

Friends and Networks External Evaluation Report

April 2025

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Contents

List of figures.....	4
List of tables.....	5
Executive Summary	6
Introduction	6
Key findings	7
Further considerations	9
1. Introduction	11
Background and context	11
The Suffolk context	11
Friends & Networks project.....	12
Project timeline	13
2. Evaluation methodology	14
Introduction	14
Data collection methods.....	14
Data analysis	19
Ethical considerations	20
Limitations.....	20
3. Project-level findings	21
Project outputs	21
FaN team and approach	22
Project monitoring	23
Activity provision	24
Perceived project successes.....	25
Perceived project challenges	27
Project relationships with stakeholders	28
4. Project outcomes against key indicators	34
Key performance indicators	34

Project KPIs in their context	35
Attendance	35
Emotional wellbeing	37
Confidence and self-esteem	38
Reducing parental stress/anxiety	39
Multi-agency support.....	40
5. Reflections for the future.....	42
Project design	42
Information sharing	44
Absenteeism	45
References.....	46
Appendix 1: Case studies.....	48
Case Study 1: Reboot Education	48
Case Study 2: Offshoot Foundation	50
Case Study 3: East Coast Adventures	52
Appendix 2: Friends & Networks experiences and activities offered	54

List of figures

Figure 1. Online survey participant roles (n=32)

Figure 2. Star chart used to collect data on CYP

List of tables

Table 1. Description of data collection methods

Table 2. SCC interview information

Table 3. Focus group information

Table 4. Summary of progress towards project KPIs

Acknowledgements

The University of East Anglia evaluation team wants to thank everyone who spoke to us throughout this evaluation process, including the Friends & Networks team, parents/carers of children, survey respondents and the children and young people involved with the project.

Executive Summary

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.***

Additionally, five research objectives 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.

Key findings

Project outputs

Between April 2023 and January 2025 (the latest data available to the evaluation team), FaN reports that it has reached 259 CYP (a 180 target + a summer holiday cohort) and that everyone has been allocated to the project. 63 CYP were still accessing the provision, and three more were waiting to start. 145 CYP had finished their activity programme with FaN, and 61 had fully closed (i.e. were no longer being followed up by LLOs).

Within the 259 number, 86 CYP have accessed FaN through summer holiday sessions (FaN report, January 2025). Moreover, the project sought to provide this cohort with sleepover clubs (running in February and March).

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/carers stress and/or anxiety levels** regarding their child's wellbeing/interactions.

Currently, the project is achieving below on improving attendance (41% vs a target of 50%), above its target on emotional wellbeing (58% vs a target of 50%), and 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%.

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.

Further considerations

This evaluation considers broader issues relating to **project design, information sharing, and absenteeism** that arose during the evaluation. These issues are discussed in [Section 5](#).

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

1. Introduction

Background and context

The Short Break Innovation Fund (SBIF) allowed the Department of Education (DfE) to provide grants to seven Local Authorities¹ (LAs) 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 disabilities³.

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 Hub⁴.

The Suffolk context

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 school⁵. SCC's 2024 CYP profile describes a rate higher than the national rate:

In 2021/22, 18.5% of primary school pupils (9,100) and 30.7% of secondary school pupils (12,284) were identified as persistent

¹ Only six out of the seven LAs took during year 1. One LA postponed 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

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>.

absentees in Suffolk schools. This means these pupils missed 10% or more of the possible sessions in the academic year.⁶

A combination of socio-economic challenges shapes Suffolk's school attendance backdrop. The CYP⁷ 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.

Friends & 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

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.

experiencing difficulties in maintaining a full-time education placement or facing placement breakdown⁸

In practice, the project targeted children aged 8-16 with 60% or less school-based attendance. Some referrals were generated by the project team reaching out to schools and wider stakeholders. In contrast, others involved someone such as a SENCO getting in touch with the project.

Project timeline

As noted above, Suffolk was successful in round two of the DfE SBIF funding project. Although the funding was awarded in April 2023, recruitment for the project took around five months from start to finish, given that new roles needed to be created. The project lead was in post by July 2023, having interviewed in May. Further recruitment of the first set of LLOs was not until mid-August 2023. The first roll-out of provision was around September 2023. This means that the FaN project has only had approximately 18 months of public-facing work, which included reapplying for year 3 funding.

This evaluation has KPI data reporting up to January 2025, and the UEA evaluation team spoke to FaN team members between November and February. The last interviews were conducted in mid-February, which provided some helpful context about how the project had refocused on conducting more whole school approaches when working with CYP, who had been referred to FaN.

⁸ Friends and Networks (2023) 'Suffolk County Council's Friends and Networks'. [Available here](#).

2. Evaluation methodology

Introduction

This evaluation adopted a multi-method research approach involving primary and secondary data. The UEA evaluation team drew on multiple qualitative data collection methods to ensure the breadth and depth of data from different stakeholders.

Specifically, the evaluation team utilised primary data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, and an online survey to obtain diverse stakeholders (i.e., Suffolk County Council [SCC] staff, parents, CYP, school staff, activity providers, etc.) thoughts, perceptions, and experiences of their engagement with the FaN project. Analysing secondary data in the shape of key documents (i.e., Personal Development Plan (PDP), KPI, and additional project outputs) provided by SCC further contextualised the project's broader impact and stated measures of success. Overall, the data collection phase of the FaN evaluation ran between November 2024 and March 2025.

This evaluation sought ***to understand and explore stakeholders' perspectives and experiences of the Friends & Networks project.***

Five research objectives 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.
3. To evaluate the perceived impact that the project is having on the lives of CYP 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.

Data collection methods

This project evaluation incorporated multiple data collection methods involving primary and secondary data. Table 1 outlines each collection method and provides a rationale for its inclusion in this evaluation. All data were collected and analysed collaboratively by the evaluation team. In most instances, two team members conducted interviews.

Table 1. Description of data collection methods

Method	Description	Quantity
Semi-structured interviews	<p>Virtual semi-structured interviews were mostly conducted via Microsoft Teams by two evaluation team members.</p> <p>Rationale: Interviews enabled the research team to obtain in-depth knowledge and understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences of the project, while the virtual element overcame geographical barriers and provided participants with flexibility and a sense of comfort.</p>	10 x virtual semi-structured interviews.
Focus groups	<p>Two focus groups. One with the parent/carer of the project-participating children. One focus group with just project children.</p> <p>Rationale: Designed to explore participants' diverse thoughts and experiences. The evaluation team facilitated In-person focus groups to understand differences and/or similarities in participants' attitudes, engagement, and beliefs about the FaN project.</p>	2 x in-person (Ipswich) focus groups.
Online survey	<p>An online survey (Microsoft Forms), containing a mixture of Likert scales and open-ended questions.</p> <p>Rationale: Designed to supplement interview and focus group data, with a broader set of stakeholder views (such as schools, child referrers, SENCOs, LA). The online survey captured participants' views about the project, its outcome and goals, and perceived benefits and challenges.</p>	1 x online survey received 32 responses (the survey was closed on 25/03/25).

