



An independent evaluation of the 'Aspire Beyond', embedded mentoring programme

1. Context

'Aspire Beyond' is a bespoke mentoring programme, embedded since September 2018 within two schools in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire (St. Mary's Church of England High School and Haileybury Turnford School). It was developed to help identify, engage with, support and improve the life chances of vulnerable young people at risk of involvement in youth violence, exploitation and gang culture.

Qualitative data for this evaluation was gathered through twenty-five face to face and telephone interviews with mentees, staff and parents and through observing five mentoring sessions. The evaluator also had access to programme monitoring and reporting data and a limited amount of school monitoring data relating to attendance, punctuality and discipline.

2. The programme

The aims of the programme are threefold:

- i. To demystify and provide young people with an up to date, realistic and non-glamorised vision of gang culture, youth violence, county lines, knife crime etc. and the associated lifestyle, based on the mentor's own experiences of living that life.
- ii. To use the resulting understanding of the realities, risks, dangers and consequences of involvement, to bring about a shift in attitude and provide young people with the confidence, tools and skills to avoid and/or disengage with criminal activity.

- iii. To inspire, motivate and nurture the personal attributes necessary to enable young people to make safer decisions and better, more fulfilling life choices.

The associated objectives of the programme are:

- i. Raising awareness - The mentor (and sometimes additional specialist colleagues from St Giles) delivers awareness raising sessions to whole year groups, specific classes and small groups. The mentor is also available both formally and informally to support school staff to better understand the issues, keep abreast of new developments or trends concerning youth violence/gang activity locally and to provide contextual safeguarding information in order to support the school to fulfil its safeguarding duty. Further, parents are made aware of their child's involvement in the programme and are supported to better understand the issues they are facing.
- ii. One-to-one mentoring – at risk and/or vulnerable young people are identified and referred to the mentor for 1:1 sessions within school. An interactive identification and tracking system (the "spider/entrapment web") is used with mentees to identify their specific needs, issues and risks and to monitor and track progress in relation to addressing these. A bespoke, structured support plan is developed with each mentee which is worked through during sessions using tools, exercises and discussion. The mentoring relationship aims to uncover issues that sit behind the presenting behavior and work on these in order to bring about lasting change. There is also a strong focus on the importance and value of education.
- iii. External exposure connections – through established relationships with organisations, companies and service providers in the local community and with national bodies such as universities, central government and large corporate structures, mentees are exposed to a range of experiences in the community designed to motivate, inspire, change attitudes and raise their aspirations for the future.

3. Referrals

During the three academic year period (September 2018 to July 2021), a total of eighty-two young people were referred to and supported by the mentoring programme. Forty of these were referred while in year eleven and consequently left the schools prior to completing the programme, so no outcomes data was captured for them. Of the remaining forty-two mentees, thirty-one are current cases, still receiving support and therefore only partial outcomes data is available for them. The remaining eleven have completed the programme and full impact data is therefore available for them.

Table 1 below shows a breakdown by school, sex, ethnicity and age of the forty-two mentees for whom some data is available.

School	Sex		Ethnicity		Age				
	Male	Female	White	BAME	12	13	14	15	16
St. Mary's	20	0	1	19	1	2	10	0	7
Haileybury Turnford	22	0	12	10	1	2	3	14	2

All mentees are male and in fact of the eighty-two young people supported in total over the life of the pilot, only one was female. Both schools recognise the need to extend and/or develop the programme such that it is available to and appropriate for girls who tend to present differently and therefore may not be identified as at risk in the same way as boys.

Almost 70% of mentees across the two schools are recorded as BAME, with that rising to 95% for St. Mary's school. Since whole school ethnicity data was not available, it is not possible to say whether these figures are representative of the overall demographic in these schools. However, it is likely that this indicates an over-representation of BAME boys being referred to the programme and it is important for schools to be mindful of racial bias (conscious or unconscious) in relation to interpreting the potential reasons for presenting behaviours.

