Suffolk County Council's FRIENDS AND NETWORKS

External Evaluation Report
(Abridged Version)
April 2025

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Evaluation Report

This document contains an abridged version of the full evaluation report, summarising key findings and presenting case study examples. A more in-depth presentation of findings can be found in the full report.

Abbreviations/Acronyms

AP	Alternative Provision
BSO	Business Support Officer
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
EWO	Education Welfare Officers
FSM	Free School Meals
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LA	Local Authority
LLO	Local Liaison Officer
PDP	Personal Development Plan
SBIF	Short Breaks Innovation Fund
SCC	Suffolk County Council
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
UEA	University of East Anglia

Contents

Introduction

Friends and Networks (FaN) is delivered by Suffolk County Council (SCC) and funded by the Department of Education's (DfE) Short Breaks Innovation Fund (SBIF). Between April 2023 and January 2025 (the latest data available to the evaluation team), it supported a total of 259 children and young people (CYP) through activity-based provision, working closely with a local liaison officer (LLO) to improve their school attendance. The project has also supported CYP through summer holiday sessions (FaN report, January 2025) and provided sleepover clubs (between February and March).

This evaluation developed a multi-method qualitative research approach *to understand and explore stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of the Friends & Networks project.*

To address this broad research aim, the following five research objectives were developed to guide the evaluation work:

1   To provide qualitative impact data about FaN's success to the DfE and broader stakeholders.

2   To report on the project's progress against its key performance indicators (KPI).

3   To evaluate the perceived impact that the project is having on the lives of children and young people and their families.

4   To collaborate with key stakeholders to evaluate the processes and procedures related to project implementation.

5   To reflect on the implementation of the project, its key lessons and processes, and the scope of future attendance-based initiatives.

SCC commissioned the University of East Anglia (UEA) to conduct this evaluation in October 2024. Ethical approval for this evaluation was granted on 12th November.

The evidence base of this evaluation combines documentary analysis, approximately 200,000 words of interview data with FaN team members, and two in-person focus groups with parents and children involved with the project. Moreover, through a bespoke survey, the evaluation team gathered views of broader stakeholders, such as schools, activity providers, and other key workers.

This evaluation took place between November 2024 and April 2025.

Background and Context

The Short Break Innovation Fund (SBIF) allowed the Department of Education (DfE) to provide grants to seven Local Authorities (LAs)[1] in the 2022-23 financial year to 'improve access for underrepresented groups, and test innovative models of delivery'[2]. The DfE stated it would be 'delivering a total of £30 million over three years to Local Authorities' to provide 'short breaks' and 'test new approaches' to support parents/ carers with children with disabilities'[3].

In April 2023, the DfE announced an extension to its original scheme by opening it to ten further areas of the country. Suffolk County Council had been unsuccessful in the project's first year; however, it was one of these beneficiaries in year two with its FaN proposal.

Each funded LA developed and delivered a bespoke provision. For instance, the Camden Rebuilding Bridges project brought together many partners and stakeholders, such as the London Borough of Camden - Children's Commissioning Team, Children and Young People Disability Service, Educational Psychology Service, Integrated Youth Support Service, and many other voluntary groups. The project provided CYP with experienced mentors, offered respite support for parents/families and developed an Integrated Youth Support Service and Independent Living Hub[4].

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[1] Only six out of the seven LAs took during year 1. One LA posteponed until year 2.

[2] IFF Research (2023) Short Breaks Innovation Fund Year 1 Evaluation Research report. Department for Education, p. 77. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/656712d275007400131dedbd/Short_Breaks_Innovation_Fund_Process_Evaluation_Y1.pdf.

[3] DfE (2023) 'Disabled children to benefit from funding for short breaks'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/disabled-children-to-benefit-from-funding-for-short-breaks.

[4] Dean, C. (2024) 'Camden Rebuilding Bridges - External Evaluation Report, Year 2'. Ascend Consultancy

Suffolk County Council and Friends and Networks

A focus on increasing attendance for school pupils has become an increasingly central component of the government's strategy to improve social mobility. Currently, 1 in 5 pupils nationally miss 10% of school[5]. SCC's 2024 CYP profile describes a rate higher than the national rate.

A combination of socio-economic challenges shapes Suffolk's school attendance backdrop. The CYP[7] profile describes 15.4% of Suffolk children aged 0-15 living in relatively low-income families (p17). Although this is slightly below the national average, some deprived urban areas such as Ipswich and Lowestoft have over 40% of pupils eligible for free school meals. This figure suggests condensed poverty pockets.