Document analysis	<p>SCC provided the evaluation team with various documents, including PDPs, KPI resources, and additional outputs, to highlight the project's focus and measures of success further.</p> <p>Rationale: Document analysis and use of secondary data helped to supplement participant experiences by providing context to the FaN project and KPI reporting.</p>	25 PDPs (redacted and randomised across all current project LLOs), KPIs, and additional outputs.
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An overview of SSC staff involved in this evaluation is presented below.

- Team Manager
- Acting SEND Project Manager
- Provider Account Manager
- Business Support Officer (BSO) x 3
- Local Liaison Officer (LLO) x 6

Virtual semi-structured interviews explored the above individuals' perceptions and experiences of the project from their specific roles. This process focused on participants' roles and responsibilities concerning the project, the project's overall delivery and perceived success, analysis of processes and systems, and general reflections on KPI performance and anecdotal stories.

Table 2. SCC interview information

Participant	Interview date(s)	Duration	Further details if applicable
Team Manager	12/11/2024	38 minutes	
Acting SEND Project Manager	17/2/2025	48 minutes	
Provider Account Manager	4/2/2025	58 minutes	Provider Account Manager and BSO 1 were interviewed together.
BSO 1			
BSO 2	23/1/2025	53 minutes	

BSO 3			BSO 2 and BSO 3 were interviewed together.
LLO 1	12/12/2024 17/2/2025	68 minutes 38 minutes	LLO 1 was interviewed twice, having accepted the follow-up interview opportunity.
LLO 2	17/12/2024	68 minutes	
LLO 3	18/12/2024	92 minutes	LLO 3 and LLO 4 were interviewed together.
LLO 4			
LLO 5	9/1/2025	50 minutes	
LLO 6	9/1/2025	52 minutes	
		Average = 57 minutes. Range 38 to 92 minutes. 565 minutes total audio.	

Following the conclusion of every interview, all participants were offered the opportunity to take part in a follow-up interview if they wanted to expand on specific topic areas in more detail or felt there were other aspects which needed further discussion. However, only one participant (LLO 1) participated in an additional interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed via Microsoft Teams before being 'cleaned' by the evaluation team to ensure clarity and precision about participant responses.

Sampling Group 2: Children and young people/Parents and guardians (focus groups)

Sampling Group 2 included CYP who participated in the FaN project alongside their parents and guardians. This sampling group provided in-depth knowledge and insight about what it was 'like' to join the project and its impact. Two in-person focus groups were held on Thursday, 30th January 2025, at 12:30 pm at SSC's offices at Endeavour House, Ipswich (see Table 3).

CYP participated in one focus group (n=6), while parents and guardians (n=18) participated in another. The evaluation team decided this approach would help yield more open and honest conversations among participants, enabling children and young people to share their project experiences. At the same time, the parents and guardians could disclose their thoughts on logistical, practical, and broader aspects of the project's delivery, management, and impact.

Table 3. Focus group information

Participants	Number of participants	Duration	Further details
Children and Young People	6	55 minutes	One parent and a family friend were also present in the room (at one child's request).
Parents and Guardians	18 (from 12 families)	50 minutes	This focus group contained parents and guardians whose CYP were involved in the FaN project. 12 families were represented by 18 parents and guardians (including mothers, fathers, and grandparents).

A £50 incentive was used for each family to encourage engagement and participation in the focus groups, while SCC covered transport costs.

Sampling Group 3: Wider stakeholders (online survey)

Sampling Group 3 included wider stakeholders. These individuals were largely indirectly involved with the overall design and management of the FaN project but were still engaged in some capacity. To capture the perspectives of these wider individuals, an anonymised online survey involving quantitative/closed and qualitative/open questions was designed by the evaluation team and disseminated by SCC via email to relevant individuals and organisations.

Participants in Sampling Group 3 tended to be school staff members, social workers, or partner organisations involved in the delivery of activities as part of the project. Overall, 32 participants responded to the online survey, which was closed on 25th March 2025 (see Figure 1).

What is your role in relation to the Friends & Networks project?

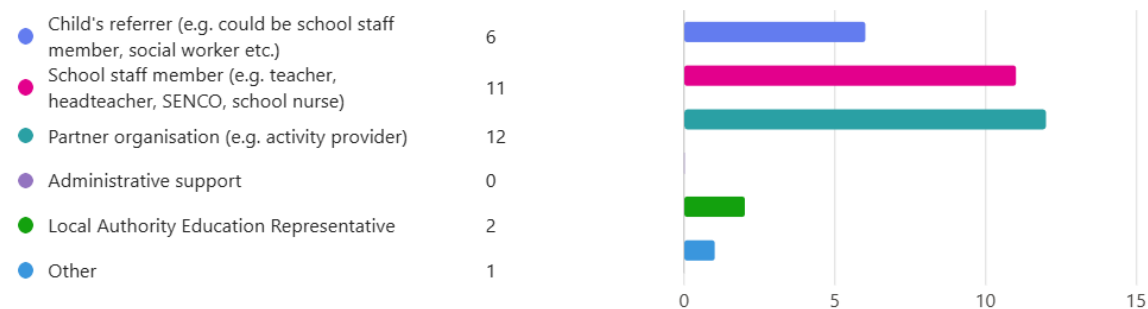


Figure 1. Online survey participant roles (n=32)

The anonymous survey contained a mixture of closed and open questions. It aimed to capture whether participants felt the FaN project had value for those involved (i.e., CYP, parents/guardians) and explored any suggestions they had for future learning. Likert scales recorded and measured quantitative data about participants' attitudes and perceptions. Furthermore, open-ended questions allowed participants to expand upon their responses. In general, the questions focused on the following aspects:

- Participants' involvement in the project in terms of their designated role and duration.
- Participants' general experiences as a wider stakeholder involved in the project.
- Participants' perspectives on the outcomes and goals of the project.
- Participants' thoughts on the delivery and implementation of the project.
- Specific benefits to CYP participants observed during their involvement in the project.
- Specific challenges participants faced during their involvement in the project and how these could be mitigated in the future.