The majority of mentees across both schools are between fourteen and sixteen years of age, i.e. in years ten and eleven. Given the preventative aims of the programme, there may be more work needed to identify vulnerable and at risk students earlier on in their secondary education in order to work with them before they become involved/entrenched. Both schools are aware of this and appear keen to focus more attention on years eight and nine going forward.

4. Findings

In this section, findings will be considered from the available qualitative and quantitative data in turn.

5a. Impact - Qualitative data

The strength of stakeholders' accounts of 'Aspire Beyond' and their enthusiasm, passion and support for the programme is notable. A wealth of accounts was gathered and what has been collated below is representative of these.

All qualitative data obtained through interviews and conversations was thematically coded and analysed. From this process, a number of recurring themes were identified which are explained

in turn below. The first two, 'lived experience' and 'the embedded programme' can be considered as over-arching themes:

Lived Experience – This term is nowadays often used and generally refers to someone who has personal experience of a particular issue (e.g. mental illness, criminal justice, substance misuse etc.) and/or who has made particular choices in the past and who uses the knowledge gained from these experiences and choices for some purpose, usually to help others experiencing similar issues. In relation to 'Aspire Beyond', data shows that the term is used as short-hand for something very specific, namely the 'credibility' and 'relatability' of the mentor, which in turn creates the conditions necessary for gaining trust and building effective relationships, both of which facilitate the mentoring process.

"Lived experience is probably key. It's what helps me trust him. I wouldn't engage with him if I couldn't relate." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

"Initially the lived experience is what caused [my son] to open up to [mentor] but after that it's just about the positive relationship and experience." (Parent of mentee)

Mentees value being understood '*properly*' and not being judged in their relationship with the mentor. This view is echoed by staff who describe lived experience as a key element of the programme, vital for engaging the most at risk young people.

"It's really important because we have students who will disclose to [mentor] things they wouldn't feel comfortable disclosing with us, it's a really trusted relationship." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

Several staff were also concerned initially about the risk of increasing some young people's fascination with and attraction to gang related lifestyles by glamorising the experience. However in all cases, these concerns were not borne out.

"When [mentor] first gave his presentation there was a fear that it might be a bit glamorising inadvertently but it didn't happen, it was dealt with really well in the presentation. I think it's really skilfully handled and permeates through the whole programme...You've got to be so careful that students don't gravitate towards risky behaviours if it's glamorised so it's very subtle and approached it in a way that stops that from happening." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

Further, staff across both schools described how having a mentor working with them helps them to keep abreast of issues that are often evolving at a fast pace. The specialist expertise and knowledge that the mentor adds to the schools' intelligence base is valued highly.

"We as teaching staff need that expertise to help us understand and identify the risks...there's always new things that come up that are new and I have to say to [mentor], 'I've heard this or

this'. He's the expert, he knows, he has an ear to the ground and can raise your awareness of things that are potentially going to occur. We've diverted some tricky issues because of that knowledge." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

The mentor provides staff with dynamic intelligence and can offer guidance, advice and support in dealing with sensitive and challenging situations. This knowledge and understanding of how best to approach high risk, potentially volatile situations has helped both schools to deal with a number of difficult situations.

"I've relied on that heavily in the past when we've had gangs coming down to the school because there have been heated discussions between two year groups and we've leant on expertise and understanding there about how to tone that situation down without us having to address that as members of staff, because it's out in the open. That could have gone a different way too but the fact that it came out helped the school deal with it." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

However, crucially, the skills-set of mentors has to extend beyond their lived experience and also include the personal attributes required to build relationships with professionals and young people alike in order to communicate effectively and appropriately with both, as the following quote exemplifies:

"Lived experience is a crucial engagement skill, that early hook that's the foundation for engagement. In the first session he gives his testimony then it's never touched on again, doesn't need to be. Then it's about the power of just building that relationship, the language that's used, that's where he is absolutely superb, when you see him working and how he articulates it and talks to the kids it is powerful. That cultural competence is everything." (Senior leader, St. Mary's)