As a result of increased adversity (exacerbated by the pandemic and pressures from the cost of living), eligibility for FSMs in Suffolk has nearly doubled, from 10.8% in 2017–18 to 21.0% in 2022–23 (p19). There is a substantive correlation between poverty and lower school attendance. Nationally, special needs and disadvantaged children have higher rates of repeat absences (CYP Profile 24th October). According to the profile document, these patterns are reflected in Suffolk, where socio-economic factors and SEND needs play a significant role in attendance patterns (p20). In short, the CYP profile points to multiple factors that could drive absenteeism, including the impact of poverty, mental health/EBSA, SEND and, in some cases, safeguarding or youth justice issues.

In 2021/22, 18.5% of primary school pupils (9,100) and 30.7% of secondary school pupils (12,284) were identified as persistent absentees in Suffolk schools. This means these pupils missed 10% or more of the[6] possible sessions in the academic year.

Friends and Networks Project

FaN's main objectives involve:

1 — Improving school attendance of children referred to the project

2 — Enhancing the wellbeing and confidence of CYP

3 — Enhancing social inclusion, through connecting often isolated young people with a supportive adult (such as the project's LLO or through their activity providers)

4 — Improving family engagement by working with families to support young people throughout the provision

The project was communicated to schools and other stakeholders as 'a child-led approach to reengagement through activity-based, short-break sessions', thereby supporting 'school-aged children with emotional based school avoidance (EBSA) and/or special education needs and disabilities (SEND), who are experiencing difficulties in maintaining a full-time education placement or facing placement breakdown'. In practice, the project targeted children aged 8-16 who had 60% or less school-based attendance.

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[5] DfE (2024a) 'Thousands of pupils receive support to boost school attendance'. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-pupils-receive-support-to-boost-school-attendance.

[6] Suffolk Knowledge, Intelligence and Evidence Team (2024) A profile of children and young people in Suffolk: Data and insights that can support our understanding in relation to the Healthy Child Programme, p. 111. Available at: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/CYP-Profile-Oct-24.pdf.

[7] Ibid.

Key Findings

Reported progress against project KPIs

This evaluation presents FaN's current progress against its five KPIs. This data is taken from FaN's reporting to the DfE (January 2025).

Benefit 1 is constructed from four KPIs tracking improvement to a CYP's: i) attendance, ii) self-esteem and confidence and iii) emotional wellbeing. The fourth KPI refers to iv) reduction in parental/carer stress and/or anxiety levels regarding their child's wellbeing/ interactions.

v Currently, the project is achieving below on improving attendance (41% vs a target of 50%).

^ It is achieving above its target on emotional well-being (58% vs a target of 50%).

v It is achieving below its target on confidence and self-esteem (54% vs a target of 75%).

- At the time of writing, there is not enough available data to report on the effect on parents/carers.

Benefit 2 is assessed using one KPI that tracks the project's effectiveness in helping CYP, with multi-agency support, to maintain their education placement. Currently, 41% of CYP—29 out of 70 CYP—are maintaining their placements, slightly below the target of 50%.

The FaN Team and Approach

There was a broad diversity in backgrounds between the project lead and LLOs. Some had previous council experience or had taught at different ages. In contrast, others joined the project with other long-standing careers, such as the police.

The evaluation found that the diverse backgrounds of the FaN team enriched their capacity to adapt approaches to individual CYP needs. LLOs predominantly adopted individual approaches tailored towards their CYP. Still, some used family approaches when appropriate or expanded into whole school provision, particularly as the project evolved and learning about what worked evolved.

FaN LLOs adopted individual, family, or whole-school approaches with their CYP referrals. In interviews, LLOs noted that most of their approaches had been individual approaches solely focused on the CYP and getting them to match and engage with the activity provision they find most suitable.

> *How I approach a young person could be different to how LLO 1, or LLO2, or 3, or 4, or 5 would approach a young person because one- my background, two- perhaps my expectations of that person. And I suppose, Team Lead's job was trying to match the right person to manage and work with that young person and family as best as she could within the geographical constraints that everybody had with their travel and their home working environment, really.* (FaN Team Interview, LLO)

Activity Provision

The FaN project was designed to provide engaging and alternative activities for children currently disengaged from traditional education. These included outside education such as bushcraft and farming, multimedia work, and physical events such as rock climbing, horse riding and boxing. These offered diverse experiences, recognising the importance of reaching children in ways beyond the classroom that could appeal to different interests and help build a positive connection to learning.

