have strategies in place to deal with them.

Evidence of this outcome was identified from a number of perspectives, from school staff, parents/carers and CYP themselves. Many of the participants described how CYP had developed strategies since attending the AP, with parents describing improved relationships at home and CYP describing how this had improved their relationships with teachers.

Outcome 3 - Parents/carers feel involved in their children's education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.

The majority of parents/carers we spoke to felt involved in their child's education and described their child's experience of the AP as a positive experience. However, it must be noted there were a small number of parents who did not feel the AP had been positive for their child.

Mechanisms (what was it about Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College that helped achieve these outcomes?)

A **personalised learning journey** – the approach of 'one learner at a time' was described by delivery staff, schools and parents as being an important factor in their child's engagement in learning.

Facilitating lifelong learning – the use of real world learning, 'hands on' projects and work place experience and skills were all described as being important factors in CYP's engagement with the AP setting.

A **supportive, nurturing and inclusive environment** – the supportive environment created in both settings was described as being central to learners continued engagement. Parents and CYP described the impact of this in helping students to feel valued and listened to and thereby engage in learning. It was clear from a range of participants that the AP was delivered very differently to mainstream school. Parents, schools and CYP described how both settings helped learners to understand themselves better and develop ways of managing their reactions.

A **focus on mental health and wellbeing** – both settings seek to support CYP with their overall wellbeing. This holistic approach was seen to create the right environment for them to learn. Furthermore, the fact that learners are supported with issues outside of the learning environment was seen to create a safe space where they could learn more about themselves.

A partnership approach to education – both settings were described as working in partnership with schools, CYP and parents/carers, which helped to improve communication between all involved and helped to repair relationships.

Contexts (what contexts have helped or hindered these outcomes?)

Referrals to BPD and Vega – low referrals to both settings have impacted on the reach of the AP in Doncaster. There were various reasons for low referrals, including not having sufficient time to raise the profile of the AP at the start. This barrier is being addressed for September 2024 with the new Triage panel.

Challenges with the SIB outcome measures – the outcomes measured (and therefore paid) by the SIB model have had to change over time. It is still the case that not all outcomes are within the control of the AP (e.g attendance and reintegration). There are also outcomes achieved (such as those mentioned in this evaluation) that are very important, but do not result in payment.

Sufficient resources – schools, delivery staff, parents and CYP all commented on resource issues that can be seen to have restricted the potential of the AP. These include the buildings/location, the lack of travel and the limited time learners can attend the settings for. It is important to note that the location issues are currently being addressed (with new buildings being identified) and the length of time at the settings is a requirement of the rules around alternative provision.

Effective relationships with schools – it is clear that in order for students to continue their successes at BPD/Vega in school, there needs to be effective working between the two. There were concerns raised on both sides about the extent to which this happens in practice (with some raising the different expectations at the AP compared to school). But it is important to note that this has improved over time and schools have noticed improved communication and working relationships with the AP.

Engagement of parents/carers and CYP – in order for the AP to achieve the outcomes described in this evaluation, it requires CYP and parents/carers to be actively engaged in the process. There was some concern from schools and delivery staff that not all parents/carers and CYP are actively committed. However, it must be recognised that the setting may not be the most appropriate setting for all CYP who are referred and that sometimes parents/carers require better communication from the AP.

Staff changes at Vega – the significant changes in staffing at Vega has been described as both a challenge and a benefit. While it caused problems in reporting outcomes and a lack of continuity between the previous and new management, it has been described in positive terms by schools and some parents/carers who appreciate the more structured approach.

Work placements (Vega) – despite CYP, schools and work place providers seeing the value of work placements at Vega, the reality of arranging them has been challenging. This is something that has been experienced in Big Picture Learning approaches in other countries. It is also the case that not all learners are ready for a work placement, particularly because of anxiety.

A flexible SIB funding model that evolved over time – despite numerous challenges experienced by the use of the SIB model, it is clear from all perspectives that those involved have worked hard to ensure the providers had what they needed and could continue to operate (including through Covid-19). This has evolved to a set payment to help the settings have some financial stability. Without this, the providers may not have been able to achieve the outcomes seen in this report.

Our recommendations:

- We suggest that as the programme moves into the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System, outcome measures are reviewed to capture the breadth of impact for CYP and parents/carers that we have identified during this evaluation.
- We have been able to answer the vast majority of research questions that were agreed at the start of this evaluation, however, it is important to highlight an important question that could not be answered fully: How outcomes for CYP have changed over time, meaning from before referral to post integration. We discovered that there has been limited data sharing between schools and the AP providers to allow this question to be answered meaningfully. Both BPD and Vega have data on what CYP achieve in their settings, but data on attendance, behaviour and educational outcomes in the mainstream settings (post reintegration) are not available. This is something that CDC may want to explore moving forward as this would help to strengthen the evidence on the impact of the AP.
- Despite the challenges of arranging work placements for students at Vega, both CYP and the placement providers spoke highly of the opportunity. We suggest Vega are supported to continue with this, while recognising the challenges involved (and the fact not all CYP are ready for a placement).
- We have identified a number of contextual challenges to the AP, many of which are being addressed by the move to the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System and the Triage panel from September 2024. However, we would recommend CDC, BPD and Vega work together to address some of the remaining challenges, particularly closer working with schools and parents/carers to support learners to achieve their full potential.
- A key issue that will remain post September 2024 is the lack of travel arrangements for the AP settings. We appreciate travel is not provided to other AP settings in Doncaster but it has been raised by a number of participants as a potential barrier to attendance. This is perhaps something CDC could consider seeking funding for – potentially through the social value procurement process¹.

Aim 2 – Evaluate the process of implementing the Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College model of delivery for children and young people

Key findings:

- The AP has changed considerably since the initial concept in 2019.
- Some participants felt there was a lack of understanding regarding what was involved initially, and not a clear enough articulation of the need and how it could be addressed (resulting in a setting that could not meet the needs of learners).
- This resulted in the closure of the school following an Ofsted visit, but it was noted that the school had not had enough time to develop their approach at the time of the inspection.
- Following the Ofsted inspection, all parties worked hard to come up with a new approach to the AP, resulting in a focus on key transition points (thereby identifying a clear need).



¹ [How the Procurement Act 2023 will unlock Social Value across the supply chain \(socialvalueportal.com\)](https://socialvalueportal.com)

- The revised contract focused on KS3 (BPD) and KS4 (Vega College) and both settings have evolved over the last 3 years to deliver an effective AP to children in Doncaster (as evidenced in the previous section of this chapter).
- Despite considerable challenges along the way, it is clear that all those involved have shown considerable commitment and dedication to finding solutions, the result being an AP that meets a clear need for CYP in Doncaster.

Our recommendations:

- There has been a considerable amount of learning as a result of this AP. This has led to the creation of a provision that meets a clear need for CYP in Doncaster. This is also the first time that a BPL approach has been used in the UK. We feel there is much that other local authorities and schools could learn from the process of implementation in Doncaster and recommend CDC sharing their experiences as widely as possible.

Aim 3 — Analyse the efficacy and successfulness of a Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting

Key findings:

- The SIB model was seen to have supported CDC to take an innovative approach with minimal financial risk.
- The flexibility of the model was key in seeing the provision through the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- CDC has learned from this SIB contract and has changed ways of working for future SIB contracts.
- The model was seen as very resource intensive (for both providers and CDC) raising questions as to how cost-effective it actually was.
- Finding the ‘right’ outcomes to measure is challenging – they have been amended numerous times but some outcomes are still outside the providers’ control. Focusing on certain outcomes also misses the other valuable outcomes that are achieved.
- The financial instability and short-term nature of SIB funding has been challenging and was seen to have impacted staffing and innovation (although as time progressed, the model changed to provide more financial stability).
- There was a clear commitment of all parties to address challenges and find solutions. This undoubtedly facilitated the continued success of Doncaster’s AP.



Our recommendations:

- Given the limited evidence base currently available on the use of SIBs in the UK, we feel there is much that can be learnt from the experience in Doncaster. Indeed, CDC have already taken learnings and modified how they use SIBs in other areas of the LA. We recommend CDC, BPI, BPD and Vega share their experiences (both positive and negative) with other areas interested in this funding model.
- One of the key improvements suggested by those involved in this project is the use of a ‘part-outcomes’ model, where providers are given a set income and paid for outcomes achieved on top. This is how other SIBs have evolved and reflects how this project worked in the end. This is important learning for anyone considering using an SIB model as it reflects the reality of

providing a consistent service. We suggest the LCF and DCMS consider evaluating this more fully.

About Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College

As part of the Doncaster Growing Together Strategy 2017, the Education Inclusion Programme was developed to improve outcomes for all children in Doncaster. There was a particular focus on vulnerable and/or disadvantaged children. This work was made up of 3 projects: the behaviour and attendance review, the Special Education Needs review and an application to the Life Chances Fund for a Social Impact Bond to introduce Big Picture Learning to Doncaster.



Big Picture Learning had the potential to offer a transformational new model of alternative provision into the education system in Doncaster. Originating from the USA, it is a model of learning that focuses on one student at a time, with small class sizes and a curriculum taught in a way that is centred on the passions and interests of children and young people². Based on evidence of impact in the US, the Council believed it had the potential to re-engage young people in learning, and ultimately improve their long-term life chances and outcomes.

Central Government advocates that Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) represent a significant opportunity to reform public services, improve social outcomes and create saving for the taxpayer³. As such the Life Chances Fund was developed. This £80 million fund is overseen by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) to provide payment-by-results contracts for locally developed projects by socially minded investors. The Council worked alongside a range of partners, including The Innovation Unit, to secure a contribution of 20% from the Life Chances Fund for a Social Impact Bond in order to introduce Big Picture Learning as a new model of alternative provision in Doncaster.

Social, 'ethical' or 'impact' investment, is any investment strategy which seeks to consider both financial return and social good to bring about a social change. Impact investing means considering risk, return and impact when making investment decisions, and choosing to invest in companies that are actively creating positive social or environmental impacts. It means using money to consciously tackle society's challenges – and to make a financial return⁴. The Council worked alongside the Innovation Unit to secure investment from the social investor, Big Issue Invest. A robust Social Impact Bond contract was issued, using a model where payment is only received once a number of outcomes were achieved. In turn, Big Issue Invest developed a sub-contract with Big Picture Learning UK for the operational delivery of the Big Picture model.



The original model included the development of a Department of Education (DfE) Registered Independent School operated by Big Picture UK. The school aimed to provide an inclusive, full time education offer for young people who have previously been disengaged from learning and who require an alternative model of education in order to be successful. A range of Real-World placements sat alongside the curriculum, linking young people to mentors who would provide inspiration and motivation and act as role models, providing a different perspective.

² Big Picture Learning. Available at: <https://www.innovationunit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Big-Picture-Brochure.pdf>. [Accessed 08/05/2024].

³ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T. and Airoldi, M. (2018). Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation. *Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government*.

⁴ Ibid

Due to a range of challenges, the Big Picture Doncaster school was converted into an Alternative Provision facility within the first year. There was a revised delivery model and a series of significant changes agreed through the SIB Contract which gave freedom to:

- Engage a range of delivery partners to further a new model of Key Stage (KS)4 provision.
- Develop a blended offer of delivery, with some learning taking place online.
- Increase the range and scope of the cohort in order to support those who are out of education.
- Agree a new financial model to reflect the changes to the delivery model and cohort volumes, ultimately producing a higher quality delivery at a lower cost than previously planned.

This evaluation explores how Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College have evolved to meet the needs of a distinct set of learners. We investigate the impact of both settings on CYP, the process of implementation and development over time, and the use of a Social Impact Bond method of financing the project.




[Please note, at times this report refers to the combination of BPD and Vega College as 'Doncaster's alternative provision' – we recognise there are other forms of AP in Doncaster outside the scope of this evaluation].

Evaluation approach

Evaluation purpose and objectives

The evaluation had three key aims (see Table 1). These aims and associated research questions were reviewed with key stakeholders to ensure the evaluation addressed the key areas of interest. The agreed aims and research questions are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Evaluation aims and research questions

Evaluation aim	Research questions
<p>Aim 1: Evaluate the impact of BPD and Vega College as a model of delivery for young people.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has this model achieved in terms of outcomes for CYP in Doncaster? • How have these outcomes been achieved and in what contexts? • How have outcomes for CYP changed over time – from before referral to post reintegration? • What has been the impact on parents/carers? • What has been the role of Big Picture Invest/the SIB model in achieving the outcomes of the project?
<p>Aim 2: Evaluate the process of implementing the BPD and Vega college model for CYP.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does current delivery look like and how has the model changed from the initial concept? • What have been the challenges and successes of implementing the model (throughout its development)? • How has the partnership between CDC and Big Picture Invest changed over time? • What has been the role of Big Picture Invest in implementing the Big Picture Doncaster approach (including Vega)?
<p>Aim 3: Analyse the efficacy and successfulness of a Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting.</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been the challenges and successes of the Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting? • What needs to change to improve this way of contracting in the future? • How has this model worked across different parts of CDC – legal, finance, commissioning – and what are learnings for the future? • Has this approach provided benefits for new/different ways of working in other areas of council services? • How successful has this outcomes-based model been for the outcomes of children and young people and for Doncaster City Council? • Has the Social Impact Bond contract achieved its aim of tackling a social or environmental challenge?

Realist Evaluation

The aim of this evaluation was to understand how Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College had developed over time and what they had achieved. Due to the fact there were two AP sites with different ways of working, we suggested the approach of Realist Evaluation to help frame the evaluation.

Realist evaluation⁵ is a theory based approach to evaluation which seeks to understand what works, for whom, in what circumstances and in what respects. It emerged in the 1990s as a response to criticisms of traditional evaluation approaches. At the time, most social policy evaluations either used experimental approaches (such as Randomised Controlled Trials RCTs) that could *measure* the difference between two points, or more qualitative approaches that could *describe* the difference between two points - but neither could explain *how* the difference was achieved. It was the desire to understand causality between interventions and outcomes that led to new evaluation approaches such as realist evaluation.

The essence of realist evaluation is that social programmes do not bring about change, instead it is the resources they generate and the conditions they create for people to act, that generates change.

As Ray Pawson (one of the co-founders of realist evaluation) explained:

“Interventions work when the resources on offer (material, cognitive, social or emotional) strike a chord with programme subjects. This pathway from resources to reasoning is referred to as the programme ‘mechanism’. Realist evaluation is thus fundamentally about unearthing and inspecting vital programme mechanisms”⁶. (2003, p. 473)

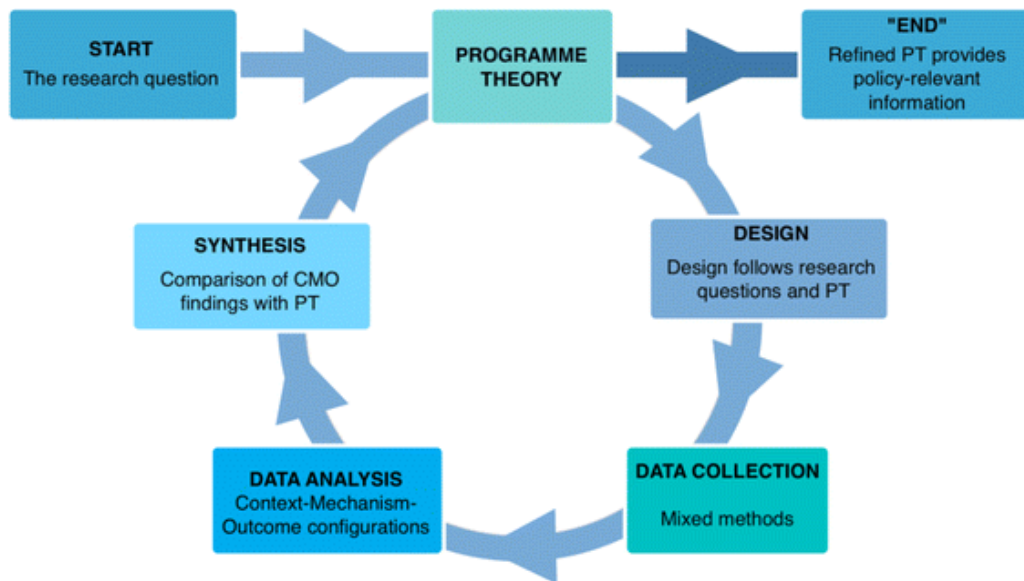
In Realist evaluation it is assumed that programmes and the measures they introduce will trigger different mechanisms depending on the local context. Context is therefore really important in realist evaluation because it will either help or hinder mechanisms from leading to outcomes.

We viewed Realist evaluation as being the most appropriate approach for the Doncaster AP evaluation because it could unpick what it was about the two settings that’s led to outcomes and what contexts were either helping or hindering those outcomes from being achieved. This level of understanding is vital because if an evaluation doesn’t identify what it was about a programme of work that led to outcomes, and the contexts that facilitated this, it is very difficult for another area to implement the approach and reach the same outcomes.

⁵ Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (1997) **Realistic Evaluation**. Sage: London

⁶ Pawson, R. (2003) Nothing as Practical as a Good Theory. **Evaluation**. 9 (4): 471-490.

Image 2 - The Realist Evaluation Cycle (Belle and Rifkin, 2017⁷) adapted from Marchal et al (2012)⁸



The starting point of Realist evaluation is a set of research questions (page 7) that inform the initial programme theory (page 13). The programme theory is intended to be a **high level outline of the project** that will be used to inform the evaluation, but it is also designed to help the project keep a shared perspective of what it is trying to achieve.

The **mechanisms and contexts at this stage were designed to be a hypothesis** about how the AP might achieve the key outcomes. This hypothesis **informed how we designed our data collection tools** so that we could capture evidence about what was achieved, how and in what contexts. As the evaluation progressed and we had collected and analysed the available data, we refined the programme theory which involved identifying slightly different outcomes, mechanisms and contexts to those hypothesised at the start. The result is a refined programme theory that is much more useful to those responsible for implementing further programmes of work.

⁷ Van Belle, Sara & Rifkin, Susan & Marchal, Bruno. (2017). The challenge of complexity in evaluating health policies and programs: The case of women's participatory groups to improve antenatal outcomes. *BMC Health Services Research*. 17. 10.1186/s12913-017-2627-z

⁸ Marchal, B., Van Belle, S., Van Olmen, J., Hoérée, T. and Kegels, G., 2012. Is realist evaluation keeping its promise? A review of published empirical studies in the field of health systems research. *Evaluation*, 18(2), pp.192-212.

Evaluation activities

This evaluation has included a number of different data collection activities to help build a picture of how Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College developed and what they have achieved. Further detail about the different elements of data collection are below with a summary provided in Table 3. This evaluation has been delivered to SO 9001:2015, 20252:2019 and 27001:2013-standards.

Evidence review

We conducted an evidence review to understand two key aspects of this evaluation. Firstly we reviewed published evidence on the Big Picture Learning approach that had been adopted by CDC, and secondly, the Social Impact Bond (SIB) method of financing interventions. The evidence review considered the below questions:



Table 2 – Evidence review research questions

Big Picture Learning	Social Impact Bond financing
What is BPL, when, why and how did it develop?	What are SIB, how did they come about and what are they trying to achieve?
What does it involve? E.g. the 12 distinguishers see page 18	What is the Life Chances Fund and what role does it play?
What has it achieved?	What have been the positive outcomes of SIB models?
What have been the challenges and how have they been overcome?	What are the challenges of SIB models?

Outcome data provided as part of the contract

We were provided with outcome data relating to both BPD and Vega College. This data covered the period 2019 – end of December 2023 for BPD (KS3) and 2021 – end of December 2023 for Vega College KS4 (Vega College did not start operating until 2021). The data relates to the total number of outcomes achieved as opposed to outcomes per child/young person.

Random sample of attendance data (and qualification data for Vega)

In order to build a picture of the impact of BPD and Vega on outcomes such as attendance, it was agreed that CDC would identify a random sample of CYP from both settings and that their attendance data would be provided (and compared to their attendance at school). We were provided with a attendance data (and qualification data for Vega) for a sample of 9 learners at both settings.

Observation visit to BPD

In December 2023 one of the research team visited BPD to observe how the setting worked and to get a better understanding of the provision. We had arranged to do the same at Vega College, but due to a staffing crisis with the Head leaving, we were unable to do this. Based on our observation of BPD, we decided to change how we collected data with CYP (see below).

Online surveys - Online surveys were created in our Forsta software and the links were sent to relevant participants by CDC, BPD and Vega. The surveys asked participants about their experience with the alternative provision settings, including what they felt they had achieved and how. We made the surveys short (to improve participation) and allowed participants to navigate through the survey without any mandatory complete questions. No identifying details were passed to M.E.L research. All surveys were completed anonymously (apart from



email addresses for participants from the parent survey if they wished to be included in the prize draw).