Data analysis

This evaluation adopted a multi-method qualitative research design, incorporating primary and secondary data forms. The team used a broad thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes regarding participants' perceptions and experiences of the FaN project.

During data analysis, all four evaluation team members acted as critical friends to one another, applying scrutiny to the coding and theme generation process across the whole dataset. This process was essential to ensure participants' voices were represented fairly and that the report findings captured all stakeholders' holistic perceptions and experiences in the FaN project.

Ethical considerations

All data collection methods utilised within the evaluation methodology were subject to the UEA's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics subcommittee's approval, which was obtained on 12th November 2024

Before any primary data collection method (i.e., interview, focus group, online survey), all prospective participants were provided with participant information sheets which informed them on the purpose of the evaluation/research, their expected involvement, potential risks and benefits to participation, their right to withdraw, considerations regarding anonymity and confidentiality, alongside information related to data management and use. Having been sent this information in advance, all participants gave informed consent to state that they were happy to participate in the evaluation.

Limitations

The FaN evaluation represents the voices of 10 SCC staff, 12 families, and 32 wider stakeholders involved in the project. Therefore, individuals' unique perceptions and experiences of the project should not be overly generalised to account for the experiences of the total number of families and stakeholders involved in the project. Moreover, the evaluation team did not speak to schools, and there was very little feedback from this key stakeholder group during the survey. [Section 5](#) discusses how the project might have worked more closely with schools.

It is important to note that this research evaluation is not an impact evaluation per se. Therefore, its scope is limited to addressing the research aim and objectives outlined earlier in this evaluation methodology section. Rather than quantifiably measuring perceived impact in terms of 'success', this project broadly sought to capture and understand the subjective thoughts, feelings, and experiences of those individuals involved in the FaN project throughout its duration.

3. Project-level findings

This section will indicate a high-level overview of what the project delivered regarding project outputs, the FaN team make-up and approach to project delivery, the activity provision, perceived project successes, perceived challenges and limitations, and the relationships between stakeholders across the duration of FaN.

Project outputs

Between April 2023 and January 2025 (the latest data available to the evaluation team), FaN reports that it has reached 259 CYP (a 180 target + a summer holiday cohort) and that everyone has been allocated to the project. 63 CYP were still accessing the provision, and three more were waiting to start. 145 CYP had finished their activity project with FaN, and 61 had fully closed (i.e. were no longer being followed up by LLOs).

Within the 259 number, 86 CYP have accessed FaN through summer holiday sessions (FaN report, January 2025). Moreover, the project sought to provide sleepover clubs (running in February and March) from this cohort.

Table 5. Project outputs

Project Output	Target	Delivered
Total unique CYP people receiving the provision	180 target	174 CYP supported out of the 180
Offer each CYP 16 weeks of activities	180 target	
FaN support package - Daytime	Each CYP receives 1-2 activities per week.	
Sleepover Clubs	20% of total 180	Running February/March. No data at present.
Summer holiday club	min 20 max 35 CYP on top of 180 target	86 CYP supported through additional summer holiday sessions

*Data from progress report January 2025.

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.

Part of the role of the team lead was matching a CYP's profile with LLO (based primarily on background). The team's diversity invariably shaped the LLO's approach to each child. However, all LLOs said the primary driver resulted from the CYP's case after the initial meeting. The FaN team stretched out across the whole county of Suffolk.

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. In some cases, where an individual approach did not work, LLOs would adopt a family approach where the FaN project would fund something for the family, 'building those relationships with the home' (FaN team interview).

In other cases, and more predominantly towards the end of the project, LLOs were taking on whole school approaches. This approach involved working with one or more CYP and conducting the activity on the school site. Whole-school approaches sometimes occurred when multiple referrals had been made from the same school.

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)

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.

Project monitoring

FaN had two BSOs supporting the project. The evaluation team also spoke to another BSO supporting the Provider Account Manager, who oversaw the activity provision—sourcing it and working on costs. BSOs worked predominantly on data collection, supporting LLOs with logistics (e.g. booking taxis for CYP, for instance), and reporting KPI data.

Each CYP had a PDP attached to them. During an initial meeting, the PDP structured and supported the conversation and informed the next steps, including the approach and potential provision. The PDP was a core document for monitoring each CYP's progress and tracking general KPI performance. According to FaN's project outcomes report, the PDPs were a 'live document'. They were subject to ongoing review/update throughout the child's time in the project.

Most KPIs were judged based on data collected in the follow-up PDP, explicitly using the *star chart design* (see Figure 2).

We have something called the star design where we kind of ask the child and young person, the parent, carer to scale across 6 areas, one of them being mental health and well-being, confidence and self-esteem. We have interaction with others, and so on and so forth. (FaN team interview)

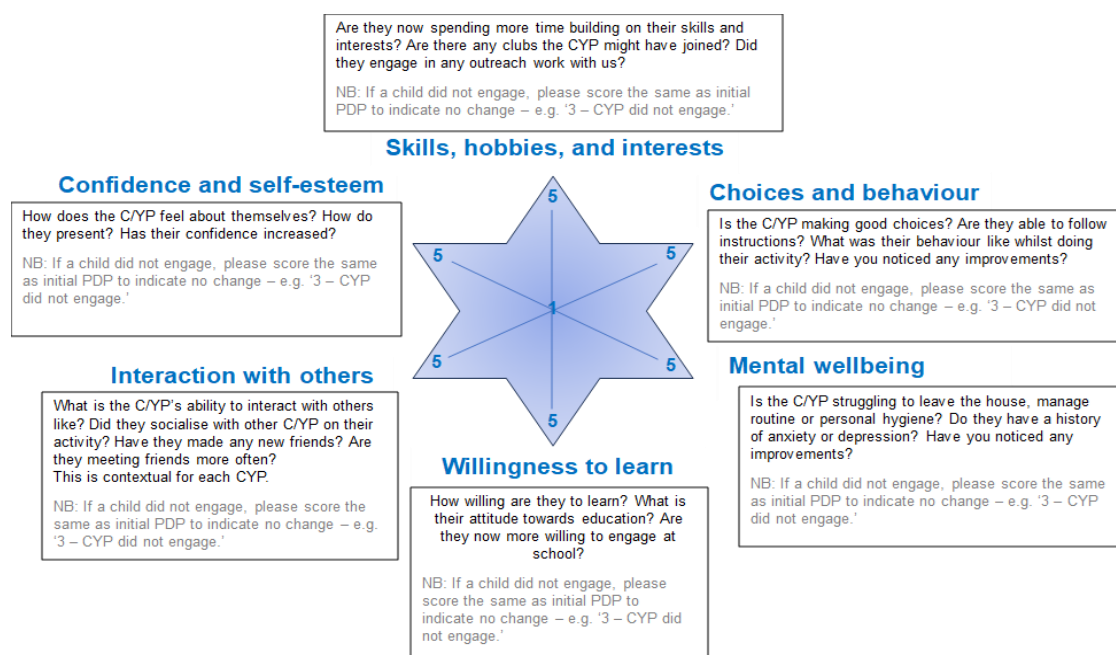


Figure 2. Star chart used to collect data on CYP

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.