Activity Providers:

Avid Climbing	Indoor climbing area and gym
The Cragg Climbing Wall	Rock climbing wall
Deben Community Farm	Care farming, engaging with farm animals
The Dogs Squad	Working with dogs, conservation tasks, teamwork
East Coast Adventures	Archery, axe throwing, geotagging, mountain biking, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding and bushcraft
East Face Climbing Wall	Indoor wall for rope climbing
Green Light Trust	Conservation and bushcraft
Hill Farm Riding School	Riding, stable management, pony care
Iliya's Kitchen	Interactive, hands-on cooking classes, age-appropriate cookery techniques in a fun, relaxed and safe environment
Innov8 Workshops	Range of workshops; music, creative writing, art, photography, maths, cooking, bike repair, beauty, allotment and woodwork
Involve Active	Bushcraft, nature, growing vegetables and maintaining woodland areas
Ipswich Community Media	Music, media and podcasting with IO radio
Lyward Colley	Workshops in music, wood and art and mentoring to instil self-worth and autonomy
Mindjam	Digital skills such as game design, 3D design, digital art, animation, music and video editing, online games, with mentoring, online activity
Offshoot Foundation	Workshops and programs that empower youth to explore the world of filmmaking, hands-on experiences, cultivating technical skills and fostering an understanding of storytelling
Outloud Music!	Music and percussion workshops with gaming, podcasting and video sessions with iRock

Out Space	Course fishing and fly fishing
Press Start Gaming Lounge	Video games, high spec gaming, old school consoles, pool table and VR
Reboot Education	Developing IT skills including coding, website building, 3D printing, graphic design and art therapy, breakfast and reflection time
Red Rose Community Farm	Care for livestock, planting, harvesting, conservation
Sensory Wise	Sensory equipment including fidget toys, art, creativity, sporty or calming, chosen by children and family
Stagecoach	Singing, dancing and acting, not only to perform on stage but also, to perform better in life
Sunflower Artistry	Ecofriendly art, focus on wellness and creative expression, activities online
TF Music	Tuition in guitar, bass, vocals, piano, keys, drums, ukulele, production and theory
Ultimate Boxing	Learn to box and improve fitness

In the stakeholder survey, activity providers responded positively to working with the project.

> *We have had a great mixture of FaN children throughout our time providing the project and to see how the horses and their time learning to ride has made a lot of the children happy and wanting to carry on riding after the FaN project is brilliant for us. (activity provider, stakeholder survey)*

LLOs generally expressed that there was a good selection of activities to offer CYP. However, this did depend partly on location.

Attendance

FaN's core rationale was to support each participant in the project in making measurable gains in their attendance and/or, in more embedded cases, to return to regular school-based education. At the time of this evaluation, 41% of its CYP who completed their FaN package increased their school attendance. Across the KPI of attendance, the UEA evaluation team found three key areas: a) difficulty converting confidence/wellbeing into attendance improvement, b) connecting activities design with increasing attendance and c) the potential trade-offs in the 60% threshold for allowing FaN project intervention.

Emotional Wellbeing

At the time of writing, FaN reports that 58% of its CYP report improving their emotional wellbeing after engaging with the project. This is the one KPI that is currently above its target. Although FaN was primarily funded as an attendance-based project, improving a particular CYP's emotional wellbeing was regularly cited by LLOs describing the complex nature of many of the cases they were working on. In the same way, improvement to emotional wellbeing often contributed to substantial changes that had been achieved through the intervention work of the project.

Confidence and Self-Esteem

LLOs reflected that they could often see a 'big increase in their confidence and wellbeing' but this did not always convert into improved attendance (FaN Team Interview, LLO). We also heard several positive examples of FaN's impact on CYP's confidence in the focus group from parents too. Across every interview, the FaN project team highlighted the value they placed on confidence as a foundation for better attendance–whether this was demonstrated through developing 'a skill' or 'feeling more confident in something' (FaN team interview). Children in the focus group mirrored this, suggesting that they were not always focused primarily on attendance.