Online survey - Delivery staff: 10 delivery staff completed the online survey (8 from BPD and 2 from Vega). Of those, 4 had been working at the setting for more than a year, 3 had worked there for more than 6 months but less than 12, two had worked there for more than 3 months but less than 6 and one person had worked there less than 3 months at the time of completing the survey. 7 out of 10 had worked in education prior to working for BPD/Vega.

Online survey - School stakeholders: 10 school stakeholders responded, 10 of whom had worked with BPD and 8 with Vega. 8 had worked with BPD for more than a year and 5 had worked with Vega for more than a year. For those who worked with BPD, half had contact with them every week, and for Vega it was two thirds.

Online survey - Parents/carers: 10 parents/carers completed the online survey. 8 from BPD and 2 from Vega college. Parents had the option of entering a prize draw to win one of 3 £50 online shopping vouchers. Winners were notified and provided the voucher in April 2024.

Online survey - Workplace providers (Vega College): 2 workplace providers completed the survey. Both worked with Vega for over 6 months and had contact at least once a week.

Interviews – interviews were conducted with stakeholders from CDC, BPD, Vega, LCF and BPI. Interviews were also conducted with parents/carers of children currently attending BPD and Vega. In all cases information about taking part in the evaluation was shared with potential participants directly (no information was shared with M.E.L without the participants explicit consent). Interviews with stakeholders explored their experience of the process of implementing the AP in Doncaster, the use of the SIB model and their views on what the AP has achieved for CYP. Interviews with parents explored their (and their child's) experiences of the AP and how this differed to mainstream school.



Interviews - Stakeholders: we interviewed 15 stakeholders for this evaluation. The stakeholders covered a wide range of roles including delivery staff at BPD and Vega, CDC staff (including commissioners, legal, audit, finance) and those involved in the SIB model. To protect participants' identities, we have not included job titles or employers next to quotes.

Interviews - Parents/carers: we interviewed 3 parents/carers (2 from BPD and 1 from Vega). Parents were provided with a £50 online shopping voucher to recognise their time. To protect participants' identities we have not included the setting their child attended.

In person workshops/interviews with children and young people: as mentioned earlier, we designed our approach based on our observation at BPD in December. We had initially planned an online forum to speak to CYP but we understood that this would probably not be in the best interests of CYP. We met with CDC and both providers in January 2024 and agreed to do an in-person workshop and include art as a way to keep it relaxed and enjoyable. We also agreed that having trusted adults in the room was important.



The workshop at Vega College took place in March 2023. CYP were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix A) and their parents/carers were provided with an information and consent form to be signed. CYP received a £25 shopping voucher in recognition of their time and their parents provided consent for this (and an email to send the voucher).

The approach worked slightly differently at BPD as we were advised that a group discussion would not suit their learners. We attended in April 2024 and instead of a group discussion, they spoke to a researcher one-to-one for a short time (mostly less than 10 minutes). CYP received a £25 shopping voucher in recognition of their time and their parents provided consent for this (and an email to send the voucher).

Sample of 10 Individual Learning Plans: we were provided with learning plans for 11 learners (6 from BPD and 5 from Vega). These plans related to the CYP we had met during the in-person workshops who had consented for us to see them. We have used some of the learning plans to develop case studies to show the learners’ journey.

Table 3: Summary of the evaluation activities and number of participants

Data collection approach	Number of participants
Online survey with delivery staff	10
Online survey with school stakeholders	10
Online survey with parents/carers	10
Online survey with workplace providers	2
Interviews with stakeholders	15
Interviews with parent/carers	3
In-person workshop/interviews with CYP	13

Analysis and reporting

All qualitative data, including interviews, open-text online survey responses, the workshops with CYP and the individual learning plans have been analysed thematically, with an independent review of the analysis by the project manager.

The data collected during the evaluation has been used to answer the three key research aims (and associated questions) agreed at the start. Where possible, we have used a range of data sources to evidence our findings (thereby strengthening the veracity of the findings).

However, it must be noted that this is a small-scale evaluation with relatively small numbers of parents/carers, CYP and staff being interviewed. It is important to not overgeneralise from such a small sample of participants.

Table 4 - Initial Programme Theory

The below table is the original theory of change that was hypothesised at the start of the evaluation. We used this to design the data collection methods and have produced a refined version based on the available data.

Context	Doncaster currently has high numbers of fixed term / permanent exclusions and managed moves with high rates of persistent absence and poor educational outcomes for children and young people in alternative provision. Doncaster is among the top 5 Local Authorities in the country for both high rates of fixed term exclusions and persistent absence. In addition a skills gap exists in Doncaster. There is a discontinuity between the offer of school and the level 4 skill requirement of the evolving economy. Too many students are not work-ready (Education and Skills Commission). Currently those accessing alternative provision struggle to progress in later life and due to their limited engagement in learning and the environments they grow up in, they are at higher risk of engaging in risk taking behaviours and of suffering with low self-esteem/resilience and mental health issues.
Aims	CDC is seeking to improve the outcomes for children and students, and is moving towards an inclusive education system for all children and students, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and behaviour issues, in line with the recommendations and themes identified in the Children and Young Peoples Plan 2020.
Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive Practice: Focus on removing barriers to learning for all. • Equality of opportunity. • Local provision: We believe that children and young people who have SEND or experience difficulties in accessing education should be able to grow up and be educated alongside their peers, and within their home communities. • Early intervention: We know that children and young people are better able to thrive if support is provided at an early stage when needs first arise. • Focus on preparing for adulthood: Ensure that plans and provision throughout childhood are routinely and progressively focussed on preparing children and people to lead as full as possible life as an adult. • Views of the child and family: Views of children and young people and their parents /carers must be evident at all stages in the planning, delivery and monitoring of services. • Joint working, responsibility and accountability.
Inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commissioning of Big Picture Doncaster to provide alternative provision for KS3. • Commissioning of Vega college to provide alternative provision for KS4.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Implementation of a Social Impact Bond Outcome model of commissioning with LCF and Big Issue Invest (through establishment of Big Picture Invest as a special purpose vehicle). 	
Outcomes (what do you hope to see as a result of BPD and VEGA?)	Mechanisms (what is it about BPD and Vega that leads to these outcomes?)	Contexts (what contexts might help facilitate these outcomes?)
<p>Students have increased engagement with learning (in and outside the classroom).</p>	<p>A personalised learning journey where students are encouraged to pursue topics that interest them.</p> <p>A holistic education environment that includes opportunities to engage in learning and development outside of the classroom.</p> <p>An inclusive environment where individual needs are accounted for and adaptations made.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A successful SIB model where providers are given the flexibility needed to achieve outcomes. Sufficient staff to be able to deliver the commissioned service. Effective relationships with schools to support learning in the mainstream setting. Sufficient resources to be able to respond to individual student’s needs. Effective partnerships with local workplaces who can accommodate students. Staffing - there is consistency in staffing, staff are managed well and given clear guidance on how to manage learning environments and they receive appropriate training.
<p>Students understand more about themselves and their triggers/concerns and have strategies in place to deal with them.</p>	<p>A learning environment that focuses on their overall wellbeing and provides opportunities to understand and manage their emotions.</p> <p>An inclusive environment where individual needs are accounted for and adaptations made.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students receive support with their mental health and wellbeing outside of the alternative provision. Schools are providing messaging consistent with the AP. Schools are able to provide the individual support to students when not in the AP. Staffing - there is consistency in staffing, staff are managed well and given clear guidance on how to manage learning environments and they receive appropriate training.

<p>Students feel valued and respected by staff and other learners.</p>	<p>A learning environment that focuses on their overall wellbeing and provides opportunities to understand and manage their emotions.</p> <p>A supportive environment where students are helped to feel respected and safe.</p> <p>An inclusive environment where individual needs are accounted for and adaptations made.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing - there is consistency in staffing, staff are managed well and given clear guidance on how to manage learning environments and they receive appropriate training. • Sufficient staff to be able to deliver the commissioned service. • Sufficient resources to be able to respond to individual student's needs. • Learning environments are managed effectively by staff.
<p>Parents/carers feel involved in their children's education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.</p>	<p>A partnership approach to education where parents/carers, students and the education provider work together to understand students' needs and provide the necessary support.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing - there is consistency in staffing, staff are managed well and given clear guidance on how to manage learning environments and they receive appropriate training. • Sufficient staff to be able to deliver the commissioned service. • Sufficient resources to be able to respond to individual student's needs. • Providers have the required resources to engage with parents/carers.
<p>Impact</p>	<p>Doncaster has an inclusive education system where all students feel valued and have the opportunity to reach their potential.</p>	

Evidence review

Big Picture Learning

What is BPL? Why, when, and how did it develop?

Big Picture Learning (BPL) can be best described as an innovation and movement to a new way of **student-centred learning**. Founded in the USA in 1995 by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, BPL looks beyond traditional schooling approaches and seeks to provide more personalised and engaging ways of learning catered for students.⁹ BPL emerged amidst a poorly performing public education system in the United States during the latter stages of the 20th century, where schooling practices had not changed since the 1930's and dropout rates were high and graduation rates were low, and significantly more prominent in socioeconomically deprived communities across the country.¹⁰ The movement recognised that **students are not all the same, and therefore, teaching should not approach each student in the exact same way either**. It attempts to change learning practices and environments to engage students based on their individual interests and ambitions, rather than applying a learning model where students need to adapt their interests to the current curriculum of their schools, namely in the form of standardised testing.



In the US, BPL has grown significantly over the past two decades and now currently has a network of approximately 111 schools in 27 states, of which around 90% are in urban areas.¹¹ ¹² It explores students interests *'through deeper learning—pedagogical approaches that develop students' abilities to effectively communicate, collaborate, think critically, problem-solve, and engage in self-directed learning.'*¹³ These practices are captured in BPL's 'distinguishers', which help guide the school's learning approach and achieve its aims. Rather than rigid teaching curriculums traditionally used by schools, BPL brings together students, advisors, and teachers to co-design bespoke learning experiences that make each student the priority, and which leaves room for feedback and further development.¹⁴ As described by Bradley and Hernández (2019), *'Deeper learning refers to pedagogical approaches that enable students to engage core academic content while applying their knowledge in authentic and relevant ways'*. In this form of learning, teachers use a variety of instructional approaches and assessment methods to develop student competencies related to effective communication, collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning. Deeper learning also aims to enable students to *"learn how to learn" and to develop academic mindsets that increase perseverance and productive learning behaviours.'*

⁹ Big Picture Learning. (2023). '2023 State of Network School', *Big Picture Learning*. Available at: https://www.bigpicture.org/files/ugd/10a73d_b47b45a7d4dc496fac430bbff6b31328.pdf. [Accessed 08/05/2024].

¹⁰ Big Picture Learning. Available at: <https://www.innovationunit.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Big-Picture-Brochure.pdf>. [Accessed 08/05/2024].

¹¹ Big Picture Learning. (2023). '2023 State of Network School', *Big Picture Learning*. Available at: https://www.bigpicture.org/files/ugd/10a73d_b47b45a7d4dc496fac430bbff6b31328.pdf. [Accessed 08/05/2024].

¹² Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*.

¹³ Ibid, p.2.

¹⁴ Hewlett Foundation. (2013). Deeper learning competencies. Available at: https://hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Deeper_Learning_Defined_April_2013.pdf. Cited in Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*. P.2.

BPL works around a combination of both in-school learning, where students' knowledge and skills are developed, and workplace-situated learning, where BPL schools provide real-world opportunities for their students to explore their interests and passions in an out-of-school setting alongside advisors and workplace mentors. Additionally, BPL students in the US also engage in performance assessments, which aim to go beyond typical standardised testing by asking students to show deeper and more engaged content knowledge on what interests them.¹⁵

The distinguishers

Big Picture Learning have established a series of distinguishers that separate it from other schools. These are based on three foundational principles:

*'Firstly, that learning must be based on the interests and goals of each student; secondly, that a student's curriculum must be relevant to people and places that exist in the real world; and finally, that a student's abilities must be authentically measured by the quality of his or her work.'*¹⁶

These distinguishers, or structures, enable BPL to create nurturing learning environments that focus on the students and what they are interested in and what their needs are.¹⁷ Moreover, the distinguishers are designed to be adaptive to local contexts, allowing it to be responsive to local need. Within the context of Launceston Big Picture School in Tasmania, four interrelated domains were created to contextualise the distinguishers; relational processes, collaboration, quality learning, and real world learning.¹⁸

What has it achieved?

Following the growth and expansion of BPL schools across the US and internationally there is strong empirical evidence of its success for students. For example, internal data by BPL showed that **test scores and graduation rates between four BPL schools to their respective surrounding district schools in 2014-2015 were in fact higher at the BPL schools.**¹⁹ BPL students within that internal dataset also reported 95% of its students were accepted onto two and four year institutions and 88% of those that did not enrol in college secured full-time employment shortly after graduation, 1/3 of which was facilitated by a BPL-linked mentor.²⁰ More recent data by BPL shows that students across all BPL schools in the US have an average daily attendance rate of 80% and a four-year graduation rate of 82%, often outperforming their district school counterparts.²¹ Researchers from the American Institute of Research (AIR), meanwhile, conducted a comparison study of deeper learning outcomes between BPL schools and



¹⁵ Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*.

¹⁶ Emery, S., West, M., Shelley, R., te Riele, K., Stratford, E. and Grant, O., (2020). An Evaluation of the Launceston Big Picture School: Executive Summary and Report. P.18.

¹⁷ Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Big Picture Learning. (n.d.). 2014–2015 infographic. <https://1.cdn.edl.io/ypVF5xkaVkJJo5BysE9CGMhZZPJrIPivunDRKVPRw8KYvpZo9.pdf> [Accessed 10/05/2024]

²⁰ Big Picture Learning. (n.d.). 2014–2015 infographic. <https://1.cdn.edl.io/ypVF5xkaVkJJo5BysE9CGMhZZPJrIPivunDRKVPRw8KYvpZo9.pdf> [Accessed 10/05/2024]. Cited in: Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*.

²¹ Big Picture Learning. (2023). '2023 State of Network School', *Big Picture Learning*. Available at: https://www.bigpicture.org/files/ugd/10a73d_b47b45a7d4dc496fac430bbff6b31328.pdf. [Accessed 08/05/2024].

respective district schools and discovered that BPL students outperformed their respective district school students in test scores on literacy, math, and science.²²

While traditional measures are key for judging BPL's success, it is important not to overlook the other elements of success that may come with a deeper learning approach. The Big Picture Longitudinal Study recognises the difficulty in proving traditional markers of success and instead highlights exit surveys carried out by BPL students. **The findings indicate clear patterns in the relationship between a BPL education and students' readiness for successful adult lives.**²³ For example, senior students in the study recognised that certain features of the BPL programme were most valuable in preparing them for the future, including LTIs, advisors, exhibitions, assistance with the college application process, and the opportunity to take college courses as part of their high school learning plan.²⁴ Seniors also reported that their respective school's were highly significant in providing a supportive community and encouragement to explore interests and develop personal qualities.²⁵ The study also found that 79% of students believed that their BPL high school did an 'excellent job' of enabling them to '*be able to name and follow my passions*', crediting these successes to the '*ability to define and follow one's interests*' component of the BPL philosophy, the end of high school autobiography, reflections during assessment exhibitions and learning through internships.²⁶ Zeiser et al (2014) found similar successes, such as students in BPL schools reporting higher levels of key interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, including: collaboration, motivation to learn and engage academically, and self-efficacy, compared to students at conventional schools, however these latter findings should not be considered definitive as they were not statistically significant.²⁷

What have been the challenges?

The Big Picture Learning model has come with its challenges too. For one, reports have found **difficulties in implementing the out-of-school learning element.** The evaluation of Big Launceston School in Tasmania, for example, found that building connections to establish effective and meaningful out-of-school internships was a challenge for the schools, as was data collection on these internships. This created a sense that their designed purpose was not being fully realised or understood.²⁸ The evaluation also found a **gap in communication between the school and out-of-school mentors** and issues with maintaining connections between students and mentors, as was corroborated by Bradley and Hernández's (2019) study.²⁹ Bradley and Hernández's (2019) study also identified maintaining records and tracking attendance and challenges.³⁰ This led to 'ImBlaze' being launched in spring 2017 to support internship management at network-affiliated schools. It is designed to support the management of internship placements and projects, although there is no data to corroborate this at the moment.³¹



²²Zeiser, K. L., Taylor, J., Rickles, J., Garet, M. S., & Segeritz, M. (2014). Evidence of deeper learning outcomes. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research.

²³ Arnold, K. D., Soto, E. B., Wartman, K. L., Methven, L., & Brown, P. G. (2015). Post-secondary outcomes of innovative high schools: The big picture longitudinal study.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p.15.

²⁷ Zeiser, K. L., Taylor, J., Rickles, J., Garet, M. S., & Segeritz, M. (2014). Evidence of deeper learning outcomes. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research

²⁸ Emery, S., West, M., Shelley, R., te Riele, K., Stratford, E. and Grant, O., (2020). An Evaluation of the Launceston Big Picture School: Executive Summary and Report.

²⁹ Bradley, K. and Hernández, L.E., (2019). Big Picture Learning: Spreading Relationships, Relevance, and Rigor One Student at a Time. Deeper Learning Networks Series. *Learning Policy Institute*.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Studies also found **BPL students showed difficulties with specific subjects, namely maths and English.** Arnold et al (2015), for example, found that Advisor surveys and Student Final Year Surveys showed weaknesses in mathematics and science, which it flagged as a concern when entering post-secondary school.³² The study further identified some BPL students leaving high school with potentially insufficient organisational, time management, and independent learning skills for success in post-secondary education.³³

Social Impact Bonds (SIB's)

What are they?

Social impact bonds, or SIB's, are an outcomes-based contract developed to improve outcomes for social and public policy areas that typically face challenges. It is often regarded as a 'partnership' to improve the outcomes for a specific group of people, such as disadvantaged kids.³⁴ As stated by Carter et al (2018), SIB's typically feature three key partners: a commissioner, a service provider, and an independent investor.³⁵ *'The commissioner is typically a central or local government organisation; service providers are often – though not always – from the VCSE sector; and the independent investors can be mainstream, socially motivated, and/or charitable.'*³⁶ Crucially, repayment to investors in SIB's are dependent on whether the stated outcomes are achieved, thus providing financial protection for the service users.³⁷



The UK make up a large proportion of SIB's in the world, with an estimate of around 68 UK-based SIB's in 2019 and similar numbers for the rest of the world combined.³⁸ The first SIB to be implemented was at Peterborough prison in 2010 amidst sentiments that there was a lack of innovation and entrepreneurship in the public sector. They have since been used for education, employment and training, homelessness, and at-risk children and young people - to achieve better social outcomes.³⁹

What is the LCF and what role does it play in SIBs?

The Life Chances Fund was established by central government to improve the lives of groups and individuals in British society and to lead them towards happy and productive lives. The programme involves a top-up fund with contracts that are locally commissioned and seek to tackle key societal issues.⁴⁰ The fund relates to SIB's through its seven objectives: 'increase the number and scale of SIBs in England; make it easier and quicker to set up a SIB; generate public sector efficiencies by delivering

³² Arnold, K. D., Soto, E. B., Wartman, K. L., Methven, L., & Brown, P. G. (2015). Post-secondary outcomes of innovative high schools: The big picture longitudinal study.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T. and Airoidi, M. (2018). Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation. *Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government.*

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, p.8.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wooldridge, R., Stanworth, N. and Ronicle, J. (2019). A study into the challenges and benefits of commissioning Social Impact Bonds in the UK, and the potential for replication and scaling: Final Report. *Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sports.*

³⁹ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T. and Airoidi, M. (2018). Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation. *Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government.*

⁴⁰ ICF Consulting Services (2021). Process Evaluation for the Life Chances Fund. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60ae2e928fa8f520bec37357/Life_Chances_Fund_Process_Evaluation_accessible.pdf

better outcomes and understand how cashable savings are; increase social innovation and build a clear evidence base for what works; increase the amount of capital available to voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) providers to help them compete for public sector contracts; provide better evidence on the effectiveness of the SIB approach and resulting savings; and grow the scale of the social investment market.⁴¹ The LCF is led by the Department for Culture Media and Sport and managed by The National Lottery Community Fund, operating from 2016 to 2025.

What have been the positive outcomes associated with these models?

SIB's were initially set up to push innovation and create positive outcomes for the public sector. Some evaluations provide evidence of this.. For example, an evaluation of care leavers by Davey et al (2023) state that 'providers mostly observed that the SIB structure did have a positive impact on delivery and outcomes due to the explicit focus on achieving outcomes and a greater scrutiny of performance'. Providers also argued that **the programme led to better results than conventional programmes**, albeit acknowledging the limited empirical evidence of this.⁴² Meanwhile, Fraser et al (2018), in relation to an evaluation related to health and social care, found that SIB's 'appeared to encourage a stronger emphasis on demonstrating results than comparable non-SIB services', but also acknowledged the limitations in confirming such a conclusion on a larger scale.⁴³ The study also highlighted positive signs of collaboration, stating, '*The Trailblazers demonstrate that SIBs can encourage collaborative approaches to the design of interventions (bringing together providers and commissioners alongside new actors such as investors and SIB specialist organisations) and seem well-suited to funding interventions that deliver highly individualised support.*'⁴⁴



What have been the challenges?