Embedded programme – Mentoring can mean slightly different things in different situations and can be delivered in different ways, for example face-to-face or virtually, one-to-one or in groups, in situ or off site. A central element of 'Aspire Beyond' is the location of the mentor, who is physically based within and shared across the two schools. He considers himself, and is seen by colleagues to be part of the school team and is a known figure and presence around school. Mentors receive their mentoring sessions at school, within school hours. The embedded nature of the programme was highlighted by mentees and staff as being critically important for a number of reasons, including strengthening safeguarding, aiding containment and reinforcing the value schools place on supporting their young people and keeping them safe.

"Students are quite brutal and make assessments quickly so if they don't feel you're invested in it, they know it. They get that we as a school community value them and want to help them so we are providing that routine and structure to facilitate that. We value it so they value it. If it feels like it's a bolt-on they treat it as a bolt-on." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

On a very practical level, both mentees and staff recognise that the ease of the referral process facilitates engagement; if sessions were delivered out of school hours or as part of an external referral process, the service might end up missing the most at-risk young people.

"It would be harder to attend if it was external. Realistically I wouldn't go...In school, it's also a de-stressor, helps me deal with stuff that's on my mind, getting in the way.....the education focus is important and you're in the right setting to think about that. Out of school, you just wouldn't go." (Mentee, St. Mary's)

"I remember a student before [mentor] was here, had to see a mentor outside and the student didn't go and then the mentor went to their home and it just didn't work. It works being based here." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

Having a mentor based within school makes the intelligence gathering and sharing process more robust. It enables situations that may be developing at school or being flagged by staff, to be picked up quickly and responded to in real time. Staff value the way it helps them to spot early warning signs and respond appropriately and swiftly.

"[the embedded programme] helps us act quicker, put an intervention in place without waiting for things to escalate....we had an incident with a student this week who disclosed something to a member of staff and then it was fantastic because the next morning one of the interventions we put in place for the student, [mentor] picked up to do an in depth one-to-one with that student straight away." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

Importantly, having a mentor in school is seen as key to facilitating communication and helps ensure students do not fall through the gaps. It provides staff with a safe space to take and discuss rumours that may or may not be indicators of something concerning. Conversely, it provides an opportunity to the mentor to spot signs and potential risk indicators in and around the schools. This embedded presence seems to be viewed by staff and the mentor as a vital element of strengthening safeguarding, reducing risks and preventing escalation, particularly in the context of disruptions to schooling caused by the pandemic.

"We had a couple of issues during the first lockdown. [Mentor] was there, he supported the family, the student, he mentored him, particularly supported the mum to support her child. That was crucial to us that there was someone in the centre that we know, that the child knows that the parent knows, to work and with children's services as well and the police and coordinating all those agencies together and [mentor] was absolutely critical in that." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

From a pragmatic standpoint, several staff recognised that by having a mentor embedded within school, they are able to access support that may be harder to achieve externally due to services being overstretched and under resourced.

"It is pretty difficult to get access to the right support when it's a Local Authority because there's lots of schools and lots of young people needing the support so having an organisation working with and embedded with us, well we're fortunate." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

In addition to the two key over-arching themes of lived experience and the embedded nature of the programme, analysis of the data identified a number of other important themes which are described in turn below.

Preventing exclusions – Data shows risk of exclusion to be one of the primary reasons for referral to the mentoring programme. Both mentees and staff interviewed considered the programme to have been instrumental in preventing a number of exclusions.

"Some of our students only survive the week or indeed the day because of the mentoring they receive from him. They are here purely because he has given them the skills and the tools and the ability to reduce and minimise the risks that they are exposed to and to cooperate with the school because otherwise there would be conflict all the time. It's prevented exclusions, exclusions that could and I believe would have occurred." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

While it is impossible to evidence preventing something that might have gone on to happen, the following quote starkly highlights two different outcomes for boys in similar circumstances, one of whom received mentoring and the other who didn't because he preceded the programme's existence.