Reducing Parental Stress and Anxiety

When writing this evaluation, the FaN team does not have complete data for this KPI. The evaluation team presents a combination of interview data and parent responses from the focus group below. Every LLO mentioned the importance of building trust with families throughout the project. Setting this foundation meant that parents were more likely to be receptive to the project intervention, work with the LLOs, and feel some benefit from FaN. By and large, parents expressed a positive response relating to the activity provision. However, they noted that additional organisational and administrative pressures came with supporting CYP on the project. These pressures were expressed multiple times throughout the parent focus group.

Multi-Agency Support

FaN reports that 41% of CYP with multi-agency involvement maintain their educational placement. This KPI was added by the DfE once the project had started, meaning that the FaN team had to backdate this metric across approximately 200 children (FaN team member, interview). The evaluation team did not hear much about how this KPI was targeted. Instead, it learned how the project team worked with broader stakeholders, sharing information and picking up referrals. In the focus group, parents referred to a multitude of stakeholders who referred CYP to the project, including social workers, support workers, EWOs, groups such as Parents Together, and in one case, the police (through a multi-agency safeguarding hub) – (focus group, parents).

Perceived Project Success

The evaluation team sought to understand where FaN had been successful according to its leadership, team and wider stakeholders. This approach draws on more contextualised evidence than quantitative KPI measures by utilising interviews with the FaN team, focus groups with project participants, a stakeholder survey and project documents. At a project level, the FaN team pointed to improvements in confidence/ self-esteem and small wins with individual children. Every LLO mentioned this. Parents also echoed this in their focus group by saying the project had had a marked positive impact on their CYP. Surveyed broader stakeholders were overwhelmingly positive about the project's impact on the confidence of some CYP. However, this did not always translate to improved attendance, and the improvement dropped once the project stopped engaging with them.

Perceived Project Challenges

The evaluation also sought to understand project challenges through interviews with the FaN team, focus groups with project participants, a stakeholder survey, and project documents. Challenges ranged from the complex context that the project worked within to the complex cases (beyond attendance) that LLOs faced and 'hidden costs associated with recruitment because of the compressed and time-limited nature of the project' (FaN team interview).

Other themes throughout the evaluation included geographical issues, such as securing an activity that a CYP wanted to do in their immediate vicinity, and if not close by, meant organising taxis (organisational issues). Although things improved as the project developed, LLOs mentioned the sometimes 'clunky' nature of working with internal and external partners and waiting for people to respond. There were also challenges with communicating with some schools. There was also some variability in how many CYP engaged fully with the activity provision.

Relationship with Stakeholders

As perhaps expected, within this evaluation, the findings suggest that the project and its staff had diverse working relationships with a broad range of stakeholder groups, significantly impacting the perceived success and impact of its implementation. In general, families/carers, in addition to CYP, spoke positively about their relationship with the project and were highly supportive and appreciative of LLOs and their efforts, especially when considering the challenges associated with schools and the limited success of previous projects they had been a part of. Furthermore, there was a clear alignment between activity providers and the project's aim, resulting in a strong working relationship and 'buy-in' from these individuals.

However, in contrast, the relationship between schools and the project varied considerably on a case-by-case basis, with schools perceived to be either an enabler or a hindrance to the project's overall success. Moreover, the relationship with the DfE was largely neutral, but there was a sense that 'more could be done' to support the project and to ensure KPIs were consistent and not open to change. Finally, although the relationship between the project and other LAs was positive, the DfE could have done more to facilitate this relationship.

Case Study 1: Reboot Education

CYP 1 expressed an interest in IT and technology, so received a 12-week placement at Reboot Education, an alternative provider that supports children to

'develop and learn a range of computer skills that will help them engage in future learning and improve their future employment prospects.'

https://reboot-education.co.uk/

This is categorised as an individual approach activity. The provider also facilitates broader therapeutic activities for young people. The activity provider gave a detailed weekly account of CYP 1's learning and engagement throughout the 12-week placement.

The Intervention

CYP 1 took part in three main types of activity during their placement with Reboot Education; STEM-based activities, cooking as a form of therapeutic activity, and 'no tech time', such as playing group-based games.

In one session, CYP 1 learned about Artificial Intelligence (AI), and 'worked with an activity leader and another pupil on learning about AI and the pros and cons about the use of AI'. They then produced alternative film posters and 'funny pictures using AI' (PDP review).