The **lack of quantitative data** can be seen as the most obvious issue when attempting to prove the practical success and benefits of SIB's. At this moment in time there is **no conclusive evidence on costs of outcomes from SIB's that show its success outright.**⁴⁵

Beyond the lack of data, a key challenge faced by SIB's are the costs and complexity associated with setting up and running them.⁴⁶ Once set up and running, there have been sentiments that it takes time for stakeholders to get up to speed and to explain the model to others, slowing down the progress of the SIB and any intended outcomes from being achieved. Davey et al (2023) found that there was **a relatively steep learning curve for stakeholders**, and also challenges related to understanding roles and responsibilities within the SIB model.⁴⁷ The OECD report (2016)



⁴¹ Ibid, p.i.

⁴² Davey, C., Elsby, A., Erskine, C., Hill-Newell, M., Monk, L., Palmer, H., Smith, R., Whitley, J., Williams, M., N., Baker, C., (2023). Evaluation of the Care Leavers Social Impact Bond (SIB) programme, p.12. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b14dac07d4b8000d3472ea/Evaluation_of_the_Care_Leavers_Social_Impact_Bond_SIB_programme.pdf

⁴³ Fraser, A., Tan, S., Kruithof, K., Sim, M., Disley, E., Giacomantonio, C., Lagarde, M. and Mays, N., (2018). Evaluation of the social impact bond Trailblazers in health and social care final report.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.18.

⁴⁵ Fraser, A., Tan, S., Kruithof, K., Sim, M., Disley, E., Giacomantonio, C., Lagarde, M. and Mays, N., (2018). Evaluation of the social impact bond Trailblazers in health and social care final report.

⁴⁶ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T. and Airoidi, M. (2018). Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation. *Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government.*

⁴⁷ Davey, C., Elsby, A., Erskine, C., Hill-Newell, M., Monk, L., Palmer, H., Smith, R., Whitley, J., Williams, M., N., Baker, C., (2023). Evaluation of the Care Leavers Social Impact Bond (SIB) programme, p.12. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/64b14dac07d4b8000d3472ea/Evaluation_of_the_Care_Leavers_Social_Impact_Bond_SIB_programme.pdf

summarised this challenge appropriately, stating, '*deciding on technical aspects without previous experience and adopting a learning-by- doing approach is a time consuming endeavour, which may also entail financial costs.*'⁴⁸

Lastly, SIB's are seen by some as **in conflict with the values of the social and public sectors**, with Carter et al (2018) highlighting that it is seen by detractors 'as the worst expression of managerialism and financialisation of public services', but acknowledges that this ideological standpoint is not helpful for commissioning public services.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ OECD. (2016). Understanding Social Impact Bonds, p.16. Available at: <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/UnderstandingSIBsLux-WorkingPaper.pdf>

⁴⁹ Carter, E., FitzGerald, C., Dixon, R., Economy, C., Hameed, T. and Airoidi, M. (2018). Building the tools for public services to secure better outcomes: Collaboration, Prevention, Innovation. *Government Outcomes Lab, University of Oxford, Blavatnik School of Government*, p.23.

Evaluation Findings

Aim 1 - The impact of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College



Key findings

- Big Picture Doncaster (BPD) and Vega College have; helped children and young people (CYP) to improve their engagement in learning; helped CYP to understand more about themselves and their triggers and have strategies in place to address them and; helped parents/carers feel involved in their child's education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.
- BPD and Vega College have also improved the proportion of outcomes achieved with CYP year on year, demonstrating improved efficacy.
- 5 key mechanisms were identified that helped in achieving the above outcomes: a personalised learning experience; commitment to lifelong learning; inclusive, supportive and non-judgemental approach; a focus on mental health and wellbeing and a partnership approach to education.
- A number of contextual issues were identified that were seen to limit the success of BPD and Vega College; a lack of referrals; problematic outcome measures; lack of communication with schools; staff changes and sometimes a lack of engagement with parents/carers. However, the research identified that many of these issues had been successfully addressed, or there were plans in place to address them.

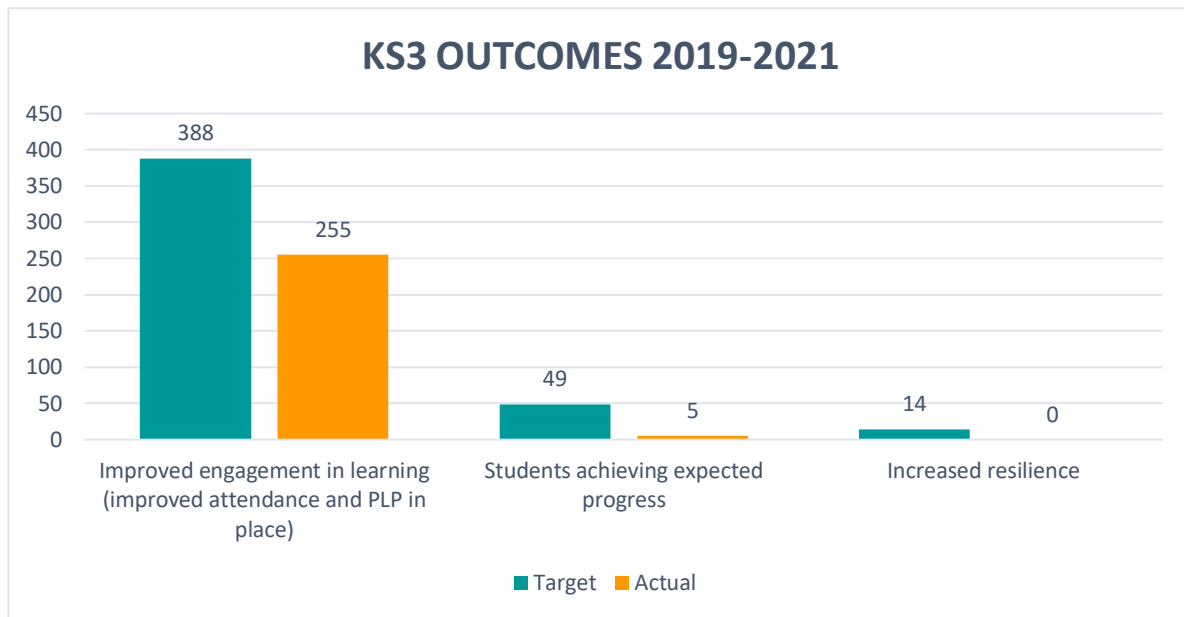
Outcome 1 – Students have increased engagement with learning (in and outside the classroom).

Big Picture Doncaster outcome data

BPD has worked with 411 children since the project began⁵⁰. When the provision first started (as the Big Picture School in 2019), it met **58% of its target outcomes overall** (Graph 1). While it achieved 100% of its target for 'students achieving expected progress', it struggled to meet two thirds of its target for 'improved engagement in learning' (measured through improved attendance and having a PLP in place within 4 weeks) and failed to meet any of its targets for 'increased resilience (it is not possible to know why this may have been the case as the original team are no longer in place).

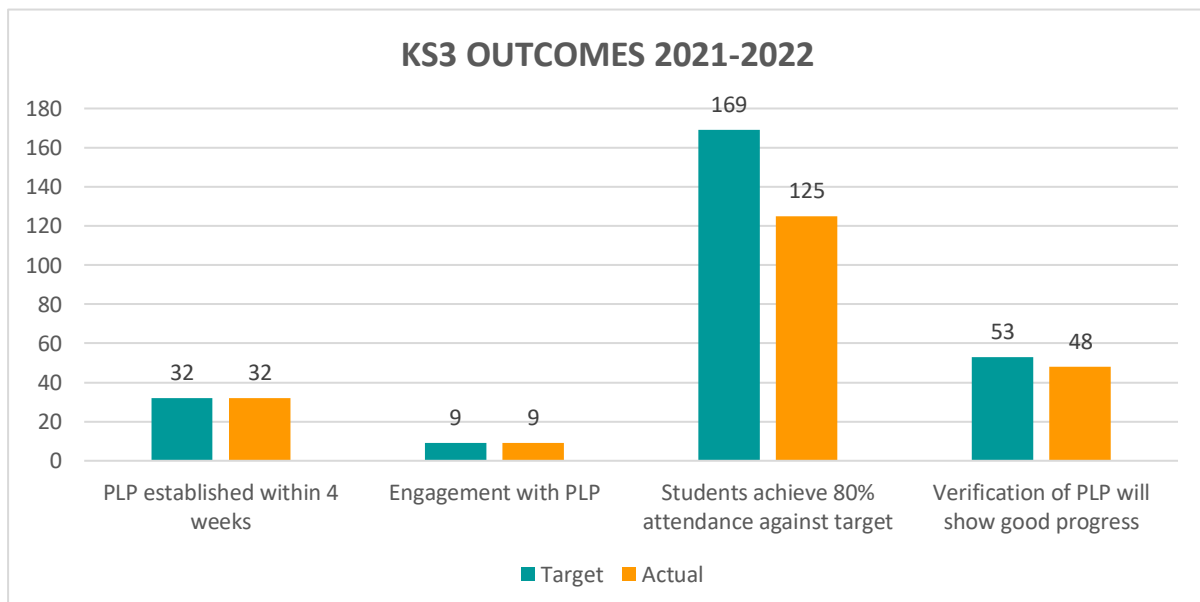
⁵⁰ From January 2019 – End of March 2024

Graph 1 – KS3 Outcomes 2019-2021



As the changes to BPD took place with a new structure and management team (starting in October 2020), in the next period, the proportion of outcomes met increased substantially (Graph 2). **During 2021/2022, BPD achieved 81% of its outcome targets overall.** It achieved all of its targets in respect of establishing a PLP within 4 weeks and student engagement with the PLP. Student attendance was met in 74% of cases and PLPs showing ‘good’ progress towards agreed outcomes was met in just over 90% of cases. These figures demonstrate that the changes made to the structure and management of BPD were effective in improving student outcomes.

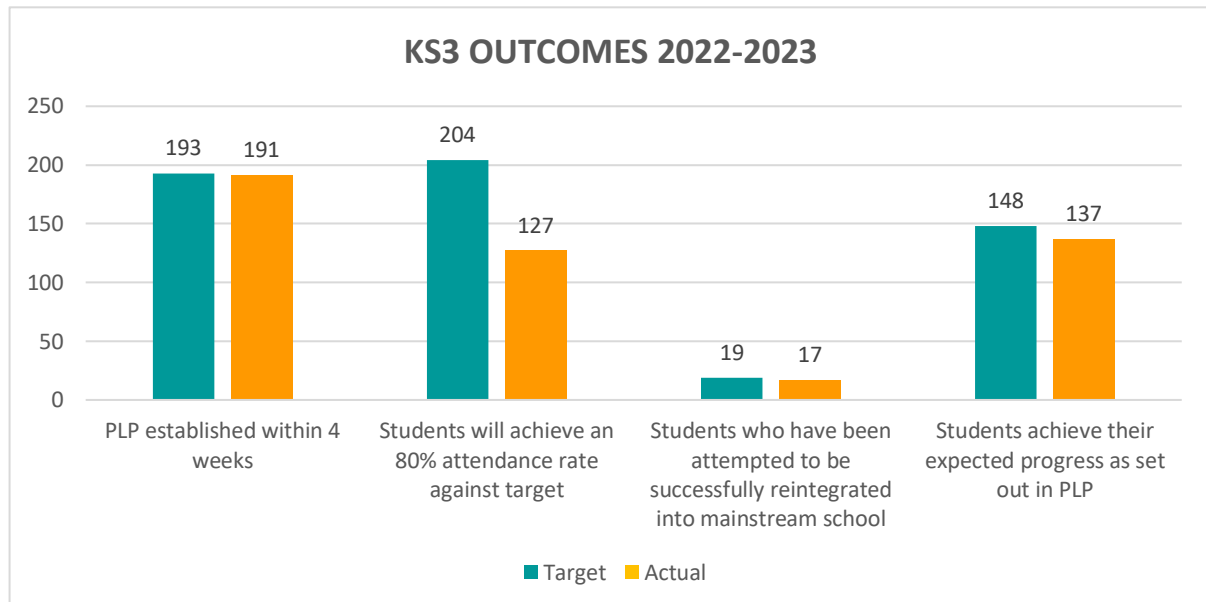
Graph 2 – KS3 Outcomes 2021-2022



As we move into **the most recent year of reporting in Graph 3, BPD achieved 84% of its outcome targets overall.** The nature of the outcomes changed slightly at this time to include a measure on successful reintegration into mainstream school, with BPD achieving 89% of its target. As with the

previous year, student attendance was achieved at a lower rate than the other outcomes (62%) but there was an increase in students showing ‘good’ progress against their objectives with this target being met in 93% of cases.

Graph 3 – KS3 Outcomes 2022-2023



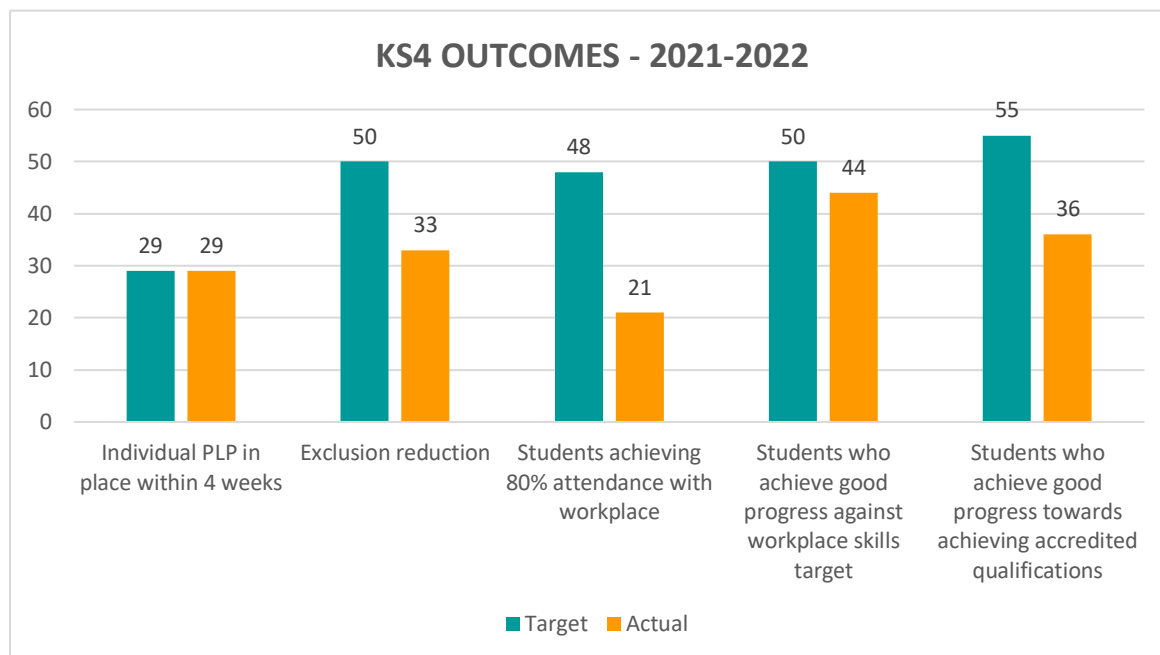
Overall, the above data demonstrates **the increasing rate at which BPD have been able to meet outcomes for CYP over the course of the programme**. Student attendance has remained problematic, with this outcome target the least likely to be achieved, yet this is also the outcome that is most impacted by factors outside of BPD’s control – including home life and transportation issues (as discussed in the contexts section of this report).

Vega College outcome data

Since the start of the project, Vega has worked with 120 CYP⁵¹. During its first year of operation it managed to achieve **78% of its target outcomes** (Graph 4). Vega has different outcomes to BPD due to the focus on workplace activity and qualification achievement. As with BPD, Vega struggled with attendance, meeting just 44% of its target, yet the other targets were achieved in at least 65% of cases.

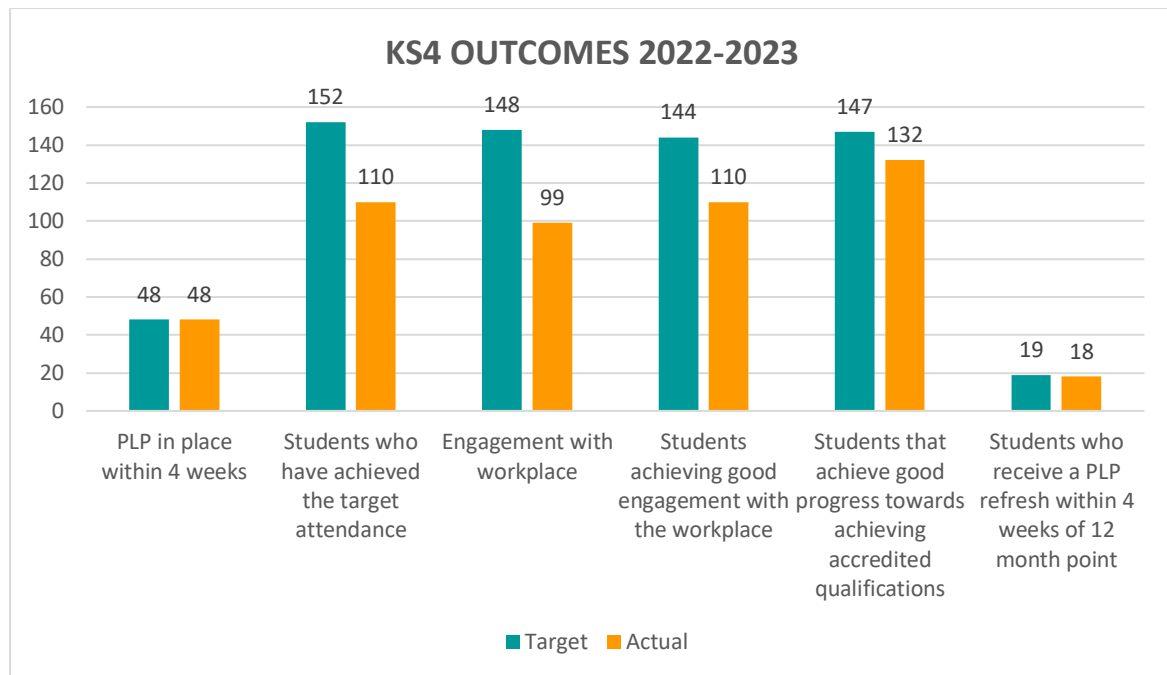
⁵¹ From January 2021 – End of March 2024

Graph 4 – KS4 Outcomes 2021-22



As we move into the second year of operation at Vega (Graph 5 below), **the percentage of target outcomes achieved increased to 79%**. A new outcome was introduced at this point regarding engagement with the workplace. Attendance increased during this year to 72% as did students achieving good progress towards accredited qualifications, with 90% of the outcomes being achieved. These figures demonstrate **substantial progress made by Vega College to meeting its outcome targets** between the first and second year, and also highlights that students were achieving improved engagement in learning – both in and out of the classroom.

Graph 5 – KS4 Outcomes 2022-2023



Improved attendance

Additional attendance data⁵² for BPD demonstrates **the total average attendance rate was 86.38% compared to a school attendance rate of 71.27%** suggesting that overall, students were more likely to attend BPD than school. Of the 9 learners randomly selected, attendance was higher at BPD for 5 of them, with one remaining the same and 3 having slightly lower attendance at BPD than school (Table 5). However, there were contextual factors such as bereavement and hospitalisation in those cases where attendance at BPP dropped slightly.

⁵² In addition to the outcome data provided to us by CDC, we were also provided with attendance data for a random sample of 9 students from each setting. The students were selected at random by CDC and BPD and Vega College were asked to provide both the school attendance data (at point of referral) and the attendance data for students while at their setting.

Table 5 – Student attendance - BPD

Learner	School attendance	BPD attendance
1	58.8%	72.25%
2	100%	97.25%
3	100%	100%
4	0	75.25%
5	75%	75.75
6	58.2%	91.75%
7	97.4%	95.25%
8	68.1%	100%
9	84%	70%
Total average	71.27%	86.38%

(Green demonstrates a higher attendance at the AP compared to school, grey is lower and orange is the same).

Attendance at Vega was just under 90%, compared to an average school attendance rate of 60.16%. All of the students selected demonstrated an increase in attendance at Vega compared to school. It must be noted that students attend Vega for a much longer period of time that BPD which means that average attendance is likely to be higher overall, yet 4 of the 9 students had a 100% attendance rate.