The project aimed to create a 'positive experience...in a safe, supportive, and appropriate environment' (FaNProvider Guide, 2024) where the children would want to leave their safe spaces, take risks, build their confidence, discover new interests, and develop skills that may not be fostered through the standard school curricula.

Activity providers and selection. Appendix 2 lists many of the activity providers involved with FaN. The evaluation team spoke to the Provider Account Manager, who discussed the process of sourcing and vetting activity providers for suitability, variety and value for money. She noted how FaN assessed activity providers for suitability safeguarding and worked with providers to ensure 'they understood the [vulnerable] clients that we would be sending their way' (FaN team interview).

In the stakeholder survey, activity providers responded positively to working with the project. The evaluation will reflect on the relationship between the FaN project team providers in the next section.

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.

There are some restrictions in terms of depending on where you are on in the county, they're not going to send you from the top of the county all the way to the bottom just because it's such a distance, it's not practical and you're unlikely to continue if you already struggle with going to school and things like that, you're unlikely to continue. (FaN team member)

Perceived project successes

When writing this evaluation, FaN's leadership recognised that most KPIs would not be met⁹. However, the evaluation team recognised a broad agreement across the team and outside stakeholders about where the project had achieved significant impact and success with its CYP.

Increased CYP confidence and wellbeing. When asked about their views regarding project success, LLOs often raised the difference in what was meant by success for each CYP that they worked with. The sheer variability in cases meant that each CYP had its own needs and challenges related to low attendance. One of the project's strengths was that LLOs worked intensively with individuals over a substantive period and could refer to individual cases with genuine knowledge and understanding. In the sub-section below, there is a broader discussion about the relationships that were built during the FaN project.

The most discussed successes were improvements that LLOs saw in a child's confidence or wellbeing. Although this was not borne out in the individual KPI data (only wellbeing succeeded its target at the time of writing), LLOs regularly referred to individual improvements they saw in the CYP they worked with across the months of engaging with them.

I think the ultimate aim is to get to get young people engaged into education, but in my eyes, it could be as little or as big as it might be for that young person. So, if that means maybe engaging into education because they've been going to school and attended meetings or going into school because they've been attending a part time timetable, or maybe just going in for a break time. Maybe they're in talks with the school because before they've just been completely detached from talking to anybody at school or going in. (FaN team interview)

Here are two further examples of LLOs discussing the variability of cases and successes that they had with CYP:

So, as we said earlier on, and as [my colleague] said, everybody measures success differently. Getting a child out of the house, even if it's just to go to the park or to go out, is a success. Getting a child to come to do an activity, so it gives the mum some respite for two hours is a success. Identifying that there are multiple agencies working with the same child and joining them up is a success. And that's before you even get to those young people that get back into education, whatever

⁹ KPIs are explicitly discussed in Section 4.

that might be. Now, that could be speaking to a school and the school applying for online tuition so that they are doing something rather than sitting at home doing nothing. (FaN team interview)

I would say the biggest success is more from a social mental health wellbeing side in terms of, I think at least, again, might be wrong, but 75% to 90% I would say of the young people have said this has supported my mental health or we've seen like a difference in terms of them wanting to go out and do things, they're happier talking to new people and professionals. Their overall mental health is better, confidence is better. But that doesn't necessarily translate into them attending school. (FaN team Interview)

This evaluation has already picked up on the LLOs response that improvement in confidence does not necessarily translate into increased attendance. On the one hand, LLOs dealing with very low attendance likely had a bigger effect at a human level, building up a rapport with a CYP, which was not always easy to translate into more school attendance.

Whole school approaches. Towards the end of the project, where appropriate (for the CYP) and possible (for an LLO's workload), we did see that more LLOs were using whole-school approaches, which more explicitly attached the project provision to the school site. This approach meant that a CYP was experiencing FaN provision in the school-based environment.

The evaluation team also heard about some successful work regarding whole-school approach activity provision:

I've had some good success with a whole school approach. We had ten students and we had three students that were consistent and attended every single session offered, and we had good feedback from them saying that it was fun and that they built their confidence. So to me that's a success because when we're looking at them returning back into their lessons. Yes, some of them took a little bit of a dip, but reflecting on what they've learnt in the activity, I think is the most important part of how we can say this is the success and what you can put into practice, so, what you've learned. (FaN team interview)

Appendix 1, case study 2, shows an example of a whole-school approach.

Relationships. One of the FaN's strengths was its capacity to build positive relationships with CYP experiencing low attendance – providing mentoring (a friend) and links for CYP and their families (networks). Below is a substantive section detailing relationships with all stakeholders. However, it is important to stress that the project built significant positive connections with CYP, their families, and other professionals (in cases where CYP had multi-agency working).

Perceived project challenges

The evaluation team heard about several project challenges. Some of these were more **organisational and policy-design related**, such as the compressed timeframe to get the project up and running, perpetual concerns about recruitment and retaining staff, or changes to the project KPIs part way through the project running.

Recruitment was really, really difficult. They release the funding, I think they tell us that you get the funding January, February time and then the project is expected to start in April. Well, recruitment doesn't work like that. Training doesn't work like that. Recruitment doesn't work like that. You haven't got staff sitting there twiddling their fingers, waiting, for something to happen. And recruitment takes a while, and you've got to start the project and you can't. (FaN team interview)

The 60% threshold on attendance meant that many of the referrals they received were complex. In their interviews, LLOs discussed how they negotiated cases that might have benefited from input from professionals working in specialist areas, such as mental health.