The activity provider highlights that using 3D printers is something that CYP 1 'clearly enjoys'. Having received a 1:1 lesson in the first week on how to use the design software, they went on to produce a range of items and develop their 3D design skills. In his final session at Reboot Education, they worked on a challenge with a partner, showing newfound teamwork and leadership skills, as well as problem-solving and technical skills. Some of CYP 1's 3D printed creations are pictured here.

CYP 1 fully understood the concept of the task and was able to create an effective design for their half of the model. They then helped their partner to make sure their model had the same measurements, they then created between them a grove for the two trees to fit together. CYP 1 had the great idea of importing the 2 designs into the CAD program and checking if they fitted together correctly, by simulating the models joining together (Activity Provider, PDP review)

In most sessions, CYP 1 also took part in programming, using coding languages such as Python, and often setting themself independent challenges.

CYP 1 worked independently in a Python coding task and once completed worked on a self-directed challenge of creating their own pong game, using AI to help them (Activity Provider, PDP review)

"CYP 1 likes being given his learning as a challenge and a chance to find their own way to solve the problem" (Activity Provider, PDP review)

Despite not initially being keen, CYP 1 is reported to have developed a real enjoyment of cooking. In the final week, the activity provider writes,

> *CYP 1 enjoys being in the kitchen and collaborated well with their partner to cook a traditional English breakfast for all the other students (Activity Provider, PDP review)*

During "no tech time", CYP 1 took part in games such as UNO, card games and Boggle. Reflecting on this in week 5, the activity provider identifies 'building relationships' with their peers as something that CYP 1 could work on, however in week 7 they report,

"When CYP 1 first started coming to Reboot Education, they were not interested in the cooking activities, where now they are always willing to join in and enjoys themself" (Activity Provider, PDP review)

> *CYP 1 is now starting to form relationships with their peers and is engaging with them in a positive manner (Activity Provider, PDP review)*

Impact on CYP 1, Family and School

CYP 1's placement at Reboot Education was described as a positive experience by CPY 1, parent, school staff and the activity provider.

> *With FaN working alongside the EWO, there has been an improvement in CYP 1's attendance and an improvement in them taking a bit more ownership of their own behaviour and what they can do to attend school more, but to also begin to see school in a more positive way (SENCO, PDP review)*

"We were really pleased with the way CYP 1 engaged with Reboot as we were not initially sure from our first visit there that they would" (SENCO, PDP review)

Attendance increased to 55.3% at the point of the last session with Reboot Education, and is reported to have 'been steadily increasing week by week since the sixth week of Reboot' (PDP review). The PDP review also reports a period of 100% attendance for 8 days, 'which is the longest period CYP 1 has been in school every day since, November 2023'. The school's SENCO also reports observing a more positive relationship between CYP 1 and their parent.

In their PDP review, CYP 1 reports an improvement in their self-rating for 'skills, hobbies and interests', and 'choices and behaviour' both increasing from 3 to 4. They also report an improvement in 'willingness to learn', from 2 to 3. CYP 1 said they were 'on the right track' and 'trying my best, and keep making gradual improvements' (PDP review).

Case Study 2: Offshoot Foundation

The Offshoot Foundation is a registered charity, delivering film education and training to disadvantaged and young people across the UK.   https://www.theoffshootfoundation.co.uk/

The provision took a whole school approach and was held on the school site, during the school day in a classroom.

CYP 2 Targets:

1 Meet other young people at school who will be involved in the whole school approach activity so CYP 2 will feel comfortable in social situations

2 To have a meeting with school, CYP 2 and parent to discuss their start to school, interventions and how to make CYP 2 feel comfortable.

The Intervention

The sessions were 10am until 2pm and featured activities such as filming, editing, make up, directing and creative writing. The plan of the sessions was to plan, design and create a film. It was indicated that the group decided this would be a zombie film (Children's Focus Group).