Table 6 – Student attendance – Vega College

Learner	School attendance	Vega attendance
1	73%	100%
2	28%	69%
3	74%	78.5%
4	28.2%	81.8%
5	86.7%	100%
6	78.6%	100%
7	41%	78%
8	71%	95%
9	61%	100%
Total average	60.16%	89.14%

Vega College qualification data

Average predicted GCSE grades for students in each subject were higher at Vega than those predicted by school⁵³. Furthermore, out of the 27 grades recorded, 21 (78%) improved from school to Vega, with none of the students predicted a poorer grade at Vega than was predicted by school. These figures, while only a small sample, demonstrate the potential impact of students' increased engagement in learning while attending Vega College.

Table 7 – Predicted GCSE grades for School and Vega College

	Maths		English		Science	
	School grades	Vega grades	School grades	Vega grades	School grades	Vega grades
Learner 1	4	4	1	4	2	4
Learner 2	0	3	0	3	0	3
Learner 3	3	3	3	4	3	4
Learner 4	1	3	3	3	0	3
Learner 5	3	4	4	4	4	5
Learner 6	0	3	0	3	0	4
Learner 7	3	3	2	3	3	3
Learner 8	0	3	0	2	0	2
Learner 9	3	7	4.5	6	U	6
Average grades	1.88	3.66	1.94	3.66	1.33	3.77

(Green cells represent an improvement in the predicted grade at Vega compared to school, while orange is the same).

College places applied for or accepted on

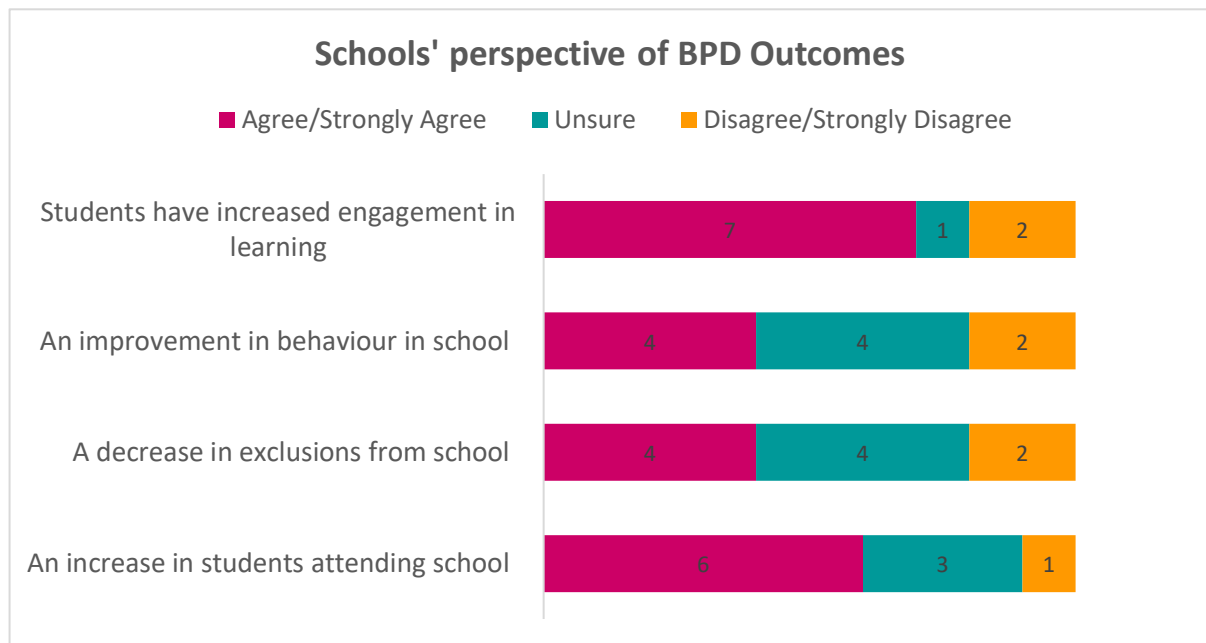
Directly leading on from the qualification data, we were able to see evidence of 'improved engagement in learning' when we met with 7 young people who attended Vega College. Of the 7 students we spoke to, **5 had secured college places for next year.** Courses included Art and Design, Music, Childcare, Bricklaying and Plumbing.

The perspective of school stakeholders

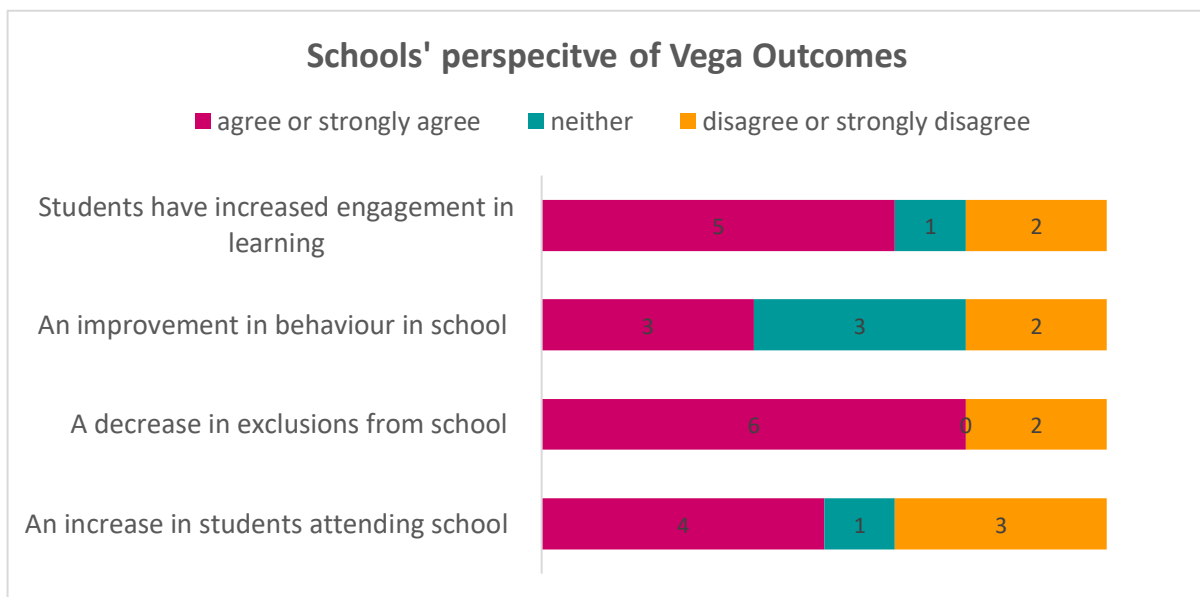
Most school stakeholders (7 out of 10) felt **students who attended BPD demonstrated increased engagement with learning**, while 6 out of 10 felt students' attendance had increased (Graph 6). For Vega, **5 out of 8 described increased engagement in learning**, while 6 out of 8 described a decrease in exclusions from school. For both settings there was less consensus about the impact of attending the AP on behaviour *within* school. Qualitative comments described the settings as helping students to be successful in mainstream education and helping to prevent exclusions, while another commented that **students were more engaged and had a better idea of their future.**

⁵³ As Vega College work with students to undertake some of their GCSEs, they were able to provide predicted qualification data for the 9 students selected by CDC.

Graph 6 – School stakeholders perspectives of BPD outcomes (n=10)



Graph 7 – School stakeholders perspectives of Vega outcomes (n=8)



Yet it is important to note that not all school stakeholders described positive outcomes for the students they had worked with. One participant notes that this approach doesn't work for all students:

It has worked well for some students as they are more settled during their time at school. Unfortunately it has not had this impact on all students. This could be down to attendance or lack of willingness to engage with the support. Some students would also have benefitted from more time.

It was also noted that different rules and expectations for students between the alternative provision and school is difficult for some student to adapt to. Overall however, the different approach taken at BPD and Vega (compared to school) was mostly seen as a positive.

Summary

From the evidence presented above, it is clear that **both BPD and Vega have achieved key outcomes for their students, and this has improved year on year for both settings.** A high proportion of the children in Doncaster who attended the alternative provision have had personalised learning plans and made 'good' progress on them. In addition, data at both settings suggests attendance is higher at BPD and Vega compared to school. These positive outcomes are largely reinforced by the school stakeholders who completed our survey, who similarly report improved engagement in learning. That said, it is noted that the provision does not work for all children, and as will be seen in section 3, there are numerous challenges faced by both settings (largely outside of their control) in working towards this outcome.

Case study 1 – Taylor* Big Picture Doncaster



Taylor * pseudonym

Big Picture Doncaster

X START DATE OF PLACEMENT: 09/01/2024

Barriers to learning (from referral)

Taylor often feels overwhelmed in a classroom setting with others around, requires more time than usual to process information and benefits from learning in smaller chunks. She is easily influenced by her peers

Desired outcomes

Taylor hopes to transition back into mainstream school by adjusting her attendance.

Parent/carer Perspective

Taylor's parent/carer approves of this learning approach for Taylor. She is concerned due to previous issues with her transitioning back to mainstream education.

What's Going Well

Taylor is building positive relationships with other learners and making better choices by listening to them. She has completed some PSHE work and added more detail when asked. She has started project work and completed it. Additionally, she is reflecting on her behavior both at school and home, and exploring coping strategies and brain breaks when at school.



X ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT: 100%



Outcome 2 - Students understand more about themselves and their triggers/concerns and have strategies in place to deal with them.

Not only do BPD and Vega aim to support students to engage in learning, they also work to help students understand more about themselves and have strategies in place to deal with their triggers/concerns. We found evidence that this outcome is being achieved from a number of different sources.



Parent's perspectives

Parents/carers told us how their child's understanding of themselves had improved as a result of attending BPD and Vega:

BPD massively improved my sons mindset and has improved his relationship with school and learning and also our own relationship.

He has learnt to control his temper also to be aware of other people's feelings.

He is now in a better place. He has changed in his attitude to school.

My child was more confident, less stressed and nervous.

This was also reflected in interviews with parents/carers who described the improvements they had witnessed in their child's behaviour:

They [Big Picture] have given him some tools to manage his feelings, and he's taken them with him to [Name of school] so that's had a lasting impact on him.

It's been a place for [Jamie] to go, to be himself and thrive, and he's just blossoming into a really, really lovely young lad. And in the last few months that boy has changed so much.*

He's spent a lot of time with staff at Big Picture one to one and they've helped him manage his feeling and behaviour and how to deal with things.

The above quotes suggest these parents/carers had seen a **considerable improvement in their child's behaviour and approach to school as a result of attending the alternative provision.**

School stakeholder's perspectives

School stakeholders similarly commented on the impact of attending BPD and Vega on students' ability to deal with triggers and manage their response to difficult situations:

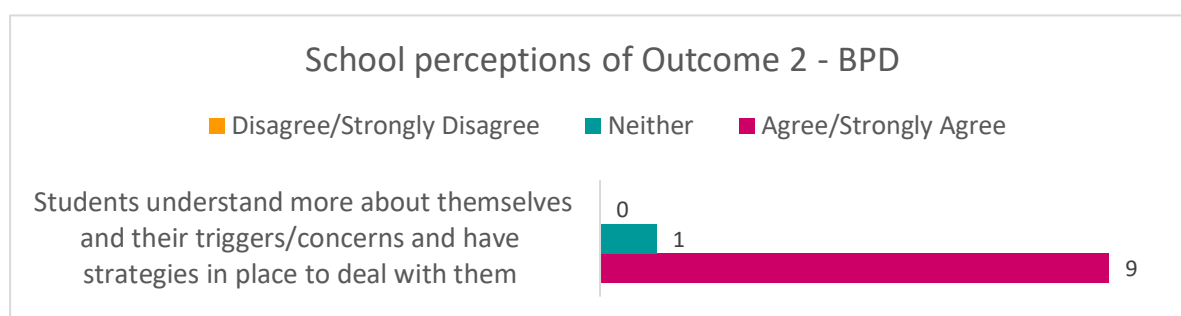
Students learn strategies that are then applied when they return to mainstream.

They are able to unpick behavioural issues with the students and help them understand the impact of their behaviours and work on how to respond differently to the situation.

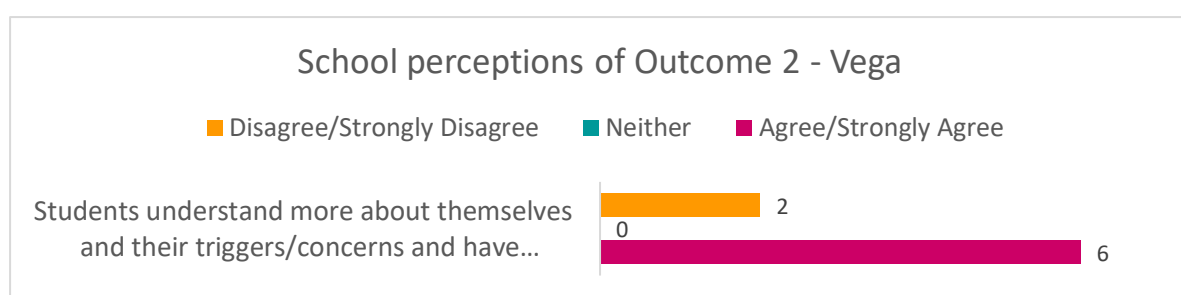
Their attitudes to learning and confidence is growing and their ability to self-regulate has increased. They enjoy and look forward to attending, they have grown friendship groups and they have developed a sense of belonging.

These comments were reflected in the number of school stakeholders who felt that attending BPD and Vega had helped students understand more about themselves and put in place strategies to deal with triggers.

Graph 8 – School stakeholders perceptions of Outcome 2 - BPD (n=10)



Graph 9 – School stakeholders perceptions of Outcome 2 – Vega (n=8)



As with feedback from parents/carers, these findings suggest that the impact of attending BPD and Vega extends beyond the alternative provision and supports students to cope with mainstream education.

Students' perspectives

Importantly, it was not just parents and teachers who identified changes in how students understood themselves and managed their triggers, it was CYP themselves who identified this outcome.

Vega students identified a number of changes in this respect. Two commented on the fact they **could now control their anger, with one reflecting that he used to 'kick off more at school', but that he felt he could control his anger better at Vega**. Two students also commented on the fact that life outside of school is now easier and they feel 'more chilled out'. This reflects some of the comments from parents described earlier, who described better relationships as a result of their child attending the alternative provision. In addition, one student commented that they felt 'a lot less stressed' than at school and that coming to Vega helped him focus in lesson when he is back in school.

For the CYP at BPD, many of the same themes were discussed. **Students reflected on the fact their behaviour had improved, they had learnt to control their anger and they were able to concentrate better**. Some of the girls we spoke to commented that they had developed self-confidence and that talking to people at BPD had helped them to open up. One student noticed that she was able to build better relationship as a result of attending BPD, particularly learning how to speak to teachers about how she is feeling when she is back at school. As a result of doing this, she is now attending more lessons and is no longer being placed in isolation for disrupting lessons.

Summary

From the evidence presented above, **it is clear that CYP at both BPD and Vega have begun to understand more about themselves and their triggers and have plans in place to address them**. This outcome has been noted by parents, schools and CYP themselves. The wider impact of this outcome

has been improved relationships for CYP, with both parents and teachers. Given the challenges students referred to BPD and Vega face in engaging with mainstream education, achieving this outcome has the potential to improve their long-term educational outcomes.

Case study 2 –Amara* Vega College



Amara * pseudonym

Vega College Doncaster

X START DATE OF PLACEMENT: 28/06/2022

Learner's interests:

Socialising with friends, shopping and music lessons.

Qualifications / credits achieved achieved while at Vega

Working towards completing AQA

Certificates in:

1. Forensic Psychology
2. Health and Social Care Life Stages
3. Health and Social Care (Unit 5)
4. Health and Social Care (Unit 3)
5. ASDAN Short Course credit PSHE Respectful Relationships
6. Designing, Making and Decorating a Clay Model
7. Multi-Sensory Introduction to Britain at War
8. Basic Fire Lighting
9. Making a Den
10. Work Experience at a local Mosque

Summary Of Progress

Amara is making substantial strides both socially and academically, her attendance challenges on non-Vega days (2 of 5) underscore the pivotal role Vega plays in her educational journey.

Parental Perspective

Amara is thriving in Vega's smaller group settings, experiencing a boost in confidence, evident from improved attendance and a newfound ease in morning motivation for school. Despite ongoing struggles with mental health, she and her parents both appreciate how Vega's communication style effectively alleviates anxiety, with her parents noting a gradual improvement in her overall anxiety levels.



X ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT:
October to Dec 2022 - 100%
January to Mar 2023 - 97%
September to Dec 2023 - 79%



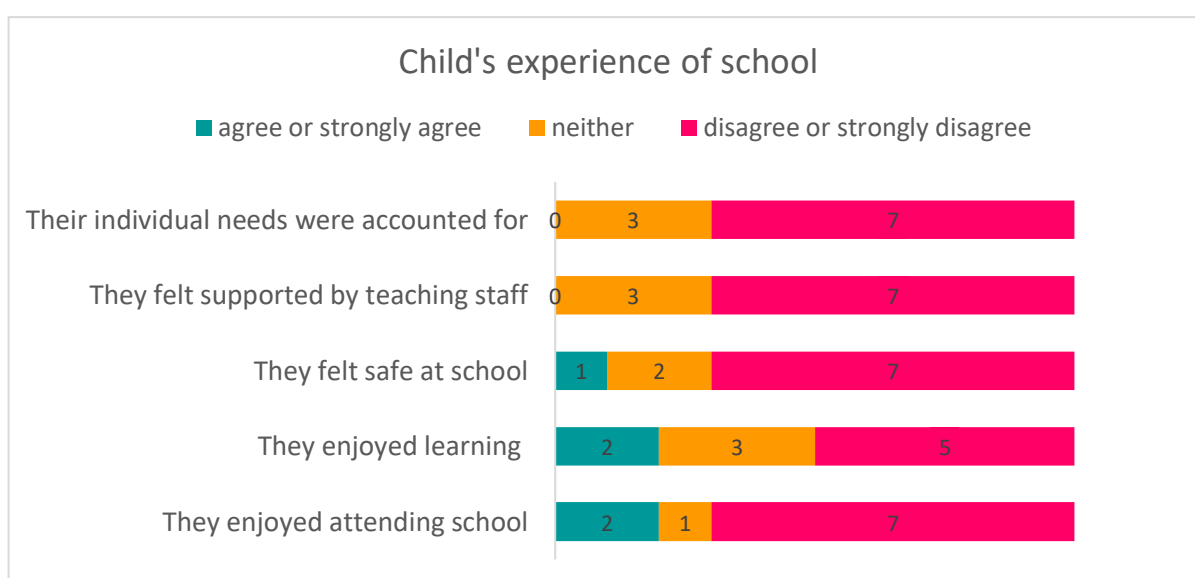
Outcome 3 - Parents/carers feel involved in their children’s education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.

One of the key principles of BPD and Vega is the importance of working with parents/carers to offer the best support to children. It is therefore a key outcome of both projects for parents/carers to feel involved in their child’s education and to have a positive experience with a learning provider.

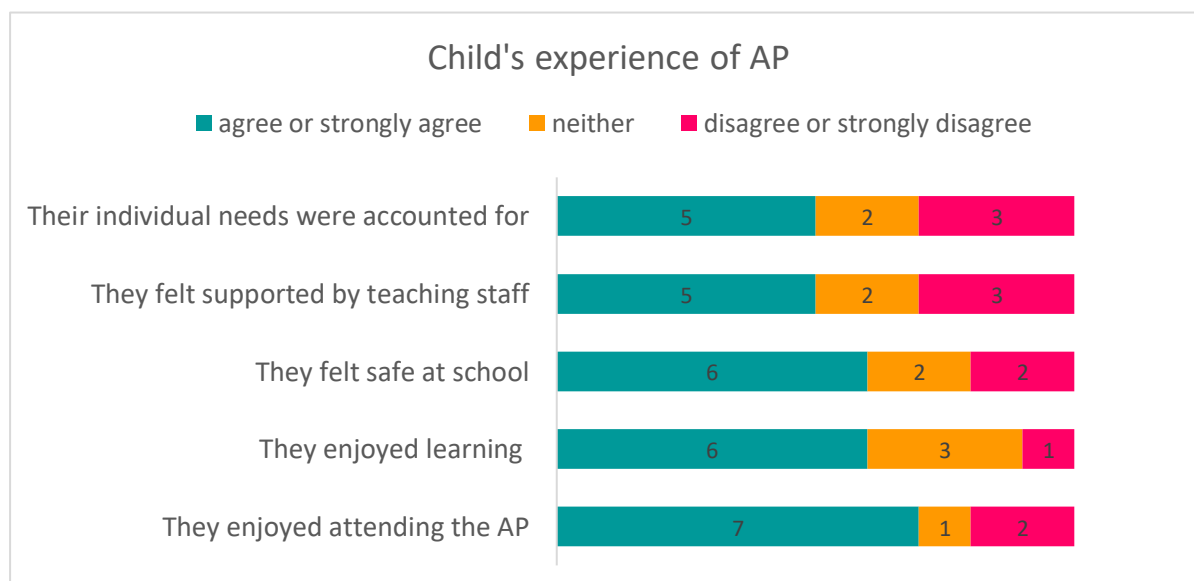


We asked participants how their child experienced mainstream school and also how they experienced BPD and Vega. Parents rated their child’s experience of the alternative provision more highly compared to their experience of school (Graphs 10 and 11).