"I can picture one student and I know if we didn't have the expertise from St Giles we would have lost him by Christmas this year. Almost definitely and I can compare that to a student who sadly we had to support in a managed move from the school into the local PRU and I can see they were in similar positions, what they're involved in and you can see the one who stayed with us and the one who hasn't. That's a powerful message." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

Impact on attendance – While it has not been possible to draw conclusions from the schools' quantitative data about the programme's impact on attendance (see section 5a. below), anecdotal feedback strongly suggests it has been instrumental in keeping some pupils in school.

"Even though they are involved in other things, he's helped hold them and keep them coming in, engaged with school, their attendance is good. They could easily not be in school and be out in London but they're not, they're in school." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

"He emphasises their education as being really important and I think a lot of these boys wouldn't have the value in their education that they have. This has helped relationships with teachers

which has kept them in lessons and in school. We've had some of the boys he mentors in at 8 o'clock for interventions and then going home at 4 o'clock, that's amazing." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

The role that parents/carers can play in supporting their children's school attendance was also highlighted. In order for them to do this successfully, they need to be aware of what is going on for their child/ward and a number of staff spoke of the value of the wrap-around support provided by the programme.

"It supports the whole family as well. They are all aware of it. If I've had a meeting with the family [mentor] has come in for one part of it so it's almost like family support as well as students.... The students go home and talk about it; a lot of our students don't go home and talk about other aspects of school but they do go home and talk about their mentoring." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

Impact on behaviour – Presenting behaviour is one of the key flags that can trigger a referral to the programme. The mentees interviewed were displaying challenging behaviour of various kinds prior to engaging and spoke about the positive impact that they consider the programme to have had on them in relation to issues such as punctuality, discipline and responsibility.

"I used to let my emotions control me and I used to act based on that. [Mentor] taught me, don't let your emotions control you, control your emotions. I haven't got into serious trouble in a while, I'm trying to get focused. I know I would have been kicked out by now if I hadn't been on the programme." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

"When I got a detention, I used to choose to skip them but if I get one now, I attend, deal with it and solve it on the same day then start afresh tomorrow. Now I attend every intervention. I used to disobey and not attend but now I can see they are trying to help me to better myself." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

Similarly, both school staff and parents recognised positive changes in the behaviour of the young people being mentored, such as increased maturity in the classroom and a more responsible attitude in school and outside.

"When he was out he used to not pick up my calls now he calls me to say where he is." (Parent of mentee)

Prevention – Some important themes emerged in relation to the preventative nature of the mentoring programme. First, while staff universally recognised the imperative to support young people who are already involved or entrenched, they also identified the need to focus future work much further 'upstream', educating the younger years with the aim of preventing

involvement. Without this more assertive, earlier intervention, the risk of harm to more young people is increased and interventions remain reactive and crisis focused.

"We've got a lot of work to do here. In our local context, drugs are becoming part of the routine, normalised and it's the preventative work we need to do with children that is really, really important. There needs to be so much more emphasis on preventative work, on personal social development and more experts like from St Giles coming in to work at that sort of level as well as when students are embroiled in things." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

"The work they need to do is working with our year 7 and 8 students and it needs to be focussing there because there's more chance of stopping the entrenched issues if we start working there." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

Second, for those young people who are already involved and even entrenched, prevention can mean something different but equally important. Here, the mentoring can provide containment, holding the young person and preventing further risk from deeper involvement. In this context, managing and achieving engagement can itself be preventative.