We were absolutely inundated in Year One. I think for some of these children and some of these schools, they've tried everything that we're one of the last services to be involved at that point. We really were getting anything and stuff that just wasn't suited. And the attendance was completely different to what was actually on the referral form. (FaN team interview)

A theme that arose consistently from LLOs was the caseload pressure. LLOs reported working on ongoing cases up to 30 per LLO at different stages. At a broad level, this might be possible. Still, it shaped how much energy and time LLOs could give an individual CYP, curtailed the amount of follow-up that was offered (once the activity provision ended) and may have discouraged more whole school approaches early on into the project.

Other factors that arose 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 attendance and activity provision. The project/some LLOs mentioned adopting a three-strike policy whereby if a CYP did not attend an activity multiple times, they would be removed from the project to allow someone else to attend instead.

Project relationships with stakeholders

The relationships between the project and different stakeholders were frequently identified as significant factors impacting the overall success of FaN. Given the wide range of stakeholders involved in the project's design and delivery, there were diverse perspectives regarding whether the relationships were positive or negative. These differences in perspectives and experiences are briefly discussed below and are structured via the key stakeholder groups.

Parents/carers. Generally, there appeared to be a positive relationship between parents/carers and the project team. It was evident that LLOs worked hard within their remit to **forge good working relationships with CYP and their families**, which was acknowledged and appreciated. Furthermore, given the often-poor relationship between schools and families and the limited impact of past provision/projects, the relationship between the project and parents/carers was often heightened and considered more successful.

The lady we've got [LLO], she's been brilliant with her [daughter]. She organised for her to have a sensory box to help her. The school's useless, but she's been brilliant and she's always keeping in contact with us.
(Parent/guardian focus group)

I had no expectations because we've been let down so much. I just thought it's going to be another one of those things, he won't engage anyway, no matter how good they are, he's not going to engage, and I was just blown away. (Parent/guardian focus group)

It is essential to recognise that the relationship between the project and families was **idiosyncratic and diverse**, meaning, at times, some issues did arise. For example, one family disclosed how their LLO had a previous role within the

school their CYP attended, significantly impacting their experiences and perceptions of the project.

I think having somebody in this role that had been employed by the school where issues are directly before did not work. I think it's a huge conflict of interest, actually. Because everything that everyone is saying, is not the experience we had. There was no effort to understand anything that was going on... I don't know it sounds like perhaps the person that we had here [LLO] was different, maybe, but that to me just adds the fact that you should not have somebody in his role that has been employed by the school. (Parent/guardian focus group)

Although some discrepancies were present, parents and carers had a good relationship with the project and its staff. They appreciated LLOs and the challenges within their role.

Children and Young People. The evaluation team heard generally **positive things from CYP** about their relationship with the project (more in-depth case studies are provided in the appendices with further information). Although initially sceptical, CYP enjoyed the project and suggested that they would recommend it to others in a similar position.

At first, I was like, what is it about? But then I decided it was pretty fun. (Children focus group)

If someone else is going to do it and they're like kind of against it, they're like throwing away from it. I think you should just do it because there's not anything really negative about it. It's mostly just positive. So, if you think you're not going to do it or something in the future, they might as well. (Children focus group)

Although the relationship was generally positive, some CYP disclosed that there appeared to be **tensions and issues** around a) the project's primary intention, i.e., whether it enhanced their attendance or not, and b) a lack of information regarding some of the activities and processes involved.

I thought it was going to help me, because I'm not in school. I was told it'll like help me get back into school and stuff... but for me it didn't because it was actually taking me out of school more. (Children focus group)

I didn't get told much like where it was going to be and didn't get told very much about it. I was just going to, like, get a taxi from my school and just be like, taken out, but I didn't know where it was or

anything. [Is there anything else that might have encouraged you, do you think?] Yeah, knowing the people and what it involved.
(Children focus group)

Although there is significant value in hearing the perspectives and experiences of these CYP, it should be noted that there is a **small evidence base**, with only six CYP attending the arranged focus group. Nonetheless, within the parent/carer focus group, the positive relationship between the project and CYP was referred to multiple times:

My daughter loves her. She organised things that I wouldn't have asked for, you know, like she was doing this, this Stagecoach thing. Does she need jazz shoes? Does she need this? Do I need that? And, you know, always thinking about what's going to make her feel like she was equipped and fitting in. (Parent/guardian focus group)

That personal way of doing things? I think it helps when you're vulnerable as it is, and the child is vulnerable. But to work together and, you know, have a face and get to know, you know, even personal stuff. It's brilliant and it's just a shame. I've only come because of LLO, really because she has done an amazing job with the family, when it could have gone the other way if we didn't get that help. (Parent/guardian focus group)

Although a small number of CYP took part in this evaluation, evidence suggests that the relationship with the project and key individuals, e.g., LLO's, was largely positive and can be considered a successful aspect of the project.

Better communication with school would have allowed professionals to work better together- it was clear that our family had poor mental health needs, however, this did not come into the work of the family worker, and this was left to school to try and seek support. A more holistic professional approach to the delivery of the project (looking at the deeper-seated reasons for the lack of school attendance) would make the delivery more effective- i.e., perhaps have counsellor support alongside the activities to be able to support longer-term behavioural change and support YP's MH needs. (Child's referrer, stakeholder survey)

I have had some really positive work with schools, and I've had some work with schools where I probably would have expected more. So, more joined up working to make it a little bit easier. And I think one of the stumbling blocks we have is that every school works so differently, we don't know the limits that the school has in terms of what they offer, and things that they can put in place.
(FaN team interview)

Schools. The relationship between the project and schools **varied considerably**. Some schools were highly supportive and enthusiastic towards the project. In contrast, others didn't engage, which produced headwinds for successful project implementation. Respondents frequently suggested that better communication and more joined-up thinking would have enhanced relationships.

From the project team side, one of the main issues was the lack of awareness and clarity concerning what the project can do and offer CYP.

It was very different for every child in every school. Some schools were absolutely diabolical, just didn't get a response. Others are really engaged. Some schools, I think, expected a lot more than what we were offering... I think a lot of schools really valued the project. They were often praising it and saying, in family network meetings and things, "thanks to the help of [the] LLO" or whoever from Friends and Networks, "we've now seen this result". So, I think it was received quite well by schools, but there was a bit of confusion sometimes as to what we could actually offer and what results would look like. (FaN team interview)

Throughout participants' responses, it was clear that the project's relationships varied with schools on a **case-by-case basis**. As outlined within [Section 5](#), FaN could have been more proactive regarding schools and relationship building. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the project was limited by duration (e.g., 18 months of the active running project) and a context of immense pressure on schools with their competing interests and priorities.