Graph 10 – Parents perspectives of child’s experience of school (n=10)



Graph 11 - Parents perspectives of child’s experience of AP (n=10)



We asked parents how involved they felt at school compared to Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College. Interestingly, there was very little difference between the two, with 8 parents feeling somewhat or very involved with their child's education through school, compared to 9 feeling that way about the alternative provision. This perhaps reflects that fact that schools need work closely with parents in our sample given the issues they are experiencing.

We also wanted to know if parents felt that attending the setting had had a lasting impact on their child. Of the 10 responses, 7 felt there had been a positive lasting impact, 2 felt there was no lasting impact and 1 felt there was a lasting negative impact. When explaining why they felt there was no lasting impact, one of the parents explained:

While attending my child was doing amazing. Sadly the placement wasn't long enough and as soon as she was placed back into a school setting things took a turn for the worse.

This is an issue we return to when exploring the contexts that have been challenging for both settings. For the parent who felt it had had a lasting negative impact on their child, this was explained further:

The whole experience was about pressuring her into attending regularly and moving her on the school. We were led to believe it was to follow her needs which it did not. They gave her more anxiety, a negative experience and made her distrust professionals even more.

While this parents experience was in the minority, it is important to note, as had been mentioned already, that not all children will respond to the alternative provision in the same way and that for some, a different approach may be needed. This relates to the appropriateness of referrals and is an issue we return to later in the report.

Finally, we asked parents if their child's overall experience of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College had been positive or negative. **For 8 of the 10 parents who completed the survey, it was a positive experience.** As two parents explain:

I would like to say what a wonderful place it is. I am so glad to know that BPD exists and long may it continue. If it didn't exist I dread the thought as to what could have happened to my son. He is a much better person and it is in part down to the work they put in. I would like to thank each and every one of them that helped put my boy back on track to reach his goals.

Vega has provided a space where our child can return into some learning environment and to become part of a community again.

Yet, as already mentioned, this was not all parents experience. When explaining why their experience had been negative, the length of the provision was referred to:

Placement is not long enough. It's not applicable now but if they did a full time setting in my opinion more children would flourish and enjoy attending a school setting like BPD.

As noted, this is a recurring theme and something we return to later.

Summary

From the above analysis, the **majority of parents/carers we spoke to felt involved in their child's education and described it as being a positive experience.** For most parents, attending the alternative provision had been transformative for their child, while for a minority, it had not. For those parents who did not feel it had been a positive experience, the length of the provision and focus on reintegration to school had been barriers. This potentially relates to the appropriateness of referrals

into BPD and Vega (an issue we return to later). Despite this, the majority of parents felt their child enjoyed learning, enjoyed attending, felt safer and felt supported by teaching staff to a higher degree in the AP compared to school. While this data is based on a small sample, it suggests both settings have been able to build positive relationships with parents/carers.

Case study 3 – Olivia* Big Picture Doncaster



Olivia * pseudonym

Big Picture Doncaster

X **START DATE OF PLACEMENT:** 29/01/2024

Barriers to learning (at referral)

Olivia can mask her feeling and communicates to staff that she is ok when she is not. Olivia struggles with group discussions and joining in. She has difficulty building positive relationships with others and is struggling with attendance.

Desired outcomes

Olivia wants to feel confident in her environment,
Better understand her invasive thoughts
And build back relationships with her friendship group.

Parent/carer Perspective

Olivia's parents loved the provision.

What's Going Well

With increased participation in sessions, accessing the full timetable, and actively engaging in small games with fellow learners, Olivia has begun to forge positive relationships with staff, delve into PSHE work, initiate a project, reflect on her anxieties, and even participate in leaving to learn sessions.

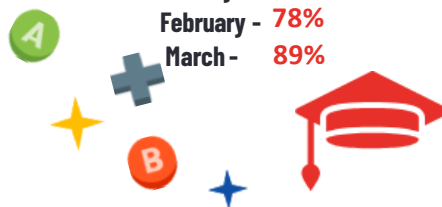


X **ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT:**

January - 100%

February - 78%

March - 89%



How have these outcomes been achieved? (mechanisms)



A key feature of this evaluation was to not only understand what BPD and Vega have achieved to date, but also to understand how they achieved these outcomes. This is particularly important in a programme such as this because if the positive outcomes described above are to continue, it is necessary to understand what it is about Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College and how they work that leads to this. We had initially hypothesised 6 potential mechanisms that might help explain how the key outcomes of the project would be achieved. Having analysed the available data, including interviews and surveys with stakeholders, delivery staff, parents/carers and speaking to CYP themselves, we have found clear evidence of 5 key mechanisms that explain how the above outcomes were achieved.

Mechanism 1 - A personalised learning journey.

Delivery staff explained that a **personalised approach to learning was a key mechanism leading to the outcomes described above**. This is perhaps not surprising given the focus on individualised learning that characterises the Big Picture Learning philosophy. Survey responses from delivery staff demonstrate flexibility and understanding, aiming to empower learners by addressing their unique challenges and helping them take charge of their learning journey. Participants described that through personalised interventions and personal interest projects, learners develop self-belief and transferable skills, with a focus on meeting them where they are rather than expecting them to conform to traditional teaching methods. It was felt that the tailored approach ensures that each learner's voice is heard and respected, fostering a supportive environment conducive to success, even during challenging moments. Similarly, understanding each learner's difficulties was seen to support the implementation of effective strategies to support their progress.

As some of the delivery staff explained:

At BPD we find the learner, find their issues, and support them to learn how to push through and take charge of their learning.

At BPD you have to find the learner where they are - whereas in school the learners have to find the teacher.

The days are tailored to individual needs and everyone's voice is heard and respected, even during times of anger and frustration as most of the children at Vega have IEP's and can struggle to regulate from time to time.

It is important to understand the learners individually and the difficulties they may face at certain times. This allows adults in the room to determine which approach is needed in order to help them succeed.

The importance of the personalised approach taken by BPD and Vega was reiterated by the school stakeholders who commented on the individualised and flexible approach:

The flexibility exhibited by Big Picture Doncaster in tailoring interventions to meet the diverse needs of each student has been great.

1 to 1 work and students enjoy their time there. They are treated as individuals.

Similarly, parents/carers who took part in interviews also reflected on the value of this for their child's progress:

How understanding they are with the children, how well they cater for the children's needs and realise how they are all different. Like when we sat down at the induction, she really got to know [Oliver] which was brilliant.*

Mechanism 2 – Facilitating Lifelong Learning.

We found evidence of this mechanism through the survey with delivery staff and speaking to CYP. It was clear from comments made by those delivering the alternative provision in both settings, that they work to inspire CYP to see the long-term approach to learning, beyond the school environment. Comments suggested that in order to improve students engagement with learning, **staff worked hard to nurture a love of learning and develop skills that would last well into adulthood.**

Big Picture wants to develop young people's skills to become lifelong learners, by enabling them to see 'who' they are and believe in themselves and what they are capable of achieving, undoing their limiting core beliefs and guiding them to be solvers of the problems they see - one learner at a time.

Vega offers core subjects and access to work placements in order to prepare learners for their future and the workplace.

Relevance is an additional principle that is exceedingly important to BPD. Relevance helps the learners to engage with their work and apply the skills they have learnt to real-life situations.

Learners returning to school with improved attendance and a better attitude to their school. There are life lessons/messages that they can take away from BPD that may not apply yet, but that they can remember as they move through their lifelong learning journey.

This approach to learning was commented on by some of the parents/carers we interviewed who felt it had worked well for their child:

The best thing is that he's been able to do more hands-on things and more one to one as well.

She enjoyed it [building her model] at the start. They gave her lots of apparatus to build it and so she was quite enjoying that.

When speaking to CYP, we discovered that they also really valued this approach. **Many of the students from BPD told us about their projects and how they enjoyed the 'hands on' activities.** We also saw many of the creative projects students had created and the time and effort they had invested in them. When we spoke to students at Vega, **they were enthusiastic about their work-placements, describing a range of placements from construction sites, café's, a hair salon and a Guinea Pig sanctuary.** Vega students also spoke of the support they received in completing college applications, the impact of which can be seen in the fact 5 of the 7 students we spoke to had secured college placements for September 2024.

Mechanism 3 – A supportive, nurturing and inclusive environment.

We found evidence of this mechanism from a range of sources including delivery staff, school stakeholders, parents and CYP. Responses from delivery staff emphasised an alternative approach to learning outside the mainstream curriculum, focusing on understanding each child's unique needs and providing bespoke support. Unlike traditional teaching methods, BPD and Vega prioritise listening to learners and adapting support accordingly. **Staff describe working to create an environment that fosters openness without judgment, building positive relationships and allowing learners to take ownership of their choices and actions.** Consistency and support are described as being paramount, ensuring each day is a fresh start, enabling learners to overcome barriers, communicate effectively, and develop skills. It was clear in their responses how differently they operate in comparison to mainstream educations. As the below quotes highlight:

An alternative way of learning, not mainstream curriculum, in order to access a child's skills and knowledge differently from being sat in a classroom.

In a mainstream setting staff aim to meet the child's needs but don't always have the focused time and resources to support as much as they may feel they want to. At BPD we can work intensively with the child to better understand their needs and learn how to support the learner and the school with next steps.

Staff involved in delivering Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College described the importance of creating a 'relaxed', 'non-judgmental' and 'supportive' space where learners feel valued, while at the same time maintaining boundaries:

A more relaxed, approachable attitude to learners, allowing them to open up without feeling judged. Patience and unconditional positive regard help me to maintain the relationship even when there have been challenges that could have lead to a relationship breakdown.

In order to help the children reach their full potential, it is important to build meaningful and positive relationships with each learner. It is imperative to get to know them, their interests and hold each learner with unconditional positive regard.

At times I have to be the voice of authority, but then I have to return to being approachable so they know the choices and changes they make they have to own them. They are not labelled by poor choices, but I challenge them to reflect, and become strategic about what they do and accept the consequences, good or bad, of what they do.

It is vital that each day with us is a fresh start for every child, irrespective of their behaviour the previous day. This support and consistency enables the learners to break down barriers, build communication and practice their skills.

If things go wrong, that's okay. You're allowed to be angry, you're allowed an emotion, but it's how we put that forward and we have lots of conversations about that, as they do get frustrated...I think it's about being calm....It doesn't matter what happens, we can deal with it; tomorrow we can have a fresh start.

Interestingly, the school stakeholders who completed our survey described many of these aspects when describing what they thought helped to achieve outcomes for CYP. Key themes included a 'nurturing' environment, where staff can spend time with learners and build positive relationships:

One-to-one support in a smaller more nurturing environment

Their understanding and patience of why a child is behaving the way they do. They work differently to school in a setting that can be more adaptable.

The advisers patience and time spent with the learners.

Similarly, some of the parents who completed the survey described the supportive and nurturing environment as being an important factor in their child's success:

A sense of learning in a college environment without the same 'rules' of secondary school.

The care and attention, improving my sons learning and relationship with school and myself.

This was echoed by parents who took part in interviews who described the inclusive and supportive nature of both BPD and Vega and what that meant for their child:

He's listened to. That's a big thing for kids like [Jamie]. If they're struggling they need to be listened to. And they [Vega Staff] are really good at saying, "No, you're not doing that, you're doing this now".... He needs consistency, he needs to be listened to, and it pays off.*

They talk to him properly. They don't shout at him and tell him he's good for nothing; that he's just a naughty boy.

She masks a lot, so she sits in a corner with a book in Big Picture eating a dinner on her own and facing wall, and she's put herself in that position. And because these relationships that she's got with these people, it must be their personalities because they've gone up to [name of child] and said, "We don't want you sitting here. Come and sit with us. Let's have a game of Scrabble". So, they've pulled her out of that and got her involved and she's loved it.

When we spoke to CYP, it was clear that this mechanism was a key factor in their improved engagement of learning and better understanding of themselves and how to manage their triggers. The students at Vega talked about the **value of working in smaller groups, going at a slower pace than school and it being a friendly environment where they felt they could ask for help**. Some also commented on the fact they didn't have to wear uniform as making them more relaxed, while another felt they were treated with respect, for example, being allowed to go to the toilet when needed (unlike school).

For the CYP we spoke to it was clear that they experienced Vega very differently to school. When describing their experiences of school they commented unlike at Vega, teachers at school 'don't care about children, its just a job to them' and 'I'm just a number to them'. Others spoke about the fact that as soon as you do something bad in school, they treat you like that forever. In contrast, at Vega they felt they were given a chance to be different. Students explained that as a result of how they were treated at school, they were reluctant to attend, with one student having not attended school for over a year (but was still attending Vega). This was contrasted with their attendance at Vega where they wanted to attend because of how they were treated.

The CYP we spoke to at BPD described similar views. Some commented on the shorter lessons at BPD which helped with concentration and was something he hoped he could continue at school. Another described how teachers 'get at you' for tiny things in the classroom, whereas at BPD the advisers will 'correct' you, not letting you get away with it if you do something wrong but will help you to learn what to do to move on from it, for example, learning a better response. **As with students at Vega, some referred to the smaller groups and fewer people as being helpful to their learning, while others liked the freedom of not having to wear uniform.** While the students at BPD did not make such stark

observations of the difference between BPD and school, one student commented that they preferred advisers to teachers because they give you options and choices, including the choice of when to take a break.

Mechanism 4 - A focus on mental health and wellbeing.

A further mechanism we identified, which aligns closely with Mechanism 3 but is distinct from it, concerns the focus placed on supporting CYP with their mental health and wellbeing. This mechanism can be seen to directly impact on Outcome 2 – Students understand themselves better and have strategies in place to deal with their triggers. We found evidence of this mechanism from delivery staff and CYP. Delivery staff who completed our survey explained the work they do to help CYP develop coping strategies and learn the vocabulary needed to express their emotions:

We set PSHE work to support them and give them coping strategies to enable them to be more successful in school.

Helping them overcome worries and anxiety around school and sometimes helping with home and general life issues.

Often, the learner has to learn the emotional vocabulary to express what is making them panic and anxious, and what they need from adults around them, as this enables them to get support for the challenges they feel they are facing. And that they can recognise how they feel and how they are behaving, when not in sync, can create the issues, and that awareness is massive to their self-determination and progress.

The impact of these efforts was reflected in comments from CYP at both settings. For example, one of the students at Vega explained how she had been supported to deal with ‘**lots of stuff outside of school**’ which had helped her anxiety. While a student from BPD explained that she had received help with her anxiety and been supported to ‘**work on herself**’. She described how her adviser had attended a lesson with her and that had been ‘really helpful’.

This approach to support with wider wellbeing was also reflected in one of the parents interviews who explained that BPD had identified her daughter possibly has autism and had referred her to the appropriate pathway for an assessment.

Mechanism 5 - A partnership approach to education

The final mechanism we found evidence of during the evaluation was the **partnership approach taken in both settings, bringing together CYP, parents, schools and the alternative provision**. This mechanism can be seen to impact on Outcome 1 - Students have increased engagement with learning (in and outside the classroom) and Outcome 3 – Parents/carers feel involved in their children’s education and have a positive experience with a learning provider. Delivery staff, schools and CYP commented on the value of a partnership approach for achieving outcomes. Delivery staff at both settings commented on the importance of effective relationships with parents/carers:

Parents are invited to be more involved in their child’s learning and progress.

Relationships, the better relationship we form with the children and their families helps improve there (sic) development and success for when they leave Vega.

The success of this approach was reflected in the parent survey where 9 out of the 10 participants described feeling ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ involved in their child’s learning. Taking this a step further, a

staff member at BPD commented on the role they take in helping to rebuild relationships between students and school:

Often our learners have lost trust with adults in an educational setting. One of the key successes we have is rebuilding that relationship between home and school.

While another explained the importance of listening to both perspectives when developing a learning plan for the individual:

Listening to the school perspective and the CYP perspective to gain a better insight of how we can support a learner better.

This mechanism was also referred to by school stakeholders, who commented on the relationships that are developed by BPD and Vega as some of their key successes:

They build relationships with students and families in order to support belonging.

Good relationship with mentors, parents and school staff.

Interestingly, one of the students at Vega described how she found the progress meetings with parents useful for letting her Mum know what's happening and what she needs to do.

However, as will be seen in the next section, there were a number of contextual factors that have made this mechanism more challenging in practice. While building effective relationships between students, parents/carers, schools and the alternative provision is a priority for both BPD and Vega, there have been some challenges in this respect.

Summary

The above discussion has identified 5 key mechanisms that, from the perspective of delivery staff, schools, parents and CYP, help explain how the outcomes of BPD and Vega have been achieved. These mechanisms include firstly, the 'personalised' approach to learning which is a key feature of the Big Picture philosophy but also embodied by Vega; secondly, the focus on 'lifelong learning' where learners are encouraged to identify their interests outside of the classroom and engage in 'hands-on' learning; thirdly, the 'inclusive, nurturing and supportive' approach which contrasts heavily with mainstream school but which is described as being invaluable to the success of both settings; fourth, the focus on overall mental health and wellbeing where learners are supported to access appropriate support outside of the education system, and finally, the partnership approach to education where learners, parents/carers, schools and the AP work together in the best interests of CYP. All of these mechanisms were identified by participants as being key to the successful outcomes described earlier.

Case study 4 – Aliyah* Vega College



Aaliyah * pseudonym

Vega College Doncaster

X START DATE OF PLACEMENT: 09/11/2022

Learner's interests:

Music, animals, cooking, guitar and drawing.

Qualifications / credits achieved while at Vega

1. ASDAN Short Course Animal Care
2. ASDAN Short Course credit/certificate PSHE Finance
3. Completed 3 tasks out of 9 towards an AQA credit in Designing and Animal Enclosure
4. AQA Credit Drawing and Colouring in a Cartoon
5. AQA Credit Table Tennis
6. Designing, Making and Decorating a Clay Model
7. Visiting a Local Church
8. Multi-Sensory Introduction to Britain at War
9. Planning a Buffet
10. Organising an Event
11. 1 credit/certificate in ASDAN Short Course Citizenship Government and Democracy



Summary Of Progress

Aaliyah has become increasingly vocal about her thoughts and emotions, particularly enthusiastic when discussing football, and has begun exploring future possibilities.

Additionally, Aaliyah has gained a heightened awareness of her social preferences. She continues to face challenges in forming connections with new staff members at Vega College.

Parental Perspective

Aaliyah's mum expresses utmost satisfaction with the progress observed at Vega College, noting a remarkable transformation in both her daughter's academic performance and overall happiness. Aaliyah's attendance has improved and she now eagerly rises in the morning, feeling content and secure within the supportive environment Vega College provides.

X ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT:
October to Dec 2022 - 96%
January to Mar 2023 - 91%
September to Dec 2023 - 82%



What contexts have helped or hindered these outcomes from being achieved?



In addition to identifying the outcomes that have been achieved by BPD and Vega and the mechanisms that led to this, we were also keen to understand the contextual factors that may have helped or hindered certain mechanisms from achieving outcomes. Through our analysis of engaging with delivery staff, schools, key stakeholders, parents and CYP, we were able to identify a number of contexts that both supported and impeded the success of the Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College.

Referrals to BPD and Vega

One of the key barriers to the success of BPD and Vega has been the lack of referrals. Interview participants reported a **continuing issue with lack of referrals to BPD and, to a lesser extent, Vega College, from Doncaster's Inclusion Panel**, which has impacted on outcomes payments paid to provision.

I think that one of the things that hasn't worked particularly well is how we generate referrals for the placements at Big Picture, and Vega, actually, as well. They originally started off going through our Inclusion Panel and I don't really know why but it, kind of, stopped.

This issue was addressed to an extent when CDC granted permission last year for BPD and Vega to contact schools direct to attract referrals, with one participant explaining how a flexible approach has helped address this issue:

When the Local Authority decided that we could directly contract with schools and have conversations with heads and explain it, then that's definitely a really good example of where that barrier got broken down. So, everybody again being prepared to be flexible about how that worked was a real a real positive and made a big difference to how we move forward.

However, **while BPD and Vega have done well to increase referrals through direct contact with schools, referrals have tended to be from a limited number of schools.**

They've done it and they've done it well. But it has been tricky and what it's resulted in, I suppose, is then working with certain schools, but not all schools because they can only work with the schools that are getting back to them, or that they've already got relationships with.