CYP 2 attended 16 out of the 16 sessions (100%), entitling them to an attendance certificate. They were reported to have 'actively participated in each and every task' and received an AQA Unit Award for their engagement with the project. CYP 2 stated that they wished the project could have gone on for longer but felt that four hours per session was long enough.
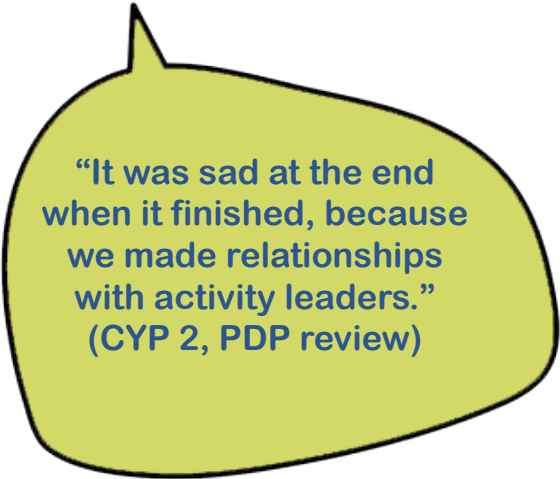
CYP 2 said that they felt that they had contributed a lot to the story line. They learnt about some of the challenges with acting and how to do specialist make up required for a zombie film. During the intervention, CYP 2's parents were engaged with the project, and communicative with the LLO. Dad attended the screening of the zombie film. Their parents both attended the certificate celebration.

Impact on CYP 2, Family and School
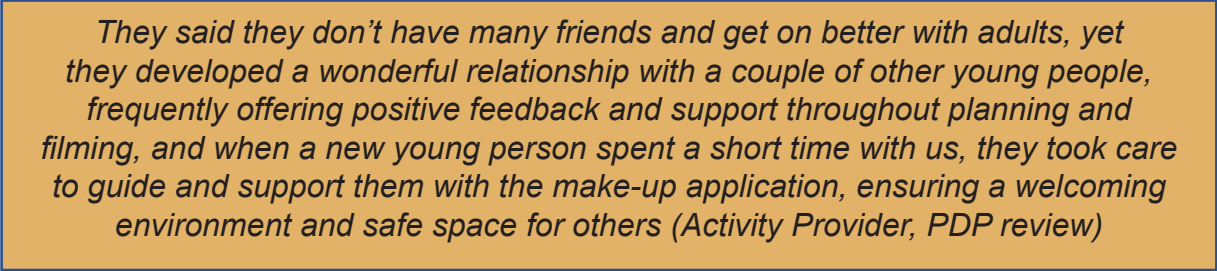
CYP 2 was clear about their needs and struggles from the outset and highlighted that they had few friends and prefers the company of adults. The activity leader reported, however, that CYP 2 developed 'wonderful relationships' with some of the young people in the group and supported them with 'positive feedback'. CYP 2 was keen to establish a 'safe space' for the others. CYP 2 explained to the LLO that the intervention took them out of their comfort zone into meeting new people, working in a different part of the school and doing activities not attempted previously.

CYP 2 reported that the filming project made them feel more comfortable around others. The activity leader noted that CYP 2's confidence grew throughout the project. Being supported to develop more self-regulation without repressing their emotions, for example being allowed to 'giggle it out' during an onset of nervous giggles could have enabled this. A teacher has subsequently agreed, noting that CYP 2 has gained confidence in themselves in school.
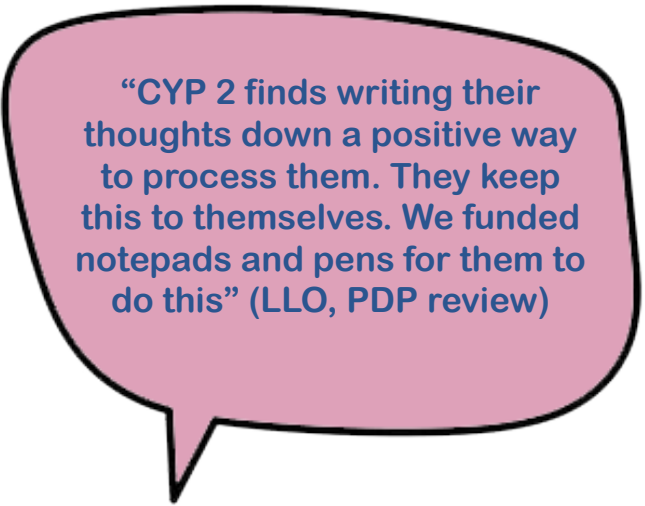
> "It was sad at the end when it finished, because we made relationships with activity leaders." (CYP 2, PDP review)

> *They said they don't have many friends and get on better with adults, yet they developed a wonderful relationship with a couple of other young people, frequently offering positive feedback and support throughout planning and filming, and when a new young person spent a short time with us, they took care to guide and support them with the make-up application, ensuring a welcoming environment and safe space for others (Activity Provider, PDP review)*