Activity providers. There was a strong, positive working relationship between the project and activity providers, with a **clear alignment** on these sessions' focus and intended outcome. The project team spoke highly of the activities on offer and the individuals delivering them.

It's really working with our providers to think "What can we achieve? Is it possible?" Not just going by "I'm based here, and I'm not going to travel", but it's working with some really great people who want to work with us. (FaN team interview)

The project team appreciated the **passion and enthusiasm** of activity providers and recognised the value and impact these sessions could have.

We've got amazing people out there in our community that actually really want to make a difference to young people and we're not tapping into them enough, and we're not using them enough to actually help build our young people in our community. And they're the people that are going to be able to do that as well. A conversation from a boxing coach about nutrition might suddenly flick a switch for someone about fitness. It might

actually mean more coming from them than their parents. It is about a community building our young people and this is what I feel has been offered. (FaN team interview)

This sentiment was reciprocated by activity providers, who generally spoke positively about their working relationship with the project team.

Everything has been run smoothly and professionally. It has been a positive experience working alongside Friends and Networks. (Partner Organisation e.g., activity provider, stakeholder survey)

In short, the relationship between the project and partner organisations i.e., activity providers, was generally positive, with these stakeholders buying into the project and enjoying the opportunity to work with these CYP.

DfE. The evaluation asked the FaN leadership about its relationship with the DfE during the duration of the project. Some participants alluded to the DfE's overt focus on quantitative **data and metrics**, often taking precedence over qualitative project feedback.

It does feel like that the DfE are very data orientated and so as long as you're hitting those data points, then they're happy. I don't know how much notice they really take of some of the positive feedback I share with them. (FaN team interview)

I think she's [DfE rep] fairly happy because we are meeting our outputs and meeting our targets, and we don't have a drastic underspend, we don't have a drastic overspend. We're kind of in a really nice medium happy ground where we're looking to hit the right number of children supported and all of those things. (FaN team interview)

In this instance, the relationship between the project and the DfE was positive if clear targets were being met. However, in some cases, there did appear to be tension between the project and the DfE, specifically concerning the **transparency and clarity of KPIs**, which changed during the project.

I think the DfE have completely unrealistic expectations of local authorities, and I think they are so keen to be kept up to date with any kind of tiny change, that you're almost fearful to share information with them. (FaN team interview)

I mean, we've been working with the KPIs for a year and then they said, "oh, we want to strengthen those" and you think, well, that's all very well, but we haven't collected the data on the other bits that you now want us to change. So that causes problems. I think, again, that goes back to that issue of transparency, or lack of, in terms of we are giving whatever they

want, whatever hoop we will jump through, but the information doesn't come back the other way. To be able to predict which hoop we're going to jump through next. (FaN team interview)

In summary, the relationship between the project and the DfE was neutral and positive, as targets and metrics were being hit. However, there was evidence of frustration regarding KPIs and at times, a lack of direction cited.

Other LAs. Despite the existence of other LAs, the project operated in **isolation** without much communication. Participants suggested this was a **missed opportunity** to share different approaches, best practices, and success stories. When networking opportunities did arise, these were perceived to be valuable, but the DfE could have been more proactive in facilitating these events and encouraging shared dialogue.

If we could have spoken with other local authorities in that setting up phase in those first six months, if there could have been more networking then I think we would have all benefited and certainly the conversations. The informal conversations that we have had, when we've gone along to events that have been, just sitting on your tables type thing, exactly the same sort of thing. Being kept in the dark, kept apart from each other, wasn't helpful because we could have perhaps worked through some things when we're both faced with. (FaN team interview)

Voices of LAs are largely absent from this evaluation (e.g., only two LA representatives completed the online survey). In their feedback, however, there was evidence suggesting that the relationship between the FaN and its own (Suffolk) LAs was positive.

Great experience with positive impact on all the young people involved. Schools were very excited and happy with this project and have said it will be missed. I myself, felt that the workers understood the young people very well and this was key to things improving. (Local Authority Education Representative, stakeholder survey)

Having summarised the key findings at a project level across seven thematic areas, [Section 4](#) now addresses the KPIs against which the project is benchmarked and measured.

4. Project outcomes against key indicators

Key performance indicators

This evaluation uses FaN reported progress to present how the project has fared against its KPIs at the time of this evaluation. These numbers come from monitoring reports to the DfE.

Key Performance Indicator	Reported Progress
Benefit 1 - Improved educational and emotional outcomes for CYP with SEND	
50% of CYP who engage in the provision package, will increase their school attendance.	41% Current progress – 41% of CYP who have completed their package with FaN have increased their school attendance.
50% of CYP who engage in the provision package, will report an improvement in their emotional wellbeing.	58% Current progress - 58% of CYP report improving their emotional wellbeing.
75% of CYP who engage in their provision package, will report an improvement in their confidence and self-esteem.	54% Current progress – 54% of CYP report increased confidence and self-esteem.
65% of parents/carers whose child has completed their provision package with Friends and Networks, report a reduction in stress and/or anxiety levels regarding their child's wellbeing/interactions.	Project data not available until the end of the project.

Benefit 2 - To reduce the transfer of CYP from mainstream to specialist settings	
50% of CYP with multi-agency involvement maintain their education placement.	41% (29 out of 70). Current progress – 41% of CYP with multi-agency involvement are maintaining their education placement.

Table 4. Summary of progress towards project KPIs

Table 4 lists the project KPIs and their reported quantitative progress number. Following this, each KPI is discussed in its context by drawing more broadly on the evaluation data set, which includes FaN team documentation (including PDPs), interviews, stakeholder survey, and parent/children focus groups.

Project KPIs in their context

This section is the product of feedback from the combination of FaN team interviews, stakeholder surveys, and parent/child focus groups conducted throughout this evaluation.

The KPIs for the project were negotiated throughout the project. The team lead and acting lead noted that KPIs were still being agreed upon with the DfE as late as September 2024.

Attendance

The first KPI states that 50% of CYP who engage in the provision package will increase their school 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.

As discussed below, the project was recognised for increasing confidence and wellbeing, by the FaN team and all stakeholders (in the survey response and parent/child focus group). However, there were difficulties in connecting the

increase in confidence/wellbeing with KPI on attendance, as articulated by one LLO and another stakeholder.