It is also the case that not all referrals are appropriate. It has already been discussed that the AP settings do not meet the needs of all learners. There are potentially CYP referred whose needs are greater than what the APs can provide. This is an issue which should be addressed by the introduction of the Triage panel in September 2024.

Some participants also thought that **schools have continued to be deterred from using the Inclusion Panel due to the amount of paperwork involved.**

The problematic thing at the moment is that the referral to the inclusion panel is seen to be such an arduous process that schools are really reticent to do it, you know.

In recognition of these issues with referrals, CDC have now designed a new process for referrals into BPD and Vega which will start in September 2024. This will be a Triage Panel which is a revised version of the former Inclusion Panel, but the new process means that when schools refer a child

through the panel, they can state on the paperwork that they would like the student to attend Big Picture or Vega, and they then do not have to go through the entire panel process and can be fast tracked straight to their chosen provision.

Challenges with the SIB outcome measures

One of the key challenges of an SIB funding model is that the outcomes selected for payment may not reflect the real value of an intervention. This is something partners have identified and attempted to address over the course of the last 5 years. Although outcomes measures have become more streamlined, as parties involved have collaborated to make outcome measures work, **some issues remain, especially when outcomes are beyond the providers' control such as attendance and reintegration.**

Furthermore, according to some CDC participants, **collecting outcomes evidence is still time-consuming for providers which may be causing late submissions of outcomes**, potentially impacting on provider cash-flow.

It's so time-consuming and with the best will in the world, we don't always get the information from the partners as quickly as they as we would like. And sometimes it's not in the right format.

Issues with the attendance outcome

According to participants, the attendance outcome has continued to be problematic as it is **a rigid measure, with no allowance for any individual circumstances that might impact on a learner's attendance** such as a bereavement, and no recognition of what a provider might do to improve attendance.

They [the CYP] have to be in so many mornings or afternoons, but sometimes they've got appointments, or they've got other things, or they've had a particularly difficult time, like a bereavement or something like that. And we've had to count them as an absence for not being at the provision. To us, everybody's got their own individual circumstances, but this contract doesn't allow for that. It's very black and white: 'You're in. You're not in, and if you're not in, it doesn't matter why you're not in. So you're not getting your money'. And so in that sense it's not tailored to the individual, really.

Issues with reintegration/the reintegration outcome (BPD)

Interview participants highlighted that **the reintegration measure is problematic as it relies on schools working with BPD to support a young person's reintegration in school.** Reintegration works well if planning has taken place beforehand between BPD and the school and if the school are willing to take on board advice on how to work with the young person. However, some participants felt that not all schools are engaged or willing to support children with difficulties.

Schools themselves not being on board with the sessions or being treat differently to teachers by the school staff themselves

Lack of support from schools.

Schools following up on good work done afterwards

I think when a school recognises that we take them so far on the journey, but it's their responsibility taking them the rest of the way, that's when you're going to see the long-term impact.

On a related point, it was raised that some CYP at Vega College soon get into trouble, and are even excluded, when they fall foul of the school's different rules. For example, school uniform rules or different morning start-times.

That means that they get a lot of exclusions while in school and they're missing lots of learning. It's very difficult for them to go from us back to mainstream and I do try in meetings to say to schools, "You do need to put something more bespoke in place for them; stagger the start of the day," as often they turn up without the correct footwear on.

However, it must be noted that schools are often limited on what they can implement, particularly if they are part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT) where rules and regulations are imposed externally. One participant hopes this will change when the provision joins the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System in September 2024.

For this to be successful long term, the schools need to be on board. I think hopefully as we move into the 'new world' [new contract] from September onwards, because those referrals are going to be going through the Inclusion [Triage] Panel the Local Authority will have a little bit more control over that. It might be that we can put some of that challenge into schools to say, "This is what we expect of you", and some of that will be around that reintegration obviously.

Simplifying PLPs to evidence outcomes

The Personal Learning Plans (PLPs) are a key mechanism for the settings to identify outcomes and therefore be paid. However, it was raised by some participants that initially, **provision staff found the PLP too complicated and time-consuming in terms of the amount of evidence needed**. In response to this issue, PLPs have been simplified, in consultation with provision staff, to make their completion less onerous. According to this participant, provision staff are much happier now:

Staff told me about the difference it made, but they were also involved in the change as well, so empowerment is in there, which helped with their workload and well-being, which has changed significantly for staff.

One of the provider participants agreed that **reporting outcomes on PLPs is now a manageable process**, where advisors quickly gather evidence of a CYP achieving a PLP learning goal at points in the day, and photos can also be used as evidence:

All we have to do is say they did this, for example to show they're working independently. If we can show evidence that they are getting better at that thing, then it means it is manageable because we're not trying to explain how they got to that point, and the photos that we take of them doing it when we put them on the web page, then that will link across so we can see them doing that.

The evolution of the PLP further demonstrates that all parties involved in the AP have been committed to addressing issues in order to ensure the service continues to work.

Sufficient resources to be able to deliver an effective service.

At the start of the evaluation, we hypothesised that in order for BPD and Vega to deliver an effective service, they would need the necessary resources to do this. While it is clear from the above discussion that both settings have achieved considerable outcomes for CYP and parents, there were a number of issues raised by delivery staff, parents, schools and CYP which suggest a lack of resource may have impacted the extent to which outcomes were achieved.

Issues with the **buildings** were commented on by delivery staff, schools, parents and CYP.

The current building is not fit for purpose and has no private spaces. There has been an upheaval in staffing (Delivery staff)

Location/building/site (School stakeholder)

The building does not lend itself to 'quiet/ safe spaces' for autistic learners (Parent)

Indeed, some of the CYP commented on the fact there was no outside space at Vega and that they felt trapped inside.

Another issue raised by schools and parents related to the **location of the settings and problems with travel**. Some parents commented that they had to arrange taxi's for their child because it was not straightforward to get to the setting. Similarly, one of the CYP we spoke to was having difficulties getting into college on time following a change in the morning start-time from 9.30 to 8.45. These practical issues are potential barriers for CYP engaging in the alternative provision and may impact on attendance and therefore engagement in learning.

The final issue raised in relation to resources concerns the **length of the intervention**, particularly for BPD. Both schools and parents commented that they think a 13 week intervention is too short and that children would benefit from attending longer. We appreciate this is an issue around the regulations of an alternative provision but it is important to highlight as it a point raised by a number of stakeholders.

Interestingly, when we asked school stakeholders about what improvements they would like to see made to BPD and Vega, they all correlated with the above issues, with schools suggesting the provision of transport, having more suitable buildings and having increased capacity/longer placements.

Effective relationships with schools to support learning in the mainstream setting.

Another key contextual factor we expected to be important to the effective operation of BPD and Vega relates to how effective relationships are between the alternative provision and the student's school. While feedback from school stakeholders suggested they see the value and impact of both settings, there were a number of issues raised by both delivery staff and school stakeholders regarding communication between the two.

The APs perspective on relationships with schools

In terms of delivery staff at BPD and Vega, a number of communication issues were raised:

Communication between school and BPD can create issues with lack of information sharing or difficulties getting meetings for updates and to discuss next steps. Some referrals can be lacking in key information or details about actual barriers to learning.

Clear communication with school can be a challenge too. All staff are busy but sometimes getting information in a timely manner can be an issue, as we need to know so we can maximise the use of every timetabled session we have with the learner.

Contacting schools as early as possible and ensuring I have the correct key contact for the learner. Asking for schools to contact parents too to remind them of what is expected.

School perspectives on relationships with the AP

Concerns around communication were also raised by schools, however, their concerns related to the admission process and ending placements:

Referrals process takes far too long. Communication isn't effective during admissions process, we find out from parents start dates/times and how inductions have gone.

Communication. We are still waiting on paperwork for a failed placement from weeks ago despite plenty of phone calls and emails from our part.

However, not all participants described these issues, with one school stakeholder commenting positively on their experience:

Very happy with the communication and relationships with staff and students

It is important to highlight that Vega in particular experienced a crisis in staffing at the start of 2024 and had to recruit new teaching staff in a very short period of time. It is likely that such issues had a significant impact on their ability to keep on top of communication with schools. As one participant commented:

Staff are lovely when you speak to them, there just needs to be an improvement in organisation and response to emails and phone calls.

Changes made to improve relationships

In response to the issues described above, one of the managers at BPD explained how they have worked to address these issues with communication:

I am able to support my staff to step up the request for responses to their need for information. Requesting EHCPs, in school visits, chasing the SENCo and the DSL for additional key information. Now that schools know what BPD is about, getting them to recognise our requests for more information helps us to help their pupils more effectively, is helping us to develop closer links and better communication. Also, having a BPD Service Level Agreement, ensures the school are aware of what they have agreed to do whilst we are working with their pupil - so we can bring them back to this and make sure we are all moving towards the same success criteria and goals.

This quote highlights how **the settings have evolved over time to address particular barriers**. The success of changes made by BPD and Vega can be seen in the school stakeholders survey responses who comment on the improvements they have seen:

Easier to access a place, working with more of our students. Stronger communication.

Much better at communicating than previous years.

Working closely with school and showing engagement with school to the students.

Despite some communication issues being raised by school stakeholders, when we asked if they would recommend BPD and Vega to other schools, 9 out of 10 said yes for BPD and 6 out of 8 said yes for Vega. When explaining why they would recommend the settings, comments included:

They help improve students behaviour and improve engagement in learning.

I think it is a great provision that is needed in Doncaster!

I feel that students benefit from a change of setting and smaller groups.

High quality provision and high quality care for learners.

They work really well with us and are really supportive to the children.

They always strive for the best interests of the child.

These comments highlight the value placed on BPD and Vega by the schools they work with and suggest that despite issues with communication, **both settings have established good relationships with schools**. As one participant explained:

They really do have impact on young people's lives who are struggling with mental health that has prevented them to get the best from mainstream school.

Parents/carers and CYP are actively engaged.

A really important context to the effective delivery of both BPD and Vega relates to the level of engagement between CYP, parents/carers and the alternative provision. Indeed, one of the outcomes described earlier relates to parents/carers feeling involved in their child's education and having a positive experience with a learning provider. While we did find evidence that parents/carers felt involved and most had a positive experience with BPD and Vega, there were concerns raised by some delivery staff and school stakeholders that not all parents and CYP were actively engaged.

Some parents show a lack of engagement and don't answer phone calls or turn up for meetings. (Delivery staff)

Parental engagement can be hit and miss. Willingness to attend [of CYP]. (School stakeholder)

I think the staff work hard and are very helpful and really care, I think the issue is the engagement from parents and the children (School stakeholder)

It is important to recognise that there can be many issues in the lives of CYP and parents/carers that may prevent active engagement with BPD and Vega. It was also the case for some parent/carers who responded to our survey that they did not feel they were being listened to or were not actively involved in change:

Lack of communication, no help when requested

Also not being involved in change - there has been a very big change in team and regime recently with no consultation or consideration of the needs of the young person just a lot of assumptions that this change will be better/ raise standards without fully appreciating the impact it has.

Staff changes at Vega College

As already mentioned, Vega College has been affected over the past eight months by staff changes, in particular the sudden departure of the Head at the end of 2023, soon followed by the departure of the Education Lead early in 2024. **The new head has succeeded in managing the crisis and stabilising the provision.** However, a limited handover has led to challenges, including outcomes not being reported in the correct format. This has risked loss of outcomes-based payments, which CDC have subsequently supported to address, as one participant explained:

I think that's been a bit difficult in terms of the outcomes and things because [Name of Education Lead at Vega] wasn't able to hand things over before she left.

Significant changes in staffing have been an issue at Vega for some time, with most of the teaching staff being relatively new in post. This lack of continuity has implications for CYP and for the successful operation of the setting, particularly given the unique demands of an SIB funding model. Despite these challenges, Vega have been able to achieve outcomes and maintain trusting relationships with their learners. The success of this transition can be seen in responses of some school stakeholders who describe the staff changes positively:

New head, new structures and expectations. Curriculum improved with more teaching staff.

New staff have arrived and there appears to be more structure and firmer boundaries for the children.

Similarly, one of the parents interviewed described their perspective on the recent changes at Vega:

Since Christmas, when it [Vega] really changed, [Jamie] has just done this massive turnaround. Before Christmas he was just going to play snooker, or whatever it was he was doing, but now he knows he's got to do a lesson. Now, I got a phone call on Friday and [name of teacher at Vega College] said, "He's done everything we've asked of him today". I can't say better than that. It really has changed him. I don't know whether it's because he's growing up. To me, he just seems to be in the right environment for doing that. And as much as I had really bad reservations about him going in there, as [Jamie*] is very easily lead, it's been a good thing for [Jamie*].*

However it must be noted that while this parent's view of the changes at Vega had been positive, one of the parents in the previous section felt they had not been involved in these changes sufficiently, suggesting a need to ensure clear lines of communication with parents/carers, particularly when change is being implemented.

Work placements (Vega College)

One of the key features of the KS4 alternative provision is the use of work placements for CYP to engage them in learning outside of the classroom and to inspire their future careers. However, as was explored in the evidence review earlier in this report, this is an aspect of the BPL philosophy that can be particularly challenging to arrange. This has certainly been reflected in Vega's experience and has been made more challenging by the turnover of staff and limited handover. For example, some participants highlighted that the work placement outcomes for Vega College has been problematic due to a shortage of work-based opportunities:

I think that thing about engaging sufficient range of employers around the extended work experience idea has probably been more challenging than we thought it would be.

Secondly, some learners at Vega College are not ready for workplace placements, for example due to anxiety, or because the available placements are not suitable for some CYP:

We can't get all the learners on placements, and it's not always appropriate for that child or young person to be in that setting.

Despite these challenges, it appears there is value in the work placements, with most CYP we spoke to being very positive about their placement and the impact it had on their decision to apply to college. Similarly, the 2 workplace providers who completed our survey were positive about their experience of providing placements, with **both saying they would recommend being a placement provider to other organisations**, saying they enjoyed helping students to develop workplace skills. However they did suggest staff turnover had impacted communication and that this could be improved.

As an alternative to the work placements over the last few months, CYP at Vega College have worked on CVs, interview techniques, and researched different sectors and the qualifications needed to work in them, with the hope that this will be enough to fulfil the work-based placements outcome.

Summary

The above discussion has identified a number of contextual factors that have impacted the implementation and impact of both BPD and Vega. Some of these issues had been identified in the initial programme theory (such as sufficient resources, relationships with schools and willing workplace providers) while others emerged during the analysis (such as issues with referrals and outcome measures). Despite a wide range of issues being experienced, it is also clear that providers and CDC have worked together to try and address them. In the case of appropriate referrals for example, there is a lot of change happening in September 2024 with the introduction of the Triage panel. Similarly, the outcomes measures and PLPs for both settings have been updated and amended on several occasions to try and reflect what is within and outside the scope of the AP's. As will be seen in the next two sections of the report, there have been many challenges to this project from the beginning and many lessons learned regarding the implementation of an SIB funding model, but despite this, as the above discussion has evidenced, both settings have achieved considerable success for CYP in Doncaster.

Case study 5 – Emily* Big Picture Doncaster



Emily* pseudonym

Big Picture Doncaster

X START DATE OF PLACEMENT: 05/02/2024

Emily's barriers to learning (at referral)

Emily finds it difficult to ignore the behavior of others. She sometimes lacks motivation for tasks. She can intimidate others and becomes aggressive, making loud noises, moving around the room when unsettled. She swears and uses negative language towards others.

Desired outcomes

Emily wants to be able to access and positively engage in her learning,
Create relationships with staff,
Understand her emotions and how to deal with them,
To be able to talk openly and truthfully and be able to reflect on her actions.

Parental Perspective

Emily's parent thought Big Picture was a good match for her and believe it will help her develop good relationships with staff and enhance her skills.

What's Going Well

Emily is showing a caring side towards other learners, while staff remain calm with her to avoid arguments. When she tries to rile up others, staff speak calmly in front of her. Additionally, Emily is focusing on her project work and beginning to build a passion for it.

X ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT:

January - 75%
February - 100%
March - 88%

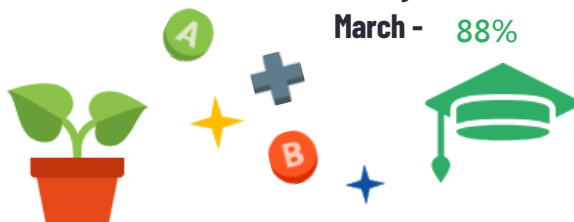


Table 9 - Revised Programme Theory

The below tables sets out what the evaluation found in terms of the outcomes achieved by the AP, how those outcomes were achieved (mechanisms) and the contexts in which this occurred.

Outcomes (what have BPD and VEGA achieved?)	Mechanisms (what is it about BPD and Vega that has led to these outcomes?)	Contexts (what contexts have helped or hindered these outcomes?)
<p>Outcome 1 - Students have increased engagement with learning (in and outside the classroom).</p> <p>Our analysis demonstrates that both BPD and Vega have increased the proportion of successful outcomes achieved year on year. These outcomes include improved attendance, students achieving good progress on learning plans, students being reintegrated into mainstream school (BPD) and students engaging with work placements and developing workplace skills.</p> <p>In addition, attendance data for a random sample of students shows that attendance is higher at BPD and Vega compared to mainstream school. The impact of this improved engagement can be seen in the predicted GCSE grades for Vega students and</p>	<p>A personalised learning journey – the approach of ‘one learner at a time’ was described by delivery staff, schools and parents as being an important factor in their child’s engagement in learning.</p> <p>Facilitating lifelong learning – the use of real world learning, ‘hands on’ projects and work place experience and skills were all described as being important factors in CYP’s engagement with the AP setting.</p> <p>A supportive, nurturing and inclusive environment – the supportive environment created in both settings was described as being central to learners continued engagement. Parents and CYP described the impact of this in helping students to feel valued and listened to and thereby engage in learning.</p> <p>A focus on mental health and wellbeing – both settings seek to support CYP with their overall wellbeing. This holistic approach was seen to create the right environment for them to learn.</p>	<p>Referrals to BPD and Vega – low referrals to both settings have impacted on the reach of the AP in Doncaster. There were various reasons for low referrals, including not having sufficient time to raise the profile of the AP at the start. This barrier is being addressed for September 2024 with the new Triage panel.</p> <p>Challenges with the SIB outcome measures – the outcomes measured (and therefore paid) by the SIB model have had to change over time. It is still the case that not all outcomes are within the control of the AP (e.g attendance and reintegration). There are also outcomes achieved (such as those mentioned in this evaluation) that are very important, but do not result in payment.</p> <p>Sufficient resources – schools, delivery staff, parents and CYP all commented on resource issues that can be seen to have restricted the potential of the AP. These include the buildings/location, the lack of travel and the limited time learners can attend the settings for. It is important to note that the location issues are currently being addressed (with new buildings being identified) and the length of time at the settings is a requirement of the rules around alternative provision.</p>

<p>the fact 5 of the 7 students we spoke to had secured college places for September 2024.</p> <p>These outcomes were largely corroborated by school stakeholders who completed our survey.</p>		<p>Effective relationships with schools – it is clear that in order for students to continue their successes at BPD/Vega in school, there needs to be effective working between the two. There were concerns raised on both sides about the extent to which this happens in practice (with some raising the different expectations at the AP compared to school). But it is important to note that this has improved over time and schools have noticed improved communication and working relationships with the AP.</p> <p>Engagement of parents/carers and CYP – in order for the AP to achieve the outcomes described in this evaluation, it requires CYP and parents/carers to be actively engaged in the process. There was some concern from schools and delivery staff that not all parents/carers and CYP are actively committed. However, it must be recognised that the setting may not be the most appropriate setting for all CYP who are referred and that sometimes parents/carers require better communication from the AP.</p>
<p>Outcome 2- Students understand more about themselves and their triggers/concerns and have strategies in place to deal with them.</p> <p>Evidence of this outcome was identified from a number of perspectives, from school staff, parents/carers and CYP themselves.</p> <p>Many of the participants described how CYP had developed strategies since attending the AP, with parents describing improved relationships at home and CYP describing how this had improved their relationships with teachers.</p>	<p>A supportive, nurturing and inclusive environment – it was clear from a range of participants that the AP was delivered very differently to mainstream school. Parents, schools and CYP described how both settings helped learners to understand themselves better and develop ways of managing their reactions.</p> <p>A focus on mental health and wellbeing – the fact that learners are supported with issues outside of the learning environment was seen to create a safe space where they could learn more about themselves.</p>	<p>Staff changes at Vega – the significant changes in staffing at Vega has been described as both a challenge and a benefit. While it caused problems in reporting outcomes and a lack of continuity between the previous and new management, it has been described in positive terms by schools and some parents/carers who appreciate the more structured approach.</p>

<p>Outcome 3 - Parents/carers feel involved in their children’s education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.</p> <p>Evidence of this outcome was found in the survey and interview responses from parents/carers. The majority of parents/carers we spoke to felt involved in their child’s education and described their child’s experience of the AP as a positive experience. However, it must be noted there were a small number of parents who did not feel the AP had been positive for their child.</p>	<p>A partnership approach to education – both settings were described as working in partnership with schools, CYP and parents/carers, which helped to improve communication between all involved and helped to repair relationships.</p> <p>A supportive, nurturing and inclusive environment – most parents/carers described how their child had experienced the AP very positively compared to school and that this had had a lasting impact on them.</p>	<p>Work placements (Vega) – despite CYP, schools and work place providers seeing the value of work placements at Vega, the reality of arranging them has been challenging. This is something that has been experienced in Big Picture Learning approaches in other countries. It is also the case that not all learners are ready for a work placement, particularly because of anxiety.</p> <p>A flexible SIB funding model that evolved over time – despite numerous challenges experienced by the use of the SIB model, it is clear from all perspectives that those involved have worked hard to ensure the providers had what they needed and could continue to operate (including through Covid-19). This has continued a move to a set payment to help the settings have some financial stability. Without this, the providers may not have been able to achieve the outcomes seen in this report.</p>
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Case study 6 – Harry* Vega College



Harry * pseudonym

Vega College Doncaster

X START DATE OF PLACEMENT: 08/02/2023

Learner's interests:

Construction, PE and socialising with friends.