The LLO had regular communication with the Head of Year, Pastoral Manager and Thrive and Reflection Room Manager at the school to share information. In addition, the LLO supported Dad during school meetings with the Head of Year and Pastoral Manager. This collaboration has meant that the school has had feedback that may help to create a more comfortable environment for CYP 2. This included a reintegration timetable, use of the Thrive Room, daily check ins with Thrive team, breathing space to allow time out from lessons. The consequence of CYP 2's 100% attendance during the intervention, meant that they pushed themselves more to attend their timetabled sessions and is attending more lessons than before the Friends and Network intervention.

CYP 2's family have been signposted to a range of mental health support that CYP 2 may benefit from. CYP 2 has started to speak more to their parent about their feelings and continues to write their feelings down in the book provided by Friends and Network, as an outlet to support their mental health. CYP 2 is interested in doing more creative activities and is now attending a kayaking club with their parent. CYP 2 feels more confident generally and is more inclined to talk to others to support them in bringing them out of themselves.

> "CYP 2 finds writing their thoughts down a positive way to process them. They keep this to themselves. We funded notepads and pens for them to do this" (LLO, PDP review)

CYP 2 feels that they are more willing to attend lessons at school and both CYP 2 and their parents agree that Friends and Network helped them to re-engage in education. CYP 2 has articulated that they would like to work with The Offshoot Foundation again, potentially creating a film around mental health so that they could share their experiences through this.

Case Study 3: East Coast Adventures

CYP 3 Targets:

1 Increase my school attendance

2 Better my routine at home and at school

3 Increase CYP 3's confidence

CYP 3 initially expressed an interest in being outdoors and doing a range of activities, therefore East Coast Adventures seemed like the right fit. This is categorised as an individual approach.

East Coast Adventures is an outdoor adventure company operating across East Anglia with a team of passionate and professional outdoor instructors. They provide unique and exciting experiences for people of all ages and abilities, from mountain biking to kayaking and bushcraft to archery. https://www.ecadventures.co.uk/

The Intervention

The first session took place on a Thursday from 13:00 to 15:30. The subsequent sessions were extended to 10:00 to 15:30. The group would attend one activity in the morning and another in the afternoon. CYP 3 was in a small group of three in the morning and eight in the afternoon.

CYP 3 participated in outdoor adventurous activities including archery tag, axe throwing and mountain biking. Their attendance was eight out of eight sessions (100%).

The LLO visited during the first session and three other occasions, including the final session, to check that CYP6 was happy and getting on well. CYP 3's attendance and engagement were reported as being good from the outset. While they always engaged and responded well, this became stronger once more rapport was built. CYP 3 related particularly well to two of the activity leaders. This was reiterated by CYP 3 who stated,

> *I liked the social aspect of the activity. I got on with the other young people there and the activity leaders*
> *(CYP 3, PDP review)*

"I enjoyed everything about East Coast Adventures. There were not any activities I did not enjoy"
(CYP 3, PDP review)

CYP 3's parent also said,

> *CYP 3 always came home positive and with a smile on their face after each activity session. Everything about it was good for them (Parent, PDP review)*

"Their teacher is pleased with CYP 3's progress and ability to catch up with the work" (School, PDP review)

Impact on CYP 3, Family and School

While CYP 3's attendance on the programme was excellent, their attendance at school declined during the programme from 23.3% to 15.2%. However, following the programme there was an increase in CYP 3's school attendance. The school reported that they were attending practical lessons, in fact CYP 3 has developed a routine where they get to school early and spend some time in school support before arriving prepared for the lesson. They also work with a friend during these lessons. While CYP 3 does not feel comfortable in school generally, they do feel happier and more comfortable in these practical lessons where they are not sitting down the whole time. CYP 3 expressed a sense of pride in working with their friend on a practical project.

Mum reported that she appreciated the support that CYP 3 has been given to help with their schoolwork. She has found the more regular contact with the school to be reassuring and supportive. Mum indicated that the best way forward is not to put pressure on CYP 3 regarding school attendance as this would likely result in school avoidance.

Overall, CYP 3 and their family felt that the programme helped CYP 3 get their spark back and re-engage with education to some extent through attending a practical subject.

CYP 3 and their family have been signposted to a range of mental health support that CYP 3 may benefit from. They were also recommended a book, by the Education Welfare Officer (EWO), about helping children with fears and worries.