Lots of the activity built confidence, but then it was quite difficult to then sometimes link that to school. Sometimes that just naturally happened, but probably again not as often as everyone would have hoped before the project started. (FaN team interview)

Attending Friends & Networks has undeniable benefits for the child, particularly in building confidence, improving mental health, and developing resilience. They are also acquiring valuable new skills through this experience. However, the challenge lies in effectively applying this progress to support their reintegration into the school community. (Child's referrer, EWO, stakeholder survey)

Parents in the focus group found the link between activity-heavy intervention and improvement in school-based attendance sometimes lacking. Usually, this was because they had to reconcile that the activity happened in school time (which took away potential school time), or outside school time (which meant there was no chance that the activity would be school-linked), or that because the activity was so disconnected from school and attendance the embedded problems still existed after the project came to an end.

That didn't work for us because what she ended up doing was on a weekend, so it didn't turn out to contribute to attendance at all, so it was fine, but my understanding initially was that it was going to be an attendance thing. (Parent, focus group)

Longer term there's still the issues that are still there. (Parent, focus groups)

They are just going back to the same place that isn't supportive. Nothing's changed. (Parent, focus group)

Throughout the evaluation, and across the team or wider stakeholders, there was a substantial reflection about the attendance threshold of 60% or below to access FaN. At 60% or below, there was a feeling that the problems these CYP faced were more than likely engrained and beyond the scope of what could be impacted through the FaN project activity design.

I believe that this resource would be useful to have for students that have low attendance but not necessarily below the 60% threshold. That way we are managing to intervene earlier before poor attendance

habits become too engrained. (School staff member, stakeholder survey)

Catching them at the 80% I think would be so much, I don't want to say better, but easier because you're not moving mountains to get them back into school. Yeah, that's what I'd say, probably. And also, like I already said, and another team that is dedicated to supporting with these emotional needs or I know we do have the emotional wellbeing hub. (FaN team interview)

Targeting CYP with a higher attendance threshold may have meant LLOs were negotiating a less complex caseload of children. However, having a higher attendance threshold could dilute the targeted nature of FaN, and overwhelm the project with too many CYP given its limited resources. Suppose the project had been designed in this way. In that case, it is a reasonable assumption that the project would have needed to reflect on its delivery strategy – working much closer with schools (whole school approach), with more children and providing a less bespoke intervention.

Emotional wellbeing

The second KPI states that 50% of CYP who engage in the provision package will report an improvement in their 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.

In part, the FaN project was set up to work with CYP to overcome emotional barriers to attendance by supporting them at all levels of the intervention—from the first visit with the CYP, the activity period, and follow-up. Here, the evaluation team heard some vivid stories and accounts about the project participants, including their starting situations and eventual progress.

One of them hadn't left his bedroom for months, and he just doesn't go out the house, and now he's been going to this activity provider where he's rebuilt a bicycle. He gets to keep the bicycle, and he's talking about actually going out, like, really local to him and having really small bike rides and building up. So, we bought him some new tools so that he can fix his bike if he needs to. He got a little emergency kit for if

he's out and he needs it, and he would have never even thought of doing that before. (FaN team interview)

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

The third KPI states that 75% of CYP who engage in their provision package will report an improvement in their confidence and self-esteem.

FaN reports that 54% of CYP who have engaged with the project have seen an increase in their confidence and self-esteem. Improving CYP's confidence and self-esteem was brought up regularly in team interviews and focus groups when specific cases and wins were highlighted.

I just thought one of my young people who, again, wasn't feeling up to doing one of the projects itself, but we managed to get her into Stagecoach performing arts school and she is on the spectrum and doesn't make a lot of eye contact, but she loves performing arts and I had the privilege of going to watch her show last Sunday and she did brilliantly. She even asked for a solo. Now, again, she didn't make a lot of eye contact, but for her, who was too anxious to go to school and face teachers, she's come leaps and bounds in her personal development. In her boldness and in her confidence, which actually, she may not be able to articulate. (FaN team interview)

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). The evaluation team also heard from parents several positive examples of FaN's impact on CYP's confidence in the focus group.

He attended every single session. Enjoyed it. He engaged. He loved it. To be honest, the whole thing's been life changing. And the fact that he is here today, I mean, the £50 helped. But the fact that he is here today. And he's now going out more. (Parent, focus group)

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)

Across every interview, the FaN project team highlighted their value of confidence as a foundation for better attendance—whether this was demonstrated by developing 'a skill' or 'feeling more confident in something' (FaN team interview). Children in the focus group mirrored this, suggesting they took part in the project for reasons outside of a primary focus on attendance.

I wasn't super focused on that [attendance], I just wanted it to be something that he got out of the house to do. Whether it was going to school didn't bother me. (Same). For him, it was being with like-minded children who were in a similar boat. (Child, focus group)

Reducing parental stress/anxiety

The fourth KPI states that 65% of parents/carers whose child has completed their provision package with Friends and Networks report a reduction in stress and/or anxiety levels regarding their child's wellbeing/interactions.

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.

I think building that trust with the families. Like I said at the very beginning, I think it's using our social skills and just being personable. We're getting to a point where some of these families have been through so many different services. You hear it all the time, don't you? That families just don't have trust in social services or the Council, which is a real shame because we're all there to do good things. But, it's getting to that point where they have so many warnings, and letters, and fines, and they're in quite uncertain times. It's about being that person who's going to help guide them on to better things and prove them that we are there to support them and help them, and we want the best for their children just as much as they do, hopefully. (FaN team interview)

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.

So they sent her a Stagecoach, a drama school. But that was on the weekend, so I had to take that, bring her home and organise all of that.
(Parent, focus group)

But the parents, it becomes like an extra part time job. Administration to keep all this going for your child is like part time job instead. So if you haven't got time to say, who would do all the administration things? (Parent, focus group)

Multi-agency support

The fifth KPI states that 50% of CYP with multi-agency involvement maintain their education placement.

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 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 their interviews, LLOs discussed their role in the broader constellation of multiple agencies working with children.

We do a lot of multi-agency working, multidisciplinary, lots of different teams. So, we've got Family Support Practitioners that I work quite closely with, and we all work quite closely with. Social Workers, sometimes CAMHS get involved. Families, schools, obviously. There's a whole range of different stakeholders that we work with. (FaN team interview)

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).

In the final section of this evaluation, we reflect on how the project may have more fully fed data and feedback to support other agencies working with the referred CYP in the long term. The project did not seem set up to do this, and LLOs and team leads were unsure how their data and work would be used to benefit CYP (especially those involved with multiple agencies) in the future.