Qualifications / credits achieved achieved while at Vega

1. AQA Credit Developing Independence Through Cycling
2. AQA Credit Taking part in a museum visit
3. AQA Credit Table Tennis
4. AQA Credit Introduction to Computer Gaming
5. Designing, Making and Decorating a Clay Model
6. Planning a Buffet
7. Basic Fire Lighting
8. Making a Den
9. Work Experience at a local Church
10. Started to work towards an additional AQA Credit in Safety Signs in a Construction Environment

Summary Of Progress

Thriving within the Vega College environment, Harry exhibits punctuality, kindness, popularity, and respect towards both peers and staff, while actively engaging in sports. Despite ceasing his work placement at parental request, he remains committed to his academic and vocational pursuits, having applied for a bricklaying course at college.

Parental Perspective

Harry's parents express contentment with his progress at Vega College, noting a significant difference in his sense of support compared to their experiences in traditional school settings.

ATTENDANCE ON PLACEMENT:

X February to Mar 2022 - 100%
September to Dec 2023 - 100%



Aim 2 - The process of implementation



Key Messages

- The alternative provision (AP) has changed considerably since the initial concept in 2019.
- Some participants felt there was a lack of understanding regarding what was involved initially, and not a clear enough articulation of the need and how it could be addressed (resulting in a setting that could not meet the needs of learners).
- This resulted in the closure of the school following an Ofsted visit, but it was noted that the school had not had enough time to develop their approach at the time of the inspection.
- Following the Ofsted inspection, all parties worked hard to come up with a new approach to the AP, resulting in a focus on key transition points (thereby identifying a clear need).
- The revised contract focused on Key Stage 3 (Big Picture Doncaster) and Key Stage 4 (Vega College) and both settings have evolved over the last 3 years to deliver an effective AP to children in Doncaster (as evidenced in the previous section of this chapter).
- Despite considerable challenges along the way, it is clear that all those involved have shown considerable commitment and dedication to finding solutions, the result being an AP that meets a clear need in Doncaster.

One of the key aims of this evaluation was to explore the process of implementing the AP in Doncaster. We asked participants from City of Doncaster Council, Big Picture Learning, Vega College, and Big Picture Invest to reflect on how the provision has developed from the initial concept of the Big Picture school in early 2019 to the current provision in 2024, along with any challenges and successes in the provision's implementation.

Key themes from interviews with stakeholders

Since the Big Picture School opened in early 2019, the parties involved in developing this provision – CDC, the providers and the investor – have faced considerable crises along the way. **Nevertheless, all parties have responded to challenge and crisis and the providers have grown from it, with the result that unique alternative provision has been developed that fits a particular need for Doncaster.** The provision is ready to join the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System in September 2024.

All participants describe their involvement in the journey from the Big Picture School to the subsequent alternative provision from the point they were involved. Some participants were involved earlier in the initiative, some later, while some have been involved all the way through. These accounts contribute to the following summary of the implementation process, along with its challenges and successes. The implementation is loosely divided into the original contract – the Big

Picture School - and an amended contract for the subsequent alternative provision, namely Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College.

The Original Contract: The Big Picture School

The BP school opened in January 2019 as a DfE-registered school, based on the Big Picture innovative approach from the USA. CDC decided that the Big Picture approach was potentially useful to meet the city's growing need to support disaffected learners.

The original school model was designed by the Innovation Unit, an independent innovation consultancy. With the benefit of hindsight, **some participants reflected that the original provision design by the Innovation Unit was flawed**. For example, the provision design assumed that the school would immediately receive a lot of referrals. Consequently, the cost per student was set too low when it was not possible to generate the volume of students in the time required to meet the outcomes levels needed to return funding to the provision. As such, predicted referral numbers did not consider that the Big Picture School would need time to make schools aware of the new service.

If you looked at the economics of it there was no way it was going to work and it was never going to be able to repay any loan based on the loan we put into the SPV based on the original approach.

Some participants felt that some of the staff employed by the Innovation Unit did not have the right skill set to work with disaffected cohorts or work with learners in the flexible way the Big Picture approach demands.

The innovation Unit kind of recruited the original staff that were in there. I don't think they had the experience necessarily to work in the environment, which obviously didn't help.

Reflecting on the flaws in the original design by The Innovation Unit, some participants from CDC suggested that CDC should have been more involved when the initiative was designed and during the early stages.

I don't think the local authority had enough control over the provision when it first opened in terms of when it was a school, although we were still going out with verifying the outcomes, etc. There was something missing just in terms of how we were able to shape what that looked like, just the way that it was set up.

One of these participants stressed that this wasn't of CDC's making; that initially The Innovation Unit acted as an intermediary between CDC and the investor until CDC asserted their involvement, and from that point on CDC started to address developing concerns described in the next section.

One CDC participant highlighted that the provision design should have clearly defined its cohort and planned the provision around the needs of the cohort and that, without defining the cohort, there was a risk that the provision would not meet the needs of its young people.

You define your cohort spec so well that you're then able to make sure that the contract reflects the defined cohort. So, you know exactly what the bundle of things around those kids is. And then you know exactly what the provision is, and the skill set, etc. And the resource will be able to make sure that we don't take any risks. If you say, "We've got some kids and we don't know what to do and we want to do something better", that's lovely and laudable, but actually it's not really helpful because you'll end up with something that's all things to all people and

doesn't make a difference. And, you know, I think people probably went in with really good intentions to work with that initial cohort, but actually missed their needs completely.

Finally, and again with the benefit of hindsight, **some participants from CDC felt that the provision probably should not have been set up as a school**. Firstly, because it didn't need to be a school if the CYP were enrolled at a school in Doncaster. Secondly, because a school involved regulators such as Ofsted.

The school opens

When the Big Picture School opened in January 2019, it immediately experienced significant challenges. For example, the initial cohort of KS4 CYP were **extremely challenging with complex needs**. It is not clear why this very challenging cohort were referred to the school – this is possibly connected to a lack of definition of the intended cohort, as mentioned above. Consequently, **staff struggled with the cohort as they did not have the skills to meet their needs**. At one point in 2019, the whole cohort had to be placed in alternative provision due to safeguarding issues.

It just was not right for those children, and they needed to be provided for differently.

Participants explained that the **school received very few referrals at first** (and continually so) from Doncaster High Needs Inclusion Panel which immediately impacted on the financial stability of the provision.

I genuinely don't know why, but we weren't able to generate the referrals at first. There were definitely young people that needed the provision, but it we couldn't quite get on top of that referral mechanism. So that's partly why we struggled with numbers for a period of time.

Some participants suggested that **Doncaster schools might have been deterred by the large amount of paperwork demanded by the Doncaster High Needs Inclusion Panel**, or that the school needed more time to promote its service to schools and build trust for a new, innovative approach.

I think part of it, as it was a different and a new service, it's kind of getting the schools on board who are then going to refer the children. So, it's raising awareness of it, and making schools aware that this is a new provision, and this is what we could do to help. And it takes a lot of time if you have a certain way of working and a new service comes up, and you've never heard of it before, and it's kind of brand new in this country as well. It takes time for a school to trust it and get those referrals in

Some participants explained that **when CDC started to become more involved, emerging issues started to be addressed**. In June 2019, CDC issued a statement of closure followed by a Performance Improvement Plan in August 2019, which is a requirement of the contract if outcomes fall below a certain level for subsequent months. CDC continued to support the school with monitoring and regular meetings.

In terms of quality, there were concerns about the stability, the set up and level of expertise and quality of leadership within the provision that wasn't good enough. And, you know, we had to step in and take action.

We supported them [the Big Picture School] in coming up with an action plan. We helped them monitor it. We had regular meetings with them. You know that we were invested in making this work. We did not want it to fail.

New leadership for the school was put in place in June 2019. The new head aimed to reset the provision for the start of the 2019-20 academic year by introducing a Year 7 intake which would gradually build to accommodate all year groups in KS3. At the start of the academic year in September 2019, the school had two cohorts: the original KS4 cohort and a Year 7 cohort.

However, as the year progressed, **the school continued to be impacted by lack of referrals.** Participants described how it became increasingly evident to all parties that the school was economically unviable, and a new approach was needed. Ultimately, the school was closed [officially in October 2020] following the Ofsted inspection of December 2019 due to a number of failings in terms of how the provision was being delivered.

While participants widely acknowledge the failings of the school, one or two felt that events could have turned out differently. For example, if the school had benefited from more time to develop before the Ofsted inspection, or if the original staff had understood the BP model:

I remember meeting and observing a number of learners at that early stage, maybe six months into it, who had opportunities to pursue their interests, and there seemed to be an engagement and an appreciation of what would be possible. Unfortunately, there wasn't the time to let that develop and also the experience of that original staff to be able to trust in the [BP] approach and to see that through.

The current contract: Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College

Following the challenges faced by the Big Picture school in 2019, all parties involved in the contract (CDC, the provider and the investor) spent **time reconfiguring a new model of provision that could run more effectively within the constraints of the existing contract that could not be changed.** CDC identified a gap in Doncaster's alternative provision in the area of transition, namely provision to **support CYP to transition from primary to secondary school, and from secondary to post-16 destinations.** Disengagement of CYP due to transition between phases of education had become an area of concern for Doncaster. Consequently, CDC decided to flex the provision to support CYP who were struggling to engage in the first years of secondary school in KS3 (including some CYP in KS2 in primary school), and CYP in KS4 secondary school who were at risk of not transitioning to post-16 destinations. CDC participants also credit the input of the current head of BPD and BPI as key to reshaping the provision.

Because of the gaps in the local system around infrastructure, there was no continuity and preparation around transition. Consider noting how big of a challenge transition is these days on a policy level. I think it was a sensible way of flexing the operation. It wasn't exactly what we set out to do, but actually it did evolve into something different, but actually broadly in line with the vision but also doing something that was kind of things we had done before.

Furthermore, CDC decided that the KS4 provision should focus on qualifications and a real-world learning element to support transitions to post-16.

We felt we needed a bit more of a focus on those accredited and non-accredited qualifications because the next step for those young people is post 16 or an apprenticeship or work or whatever it might be. So, we decided that we needed to put a bit of a focus on that.

In addition, all parties decided that an alternative provision approach, with CYP enrolled at other schools in Doncaster, would be more appropriate as the provision aimed to support CYP to reengage

in mainstream; that these CYP would not be particularly challenging and just needed 'a bit of a helping hand' to reengage in their education.

But, actually, it's just that little bit of a helping hand. For Vega College, these young people aren't young people who are being bounced and aren't young people who are being necessarily excluded. There are young people who, for whatever reason for that moment in time, the current system doesn't work for them.

What we want to do is to create an enabling function where they [KS3 CYP] can take some time out, we can develop a new way of helping them to learn and then move back into the educational system, with some advice and guidance and suggestions for school of better ways to work with those young people. So that was the additional flex built in.

The Big Picture School was closed in October 2020 and the same month, Big Picture Learning was reconfigured.

Amendments to the original contract

The BP provision was decoupled to offer separate alternative provision for Key Stage 3 (Big Picture Doncaster) and Key Stage 4 (Vega College).

Big Picture Doncaster offers alternative provision for KS3 CYP (plus Year 6 KS2 CYP) and retained the Big Picture Learning contract. CYP take time out of school to attend a thirteen-and-a-half-week placement for 2 and a half days a week. During that time, advisers support learners to find strategies to reintegrate back in school/manage mainstream school and offer advice and guidance to their school on better ways to work with those learners. BPD can extend placements if needed, with CDC's permission, to a maximum of 20 weeks. A thirteen-and-a-half-week placement was chosen as it complies with the maximum time that learners can attend off-site provision for an educational provider that is not in the Ofsted framework. This time period was also deemed appropriate as a relatively short placement would make it easier for CYP to reintegrate back into school.

Vega College offers alternative provision for KS4 CYP (plus Year 9/top year of KS3 CYP). Leger Education Trust (a MAT in in the Doncaster area) was sourced as the delivery partner/subcontractor for the Vega College provision. CYP take time out of school to attend this provision for 2 days a week until the end of KS4. The aim of Vega College is to support young people who are at risk of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) at post-16 as they might not achieve qualifications to access post-16 destinations such as FE, apprenticeships or work. The provision focusses on qualifications, namely Maths, English and Science GCSE and employability. With this aim, the amended contract also specified that young people in Vega undertake at least one day a week in the workplace, for example in a mentored work-based placement.

Outcome measures in the original contract were amended to fit with the reconfigured provision.

For BPD, the attendance outcome was adjusted to fit with the amended length of placement to thirteen-and-a-half-weeks and a reintegration (back into their mainstream school) outcome was added. For Vega College, the 'reduction in the number of fixed term exclusions' outcome had to be changed as there were no comparative data due to Covid school closures in the previous year. New outcomes were also developed for the KS4 provision including attendance, a focus on the Pupil Learning Plan (PLP) and a work-based placement.

A new KS3 and KS4 price per learner was arranged to match the predicted budget. (The price per learner had been set too low during the Big Picture School phase?. Although there were few amendments to the original contract, CDC's Legal team had to ensure that changes in contract were

legally compliant, for example to ensure the project remained within the internal authority from the LA Cabinet and USA licences for Big Picture.

Since 2021, CDC, providers and the investor have worked regularly together to develop and support the reconfigured alternative provision. There have been a number of changes made and challenges faced during this time, all of which have been described in the contexts section earlier. However, it is important to highlight the commitment and resulting success of this continued partnership. As one CDC participant describes:

The provision is quite unique, and I think if we didn't have it then actually those young people would possibly have had to have gone into a 'best fit' model rather than a 'fit' model. I also think there's always a possibility, isn't there, that not only could people have ended up in the wrong provision, but they could also have ended up actually trying to cope in mainstream without the support and therefore not have got the same outcomes.

Summary

It is clear from the above discussion that there have been a number of challenges to this alternative provision since its inception in 2019. From the perspective of some stakeholders, many of the initial problems were possibly the result of a lack of understanding regarding what was involved, and not a clear enough articulation of the need and how it could be addressed. Yet despite these challenges, resulting in the closure of the original school, CDC, BPI and BPD were able to work together to **create a new provision that would meet the needs of CYP at key transition points in their education**. The fact that BPD and Vega have been able to create the impact outlined in section 1 of this chapter, is **testament to the commitment and flexibility of all those involved** (the investors, providers and various CDC departments). Without such commitment and flexibility it is unlikely that Doncaster would now have an AP that meets a clear need.

Aim 3 - Social Impact Bond contracting approach



Key Messages

- The Social Impact Bond (SIB) model was seen to have supported City of Doncaster Council to take an innovative approach with minimal financial risk.
- The flexibility of the model was key in seeing the provision through the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- CDC has learned from this SIB contract and has changed ways of working for future contracts.
- The model was seen as very resource intensive (for both providers and CDC) raising questions as to how cost-effective it actually is.
- Finding the 'right' outcomes to measure is challenging – they have been amended numerous times but some outcomes are still outside the providers' control. Focusing on certain outcomes also misses the other valuable outcomes that are achieved.
- The financial instability and short-term nature of SIB funding has been challenging and was seen to have impacted staffing and innovation (although as time progressed, the model changed to provide more financial stability).
- There was a clear commitment from all parties to address challenges and find solutions. This undoubtedly facilitated the continued success of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College.

The final aim of this evaluation was to understand how the SIB funding model had worked from the perspective of those involved. We conducted interviews with 16 stakeholders from City of Doncaster Council, Big Picture Learning, Vega College, and Big Picture Invest between February and May 2024. We asked people to reflect on the challenges and successes of the Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting from their perspective.

Key themes from interviews with stakeholders

Benefits of the SIB model

Although stakeholders generally focused on the challenges of working with a social impact bond outcomes-based method of contracting, CDC participants also acknowledged its benefits. In terms of benefits, there were a number of key themes. Firstly, that the SIB funding model enabled CDC to use external capital to fund the Big Picture alternative provision at a time when public money was in short supply. In other words, **this project might not have happened without the SIB/Life Chances funding opportunity.**

It's a great opportunity to save if we get it right. It's a fantastic opportunity to be able to provide some start-up funding that benefits young people and give some great outcomes.

From a local authority perspective where we must continuously justify our expenditure and make sure that we're getting value for money they [SIBs] are a there are really effective way of being able to do so. That if they're managed appropriately, you can be confident that that you are only paying out for the for the positive outcomes that we're achieving.

Secondly, that the SIB funding model **enabled CDC to test an innovative approach to provision with a reduced risk to LA/public funds** before committing CDC funding from September 2024 within CDC's Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System.

I think it's allowed Doncaster to do something different that they might not have been able to do without this funding, especially with the top-up funding. It kind of allowed, well enabled Doncaster to be able to test Big Picture to see if it works before committing fully to funding.

Thirdly, that the experience of working with a SIB funding model **has encouraged new ways of working for CDC, who are already looking at using SIBs in future**, drawing on useful learnings from this project.

It's definitely made us think about more innovative practice and different ways of working, which we perhaps wouldn't have thought about before. We wouldn't do them all again, but we can definitely learn and take the take the positive elements from that.

Furthermore, participants from all stakeholder groups highlighted that the SIB funding model **helped the Big Picture project to survive the impact of the pandemic**. When young people could not attend the provision during lockdowns, the SIB paid a service fee to providers when the outcomes model would not have paid providers.

Even though the numbers weren't what probably should have been in the contract, we still managed to be funded. This positive got us through a very difficult point.

Challenges of the SIB model

Despite the above benefits, **participants' accounts overwhelmingly suggest that the SIB funding model has been very challenging** for all parties involved: for CDC, the providers and the investor. Indeed, several participants highlighted that the **initiative would have floundered without the determination of the three parties involved to find solutions to problems** as they arose to make the initiative work.

I think it's about relational contracts. It's about people willing to have difficult conversations about continuing to be determined and persistent about how to make things work.

It's that preparedness for people to be flexible within the contract that has been a strength of it. That instead of calling what doesn't work, "We'll stop doing it!", actually it's: "Let's find a solution that makes it work".

A number of key concerns were raised by participants, for example, CDC participants felt that although their local authority had benefitted from only having to pay for outcomes achieved, this was counterbalanced by the **huge amount of work required to provide the outcomes evidence required to release funding to providers**. This particularly impacted the Commissioning team, Standards and Effectiveness team and Internal Audit.

The resource needed to be able to manage and monitor a Payment by Results contract on this scale is immense. Every single outcome has to be verified, not just by the Commissioning team, but by our Standards and Effectiveness team around the Personal Learning Plans. It then has

to be independently verified by our Internal Audit team. On top of that, before money can then be paid out, we have to complete the portal for the Life Chances Fund contribution. So, this is on a on a monthly basis, on a timely basis, and there are a lot of outcomes and the two different sides of the contract [BPD and Vega].

CDC Legal and Finance Departments were also challenged by the different way of working required by SIB contracting. For example, participants described the complex financial mechanisms that the Finance department had to navigate, and a very different form of contract to the service contracts the Legal team are used to:

So, it was the first time the Council ever used this type of arrangement, so it was difficult. It was challenging from a legal perspective, giving the advice and advising on the documentation because it was all a brand-new concept.

Some participants highlighted that the **SIB funding model has impacted on the stability of provision and plans to expand and develop**. For example, before May 2023 BPD relied on payments released in response to monthly submissions of outcomes. This meant that BPD had to manage their finances on a month-by-month basis, which impacted on cash flow and their ability to develop the provision. One provider participant describes the challenges of employing new staff in this scenario as it takes three months to on-board a new member of staff in conjunction with PLP development for their CYP.