CYP 3 has become more social, meeting up with a friend more often. They get on well with the school staff, although CYP 3 felt that this had not changed drastically since before the programme.

The LLO and EWO arranged a meeting to discuss further thoughts about how to continue to support CYP 3's attendance and engagement in school lessons.

Reflections for the Future

The SBIF (through FaN) follows a pattern of previous short-term initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for young people in Suffolk. For instance, in the Ipswich Opportunity Area project (2017-22), £8,944,158 was spent from 2017 to 2022 to support work across four priorities. As with the Opportunity Areas, FaN is also [a much smaller] time-limited grant. The main issue the project leadership raised was the project's temporary nature. The LA invested much energy into bid writing and recruitment activities, which are always hidden costs for short-term projects. Although FaN was a two-year project, this meant that by the time recruitment was sorted (six months) and the wind-down time (FaN stopped accepting referrals from October 2024), the front of the project only really ran for a year.

The team lead for the project described how she had to write a bid for the second round of funding in September 2023 when the LLOs had only 'been in post for a month' (Team Lead, interview). All stakeholders that we spoke to felt the temporary nature of the project across all of the evaluation instruments.

> *Everything seems to last for like 12 weeks and then they just build their confidence up, just get going and then it all stops and they just go backward.*
> *(Parent, focus group)*

LAs work within their context of short-term funding cycles, which will continue to impact future project designs. It is reasonable that they advocate for longer-term central government allocations aligned with realistic project delivery timelines. First, this deals with the significant hidden costs of bid writing and recruiting staff. Secondly, a longer-term approach could enable a combination of more stable staffing and continuous service delivery for all stakeholders.

Activity Design
At the project level, some reflection should occur about how the activity provision is connected with improving attendance. There was some scepticism across all stakeholders about how activities at the school site would lead to better overall attendance outcomes. One of the easiest ways to mitigate this would be to run activities on the school site and to adopt more whole-school approaches. This could have impacted work with CYP who were disengaged entirely with their attendance, whereas FaN focused much more on improving a CYP's emotional wellbeing and confidence.

Information Sharing
The evaluation team was told that not much was shared between LAs during the two years of the FaN project, especially early on. It seemed like there was a missed opportunity to bring together all funded areas sooner to share best practice. The team leadership did have one meeting with other councils organised by the DfE. However, the FaN team generally worked in isolation throughout the project, likely leading to missed opportunities for both collaboration and mitigating against mistakes that were made in year 1. At the project level, one benefit of FaN starting afresh was the positive perception among some hard-to-reach families. For instance, LLOs described how they could build strong connections with families who were more sceptical of the Council.

Absenteeism and FaN

The FaN project emerged in the context of declining attendance trends because of a complex combination of socio-economic issues, cultural shifts such as home/remote working practices, and the residual impacts of Covid-19.

The Suffolk context has unique challenges, with the elective home education rates being notably higher than in England. In Autumn 2023/24, there were '1,410 children in Suffolk in elective home education (1.4% of the entire school-age population), which was higher than the England rate of 1.1% for the same period'[8]. Moreover, like in other regions, EBSA is a persistent issue that underpins absenteeism. EBSA cannot be addressed effectively using isolated or punitive measures alone. Instead, as Corcoran et al. argue, 'effective intervention to maintain or increase attendance should be provided as part of a graduated approach and in collaboration with children and young people and their families' and that this is more effective if part of a whole school practice[9]. Attendance is best dealt with as a graduated approach involving young people and their families, and adopting a whole school approach.

The evaluation team heard from stakeholders how FaN combined a targeted and empathetic intervention that could be leveraged to rebuild connections between CYP, their families, and schools incrementally. It serves as a potential approach as part of an effective response to the current crisis in school-based attendance in other regions or nationally.

[8]Suffolk Knowledge, Intelligence and Evidence Team (2024) A profile of children and young people in Suffolk: Data and insights that can support our understanding in relation to the Healthy Child Programme, p. 111. Available at: https://www.suffolk.gov.uk/asset-library/CYP-Profile-Oct-24.pdf.

[9]Corcoran, S. et al. (2024) 'Emotionally based school non-attendance: Development of a local authority, multi-agency approach to supporting regular attendance', British Journal of Special Education, 51(1), pp. 98–110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12497. Page 99.

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