5. Reflections for the future

Project design

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.

My anxiety with all of these things is that they are test and learn projects. I get that. But it's all very short term, all of it. Education. It just underlines that sense of we've had the TLIF, which was the teaching and Learning Innovation Fund, we've had the ClIFF thing, we've had Opportunity Areas which last for three years. We get lots of blocks of funding which are two to three years. They're test and learn things. Local authorities and schools put a lot of effort in and then the funding gets yanked before the learning is known and so, consequently, because there isn't a good ten-year strategy with good evaluation points along the road where things could be tweaked and learned. (FaN team interview)

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' (FaN team 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)

And I think that that's the main problem when they got more or less the confidence something happened and they are left out and there's no more resources. And yeah, they might go again to the waiting list that is years and then they just fall like. (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. This must be combined with rigorous evaluation to demonstrate sustained impact, build stakeholder confidence and ensure a more streamlined service provision. In the case of FaN, this would have meant working more closely with other services in SCC.

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 away from the school site would lead to better overall attendance outcomes.

Whilst we found the project was good whilst it was running we also found there was no connection to this hard-to-reach student returning to school. The activities on offer were good and we feel that a longer option to engage or at least provide a longer-term plan would be really good as once the intervention ends it feels like you are a little back to square one with socialising and attendance in school. (School staff member, stakeholder survey)

Once Friends & Networks stopped the attendance would decline. To ease this transition, a structured reintegration plan could be beneficial. This may bridge the gap between their progress in Friends & Networks and their reintegration into the school environment. (Child's referrer, EWO, stakeholder survey)

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. This is a difficult time for schools, which are stretched. However, the project team might have considered ways to reach out and incentivise schools to be involved with the project. When this was done, the evaluation team heard positive things from the FaN team and broader stakeholders.

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.

It was really interesting to see, who was doing what and what areas, but we were the only ones doing what we were doing. It was all slightly different. I think that would have been great to have more of those days.
(FaN team interview)

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.

[what do you think has been most successful?] *I think building that trust with the families. Like I said at the very beginning, I think it's using our social skills and just being personable. We're getting to a point where some of these families have been through so many different services. You hear it all the time, don't you? That families just don't have trust in social services or the Council, which is a real shame because we're all there to do good things. But, it's getting to that point where they have so many warnings, and letters, and fines, and they're in quite uncertain times. It's about being that person who's going to help guide them on to better things and prove them that we are there to support them and help them, and we want the best for their children just as much as they do, hopefully.* (FaN team interview)

LLO's often noted how they had developed useful contextual data and information about a CYP that may have helped other professionals (considering the multi-agency children). At the time of this evaluation, however, no one across the team knew how their data might support CYP in the future, and they had limited access to and permissions for other services.

Absenteeism

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. As the DfE notes:

Improving attendance is everyone's business. The barriers to accessing education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. Good attendance begins with school being somewhere pupils want to be and therefore the foundation of securing good attendance is that school is a calm, orderly, safe, and supportive environment where all pupils are keen and ready to learn¹⁰

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'¹¹. 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 ¹². 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.

¹⁰ DfE (2024) *Working together to improve school attendance*. Statutory guidance for maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66bf300da44f1c4c23e5bd1b/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance_-_August_2024.pdf

¹¹ 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>.

¹² 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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Appendix 1: Case studies



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' (Reboot Education). 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 themselves 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)

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,

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 CYP 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)

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:

- 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
- 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.

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 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 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/>



CYP 3 Targets:

- Increase my school attendance
- Better my routine at home and at school
- Increase CYP 3's confidence

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)

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)

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.

Appendix 2: Friends & Networks experiences and activities offered

Provider	Activities	Groups and ages
Avid Climbing	Indoor climbing area, gym	1-1 and small group Ages 8 years plus
The Cragg Climbing Wall	Rock climbing wall	Small groups of 2-8 Ages 6-11 & 12-17 years
Deben Community Farm	Care farming, engaging with farm animals	Ages 8-18 years
The Dogs Squad	Working with dogs, conservation tasks, teamwork	Ages 8 years plus
East Coast Adventures	Archery, axe throwing, geotagging, mountain biking, kayaking, stand-up paddleboarding and bushcraft	Small groups Ages 7-12
East Face Climbing Wall	Indoor wall for rope climbing	Ages 8 plus
Green Light Trust	Conservation and bushcraft	Small groups Ages 5-16 years
Hill Farm Riding School	Riding, stable management, pony care	Ages 5-17 years
Iliya's Kitchen	Interactive, hands-on cooking classes, age-appropriate cookery techniques in a fun, relaxed and safe environment	All ages
Innov8 Workshops	Range of workshops; music, creative writing, art, photography, maths, cooking, bike repair, beauty, allotment and woodwork	1-1, Ages 11-16 years

Involve Active	Bushcraft, nature, growing vegetables and maintaining woodland areas	Ages 8-16 years
Ipswich Community Media	Music, media and podcasting with IO radio	1-1 or small groups, Ages 11-15 and 16-17 years
Lyward Colley	Workshops in music, wood and art and mentoring to instil self-worth and autonomy	No age stated
Mindjam	Digital skills such as game design, 3D design, digital art, animation, music and video editing, online games, with mentoring, online activity	1-1 Ages 6-17 years
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	Under 25 years
Outloud Music!	Music and percussion workshops with gaming, podcasting and video sessions with iRock	1-1 Ages 8-18 years
Out Space	Course fishing and fly fishing	No age stated
Press Start Gaming Lounge	Video games, high spec gaming, old school consoles, pool table and VR	1-1 or in small groups Ages 5-17 years
Reboot Education	Developing IT skills including coding, website building, 3D printing, graphic design and art therapy,	Ages 8-14 years

	breakfast and reflection time	
Red Rose Community Farm	Care for livestock, planting, harvesting, conservation	Ages 11-16 years
Sensory Wise	Sensory equipment including fidget toys, art, creativity, sporty or calming, chosen by children and family	Any age group
Stagecoach	Singing, dancing and acting, not only to perform on stage but also, to perform better in life	Ages 4-18 plus
Sunflower Artistry	Ecofriendly art, focus on wellness and creative expression, activities online	No age stated
TF Music	Tuition in guitar, bass, vocals, piano, keys, drums, ukulele, production and theory	1-1 Ages 7-16 years
Ultimate Boxing	Learn to box and improve fitness	Ages 8-17 years