We've looked to develop and expand the provision that we've got on our offer to look after more children of different needs, of different levels of need, and things like that. And it's hard to do when there's always a backlog in terms of the funding coming through. So, if I if I want to bring a new member of staffing, I need to bring that member of staff in sufficiently early to be able to prep them, train them, set up the systems and processes that I need. But if they're putting learning plans together, for example, and the children are joining us in September, and the learning plan is submitted within a month, I need them [the member of staff] in July. So, the funding is always playing catch up, you know and that's been a bit of a challenge with it.

I think that provision under a SIB is literally almost operating month to month, which is really hard for providers to then develop in a way that they, you know, can be a little bit more fleet of foot.

Additionally, some participants described how the **provider financial stability has been impacted when outcomes have not been reached for reasons outside of their control**, such as attendance or lower referrals than expected.

We haven't always had the volumes of young people through that we would have liked. COVID was smack bang in the middle, obviously, so that had a massive, massive impact and obviously because of those things the funds, in terms of what we were paying out, haven't been as high as we would have liked.

However, provider participants stress that Big Picture Invest has always provided BPD with funds when needed, for example to cover costs such as staffing during cash-flow issues.

I have to say there has never been a single point since I've been here that [name of person at Big Picture Invest] has not managed to get me the funding for stuff that I needed, and I know I don't know what magic he does to make that happen, but he does and it's never been a case where we've not had what we've needed.

To support providers within the outcome submission/payment cycle, BPI agreed to provide BPD with **a monthly service fee from May 2023**, which has helped BPD reach a level of stability in the last year. Vega College has always received a monthly service fee since its inception. However, as one or two CDC participants pointed out, providing a service fee to support providers moves the risk to the investor.

For the investment partner that isn't particularly good for them because they run the risk of not having enough funds coming in from the outcome payments to be able to then fund the service charge.

Another key concern described by all three groups of participants is that **the SIB outcomes measures have not worked well as they do not fit the realities of the contexts in which they operate or capture the true outcomes that the initiative is aiming to achieve**. Participants describe the outcomes measures as too 'black and white', when they needed to be more nuanced with an emphasis on quality. Outcomes measures have remained an ongoing issue throughout the project, despite CDC, providers and the investor working together to find ways to improve them/make them work.

We've realised now as well that the outcomes that were chosen don't necessarily fit particularly well. And we've had quite a few contract variations to make sure that we are capturing what we need to capture and some of the outcomes have changed in that time from when the contract was set up to how it looks now.

How do you make sure that the outcomes that you've requested have a genuine basis in performance? And I think that isn't an easy thing to really get right and takes time and so, on reflection, I think early in the project we probably could have done with more time set aside to be able to make sure we got that right.

Participants provided examples of issues with outcomes measures, some of which have been discussed already in this report. **The attendance outcome for example is described as being out of providers' control.**

You might be at risk of not paying the provider even though they're doing everything they can do to be able to deliver strong attendance.

In addition, some suggest that the payment structure for outcomes does not reward the true positive outcomes delivered. For example, rather than paying for proxy outcomes to indicate progress such as attendance, payments should focus on the ultimate outcome of successful reintegration to mainstream, or transition to post-16 destinations. One participant explained that Vega College does not receive the full payment for a young person who does not meet the attendance targets, despite achieving the main aim of the provision, namely GCSE passes and a post-16 destination.

I guess what it misses is that it doesn't pay for the ultimate hard outcome, which is that the student is reintegrated into KS3, or that the young person isn't outside the educational system, isn't NEET, but is in a positive and productive post-16 destination. To me, they're what you should be paying for but actually we can't claim funding for those ultimate outcomes in the way the current contract is structured.

Ultimately, as this same participant points out, the outcomes measures chosen have been more of a hindrance than an enabler to developing these interventions and at the scale desired as they detract from focussing on what needs to be done contractually to achieve those outcomes.

We're paying for proxies of what we really want to achieve, so attention is drawn to paying for things and evidencing things which are slightly disconnected from the ultimate objective, which is a great educational offer appropriate to children's needs.

What needs to change to improve this way of contracting in the future?

Given our participants experiences of the SIB model, we were keen to understand their views on what could be improved. Some participants suggested simplifying the monitoring process, for example, CDC's existing monitoring process might provide all the information needed by a SIB and be less labour intensive.

A common suggestion was a **part-outcomes based model**, for example a set service fee every month with outcomes-based payments on top of that (which is what eventually happened during the course of the project).

I think that there perhaps needs to be some in-between point where there is an agreed fee set up that says, "Right, we'll buy these many places," and then a part-outcome based element to it as well, so the providers have to deliver the outcomes the Local Authority expect them to deliver.

This participant also suggested that sampling based on trust is the way forward, rather than providing evidence of outcomes for every single learner.

I think the idea that they have to go through every single learner rather than sampling has sometimes slowed down the process.

Finally, two CDC participants reported that useful learning from this project is already being applied on prioritising the most effective outcomes when working with SIB models. For example, a new Social and Emotional Health Hub initiative allows providers to gradually grow numbers of young people as the initiative gains confidence.

What we've done is put five or six in initially, let them settle, build confidence in the system and then we're slowly increasing it. So, I think we've learned a lesson already from it.

Summary

The above discussion highlights a number of benefits and challenges to the use of an SIB model in the case of Doncaster's AP. There were clear benefits of the SIB model from the perspective of some stakeholders, not least the opportunity to try an innovative approach with minimal financial risk to the Local Authority. However, there were also numerous challenges, many of which have been documented in previous evaluations of SIBs. The key challenge is the amount of time and resource that goes into monitoring an SIB funding model. While there was limited financial risk to CDC, there was a great deal of resource needed to monitor outcomes which brings into question how financially beneficial it really is.

A further issue concerns the nature of the outcomes being monitored and therefore paid. A key criticism of SIB models is that they may not be focused on the right outcomes and might create perverse incentives. In the case of Doncaster's AP, the outcomes had to be amended on several occasions with concerns still remaining. For example, the attendance outcome does not allow for recognition of individual circumstances and is often outside the control of the provider. Moreover,

there are many valuable outcomes achieved by learners that are not recognised because they do not relate to payment (e.g. qualification attainment and post-16 education).

These issues are not unique to Doncaster, and despite increased use of SIBs, there is still relatively little evidence of their efficacy in the real world. It is also impossible to tell if the outcomes achieved would have differed with a more traditional funding approach, but given the short-term funding nature of the SIB, which evolved to giving providers a set income (before outcomes were achieved) it is possible that providers may have been able to achieve more with greater financial stability. Despite these issues, it is clear from our interviews that everyone involved in this programme has worked tirelessly to make the best of the funding model and ensure the continued operation of BPD and Vega.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This evaluation sought to address three key aims:

Aim 1: Evaluate the impact of Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College as a model of delivery for young people.

Aim 2: Evaluate the process of implementing the Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College model of delivery for CYP.

Aim 3: Analyse the efficacy and successfulness of a Social Impact Bond outcomes-based mechanism of contracting.



In meeting these aims we analysed a range of information sources, including an evidence review of existing literature, interviews with key stakeholders and parents/carers, online surveys with delivery staff, schools and parents/carers, workshops with CYP, available data on outcomes and analysis of individual learning plans. Our key findings and recommendations are detailed below.

Aim 1 – The impact of BPD and Vega College in Doncaster:

Key findings:

- BPD and Vega have; helped CYP to improve their engagement in learning; helped CYP to understand more about themselves and their triggers and have strategies in place to address them and; helped parents/carers feel involved in their child's education and have a positive experience with a learning provider.
- BPD and Vega have also improved the proportion of outcomes achieved year on year, demonstrating improved efficacy.
- 5 key mechanisms were identified that helped in achieving the above outcomes, including a personalised learning experience, a commitment to lifelong learning, an inclusive, supportive and non-judgemental approach, a focus on mental health and wellbeing and a partnership approach to education.
- Despite these successes, a number of contextual issues were identified that were seen to limit the success of the AP, including a lack of referrals, problematic outcome measures, lack of communication with schools, staff changes and sometimes a lack of engagement with parents/carers.



Recommendations:

- We suggest that as the programme moves into the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System, outcome measures are reviewed to capture the breadth of impact for CYP and parents/carers that we have identified during this evaluation.
- We have been able to answer the vast majority of research questions that were agreed at the start of this evaluation, however, it is important to highlight an important question that could not be answered fully: How outcomes for CYP have changed over time, meaning from before referral to post integration. We discovered that there has been limited data sharing between schools and the AP providers to allow this question to be answered meaningfully. Both BPD and Vega have data on what CYP achieve in their settings, but data on attendance, behaviour and educational outcomes in the mainstream settings (post reintegration) are not available.

This is something that CDC may want to explore moving forward as this would help to strengthen the evidence on the impact of the AP.

- Despite the challenges of arranging work placements for students at Vega, both CYP and the placement providers spoke highly of the opportunity. We suggest Vega are supported to continue with this, while recognising the challenges involved (and the fact not all CYP are ready for a placement).
- We have identified a number of contextual challenges to the AP, many of which are being addressed by the move to the CDC Specialist Education Flexible Procurement System and the Triage panel from September 2024. However, we would recommend CDC, BPD and Vega work together to address some of the remaining challenges, particularly closer working with schools and parents/carers to support learners to achieve their full potential.
- A key issue that will remain post September 2024 is the lack of travel arrangements for the AP settings. We appreciate travel is not provided to other AP settings in Doncaster but it has been raised by a number of participants as a potential barrier to attendance. This is perhaps something CDC could consider seeking funding for – potentially through the social value procurement process⁵⁴.

Aim 2 – The process of implementation

Key findings:

- The AP has changed considerably since the initial concept in 2019.
- Some participants felt there was a lack of understanding regarding what was involved initially, and not a clear enough articulation of the need and how it could be addressed (resulting in a setting that could not meet the needs of learners).
- This resulted in the closure of the school following an Ofsted visit, but it was noted that the school had not had enough time to develop their approach at the time of the inspection.
- Following the Ofsted inspection, all parties worked hard to come up with a new approach to the AP, resulting in a focus on key transition points (thereby identifying a clear need).
- The revised contract focused on KS3 (BPD) and KS4 (Vega College) and both settings have evolved over the last 3 years to deliver an effective AP to children in Doncaster (as evidenced in the previous section of this chapter).
- Despite considerable challenges along the way, it is clear that all those involved have shown considerable commitment and dedication to finding solutions, the result being an AP that meets a clear need in Doncaster.



Recommendations:

- There has been a considerable amount of learning as a result of this AP. This has resulted in the creation of an AP that meets a clear need for CYP in Doncaster. This is also the first time that a BPL approach has been used in the UK. We feel there is much that other local authorities and schools could learn from the process of implementation in Doncaster and recommend CDC sharing their experiences as widely as possible.

⁵⁴ [How the Procurement Act 2023 will unlock Social Value across the supply chain \(socialvalueportal.com\)](https://socialvalueportal.com)

Aim 3 – The SIB funding model

Key findings:

- The SIB model was seen to have supported CDC to take an innovative approach with minimal financial risk.
- The flexibility of the model was key in seeing the provision through the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- CDC has learned from this SIB contract and has changed ways of working for future contracts.
- The model was seen as very resource intensive (for both providers and CDC) raising questions as to how cost-effective it actually was.
- Finding the ‘right’ outcomes to measure is challenging – they have been amended numerous times but some outcomes are still outside the providers’ control. Focusing on certain outcomes also misses the other valuable outcomes that are achieved.
- The financial instability and short-term nature of SIB funding has been challenging and was seen to have impacted staffing and innovation (although as time progressed, the model changed to provide more financial stability).
- There was a clear commitment of all parties to address challenges and find solutions. This undoubtedly facilitated the continued success of Doncaster’s AP.



Recommendations:

- Given the limited evidence base currently available on the use of SIBs in the UK, we feel there is much that can be learnt from the experience in Doncaster. Indeed, CDC have already taken learnings and modified how they use SIBs in other areas of the LA. We recommend CDC, BPI, BPD and Vega share their experiences (both positive and negative) with other areas interested in this funding model.
- One of the key improvements suggested by those involved in this project is the use of a ‘part-outcomes’ model, where providers are given a set income and paid for outcomes achieved on top. This is how other SIBs have evolved and reflects how this project worked in the end. This is important learning for anyone considering using an SIB model as it reflects the reality of providing a consistent service. We suggest the LCF and DCMS consider evaluating this more fully.

Appendices



Appendix A: Example information sheet for CYP

Appendix B: Example information sheet for parents/carers

Appendix C: Information sheet for stakeholders

Appendix A:

You're invited!

You are being invited to take part in a short workshop with two researchers who would like to know what you think about coming to Big Picture Doncaster. Here is some information to help you decide if you would like to take part.



When and where will it happen? Who will be there?

You will be part of a group of about 4 other learners and two of your learning advisors will be with you. The workshop will be on a day you attend BPD and will last no more than an hour and a half.



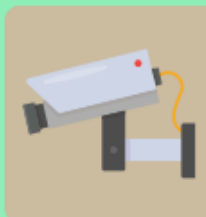
What will I need to do?

In the workshop we will ask the group a few questions about your time at BPD and how it compares to school. After the workshop we would like to look at your learning plans (if you agree). In the workshop you can create a collage or picture of things that make you happy (we will bring lots of magazines, pens etc). You don't have to create anything if you don't want to.



Do I have to take part and can I change my mind?

You don't have to take part if you don't want to. We are asking your parents/guardian if they are happy for you to take part but even if they say yes, you can say no. You can also change your mind, choose not to answer a question and you can leave the workshop at any time. There will be no consequence for you if you change your mind.



Are you recording the workshop?

No. We will not be recording it, but we will make some notes. We won't write down your name or anything else about you - other than what you tell us about BPD/School.



What else do I need to know?

We know that talking about school or coming to BPD might be upsetting. Your learning advisors will be there to support you if that happened and you can leave the workshop at any time.

As a thank-you for your time, we will give you a £25 online shopping voucher (we will ask your parents for an email address we can send it to).

If you want to take part, please fill in the consent form and send back to BPD.

Appendix B:

Vega College Evaluation

What is the purpose of the study?

Doncaster Council have commissioned M.E.L Research to evaluate the Vega College alternative provision. They would like to understand the impact it has had on children and young people and their parents.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a parent whose child has attended Vega College.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this evaluation is completely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part at any time, without giving a reason. Your decision to take part (or not) will not be shared with anyone outside of the evaluation team. You can decide to withdraw from the research at any time up until 14 days after the date of your interview.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to take part in an interview with one of our researchers, either by MS Teams or telephone. The interview will ask about your child's experience of learning in mainstream school, how that compares to Vega College and how involved you have felt as a parent. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded.

Are there any risks to taking part?

We understand that you are very busy and that giving up an hour of your time may be difficult. We are therefore offering a £50 shopping voucher for taking part in the interview as token of appreciation.

It is also possible that talking about your child's experience of school and Vega College may be upsetting. You are in complete control of the interview, you don't need to answer any questions that you don't want to and we can stop or pause the interview at any time. If you become upset during the interview we will have a list of local support services we can share with you.

How is my personal data protected?

Your personal data are held in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR 2018) and the Market Research Society Code of Practice. M·E·L Research works to the code of conduct of the Market Research Society and are fully accredited **MRS Company Partners**. Personal data about your involvement in this evaluation is not used for any other purpose and is deleted 3 months after the project is complete.

If you would like more information about who we are and how we use the information you've provided including your privacy rights and right to withdraw your consent at any time, please visit www.melresearch.co.uk/privacypolicy.

Is the interview confidential?

M·E·L Research will process your answers in confidence and keep them separate from your name and contact details. All information collected about you from participating in the evaluation will be kept strictly confidential. Everything you say during the interview will remain confidential unless you disclose something that suggests you or another person is at risk of harm. If this were to happen, we would discuss this with you first and keep you updated. We will not use your name in any of the reporting and will instead use an alternative name (pseudonym) - you are welcome to suggest a name to the researcher. Any quotes that we use will not include identifiable information (such as a location, school) to help ensure no-one reading the report can identify you.

Who is M.E.L research?

We are a social research agency based in Birmingham – we're a friendly bunch of social researchers who are passionate about making a positive difference to people and communities across the UK. Social and market research asks people for their opinions on a wide range of subjects from healthcare to policing and from local government to shopping. This information is used by their clients so they can improve and provide services that people want. The company operates to the Market Research Society's (MRS) Code of Conduct and is an MRS company partner. They adhere strictly to the Data Protection Act 2018 and do not pass personal data to clients or any third party without prior consent from individuals. M·E·L Research's Privacy Notice can be accessed here: <https://melresearch.co.uk/privacy-policy/>.

What will happen to the findings of the research?

The findings of this evaluation will be shared with Doncaster Council and the project partners (who may share it more widely). In the evaluation report there will be no personal details and nothing to identify your involvement.

Next steps

If you are happy to take part in an interview for this project, or if you have any questions, please email Holly at Holly.Taylor-Dunn@melresearch.co.uk

Alternatively you can contact Gill Galloway at Vega College – Ggalloway@vegacollege.com



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Consent questions

The interviewer will ask you these questions before starting the interview.

- I have read and understood the above information (if you would prefer someone read the form out to you, you can request this when you make contact with us).

- I agree voluntarily to participate in the research.
- I understand that my personal information will be stored securely and deleted 3 months after the evaluation has been completed.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research by stopping the interview at any time and up until 14 days after the interview.
- I consent to anonymised quotes being used in the evaluation report.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and a written transcript made.

Appendix C:

Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College Evaluation

What is the purpose of the study?

Doncaster Council have commissioned M.E.L Research to evaluate Big Picture Doncaster and Vega College alternative provision settings. They would like to understand how the settings developed, the impact they have had, and what people think about the funding model (if this is something you are familiar with).

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited to take part because you are a key stakeholder in this project and you have a valuable insight. We are hoping to interview stakeholders from a range of partners involved in this project, including Big Picture Doncaster, Vega, Doncaster Council and others.

Do I have to take part?

Taking part in this evaluation is completely voluntary. You are free to stop taking part at any time, without giving a reason. Your decision to take part (or not) will not be shared with anyone outside of the evaluation team. You can decide to withdraw from the research at any time up until 14 days after the date of your interview.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to take part in an interview with one of our researchers, either by MS Teams or telephone. The interview will ask about your professional experiences of working on this project. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded.

Are there any risks to taking part?

We do not foresee any risks to taking part in this research, other than the time you give up for the interview.

How is my personal data protected?

Your personal data are held in accordance with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR 2018) and the Market Research Society Code of Practice. M·E·L Research works to the code of conduct of the Market Research Society and are fully accredited **MRS Company Partners**. Personal data about your involvement in this evaluation is not used for any other purpose and is deleted 3 months after the project is complete.

If you would like more information about who we are and how we use the information you've provided including your privacy rights and right to withdraw your consent at any time, please visit www.melresearch.co.uk/privacypolicy.

Is the interview confidential?

M·E·L Research will process your answers in confidence and keep them separate from your name and contact details. All information collected about you from participating in the evaluation will be kept strictly confidential. Everything you say during the interview will remain confidential unless you disclose something that suggests you or another person is at risk of harm. If this were to happen, we would discuss this with you first and keep you updated. We will not use your name in any of the reporting and will instead use an alternative name (pseudonym) - you are welcome to suggest a name to the researcher. Any quotes that we use will not include identifiable information (such as a location, school or job title), however, we cannot guarantee complete anonymity because in small projects there is a possibility that someone may be able to attribute a quote to you.

What will happen to the findings of the research?

The findings of this evaluation will be shared with Doncaster Council and the project partners (who may share it more widely). In the evaluation report there will be no personal details and nothing to identify your involvement.

Who is M.E.L research?

We are a social research agency based in Birmingham – we're a friendly bunch of social researchers who are passionate about making a positive difference to people and communities across the UK. Social and market research asks people for their opinions on a wide range of subjects from healthcare to policing and from local government to shopping. This information is used by their clients so they can improve and provide services that people want. The company operates to the Market Research

Society's (MRS) Code of Conduct and is an MRS company partner. They adhere strictly to the Data Protection Act 2018 and do not pass personal data to clients or any third party without prior consent from individuals. M-E-L Research's Privacy Notice can be accessed here: <https://melresearch.co.uk/privacy-policy/>.

Next steps

If you are happy to take part in an interview for this project, or if you have any questions, please email Holly at Holly.Taylor-Dunn@melresearch.co.uk

Alternatively you can contact Liv Lawson at Doncaster Council Olivia.Lawson@Doncaster.gov.uk



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Consent questions

The interviewer will ask you these questions before starting the interview.

- I have read and understood the above information.
- I agree voluntarily to participate in the research.

- I understand that my personal information will be stored securely and deleted 3 months after the evaluation has been completed.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research by stopping the interview at any time and up until 14 days after the interview.
- I consent to anonymised quotes being used in the evaluation report.
- I understand that the interview will be recorded and a written transcript made.