"Even with the students where there are more entrenched issues already, how do you define what prevention is and what responsive work is? What we're doing is working with children who have some really entrenched behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, situations but at the same time it's still preventative because the alternative, if that work wasn't going on at all, is perhaps they are not attending at all, perhaps they are missing an education, perhaps they are not seen all weekend, perhaps they are involved deeper in some gang culture being exploited further." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

Further, prevention can be about minimising the impact on other students of the involvement of one of their peers in gang related activity. In this context, understanding a young person's networks and contacts is key. Being able to identify those on the periphery and sensitively engage them in a non-stigmatising way while providing intensive support to the entrenched individual is skilled and nuanced work.

"You get the one person that's in and the five people around them who are not in yet but who are likely to go in if that person goes to the next level because they'll then recruit their peers." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

Educating the whole school community – An important aspect of the programme seems to be the focus on education which means a number of different things in this context. First, there are the whole year, whole class and/or small group information sessions on subjects such as county lines, drugs and gangs. These are seen to provide a useful and important context for wider school initiatives and contribute to students' knowledge and learning through the personal and social development curriculum.

"After whole year group presentations, they will sometimes run small group sessions with targeted students, all those who are also being mentored one-to-one but it can be really useful to give them that opportunity to discuss an issue together in a safe way in that small group." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

Second, and echoed in issues related to the embedded model, are the benefits to schools of having specialist expertise, knowledge and skills available to staff and the wider school community. This is important in terms of up-skilling staff and parents about issues that they may otherwise have little or no awareness of, in particular the risks posed by county lines.

"Staff awareness is a really important part of it too. A lot of staff wouldn't have a clue about youth culture, a lot of parents don't. One of my key players that [mentor] worked with for a couple of years, when we were first getting his parents in in year 8, they didn't have a clue what we were talking about. We were saying he's got a trap phone, he's got another phone they were saying 'oh no it's fine, his friend lent it to him', so it was about educating the parents as well." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

It is also important in terms of intelligence sharing which contributes to and strengthens contextual safeguarding.

"Intel is really important, knowing that this is happening amongst our students and what the plan is to support without giving any details, it gives us an understanding of what's going on beyond our gates or what might be going on in their minds whilst they are here." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

Further, the information imparted to mentees during their one-to-one sessions often serves to dispel myths and provides them with accurate, un-glamorised facts and knowledge that they are able to use to help keep themselves safe, for example in relation to potential legal consequences of involvement in serious youth violence incidents and the risks associated with drug use.

"He told me about joint enterprise. If I didn't know about that, I could have been in a lot of trouble." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

"When I was referred I was doing a lot of weed smoking, I haven't done it in ages. [Mentor] did a session on the chemicals in weed and what their effects are and it helped, it opened my eyes and made me think." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

Impact on school culture – In order to normalise talking, questioning and raising awareness of youth violence, having a mentor embedded within school seems to be an instrumental

component in developing and sustaining such a culture. It serves to break down stigma and develop a better level of awareness across the school, creating what one staff member described as a "safe space."

"There's a huge void in education and knowledge about the risk factors....key to this is culture and creating a culture in schools where it's okay to talk about knives, drugs, gangs etc. and it's not seen as a big taboo. You can have the best strategy going but if you don't have the culture, you're not prepared to talk about it effectively, it won't make a difference." (Senior leader, St. Mary's)

The effect on some young people of being in a more open culture seems to be an increase in levels of maturity and a more responsible attitude towards themselves and others. Some mentees spoke about feeling a duty towards looking out for younger students and intervening in an informal mentoring capacity on occasion.

"It has taught me how to involve myself in my community in a better way, both at school and outside. It's easier in school, we know the environment and as we improve, we can try to change our environment for the better." (Mentee, St. Mary's)

"I wanted friends, I just wanted to fit in but now I want to be that student who achieves high grades, inspires others. Everything is different now, it has made me review everything, what's important and what matters to me." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

Thinking skills – A strongly emerging theme from the interview data is the effect the mentoring programme is considered to have on mentees thinking skills and ability to better identify and consider consequences. The mentees themselves reflected a lot on this theme during interviews and gave a number of examples of when and where they had employed critical thinking skills as part of their decision making process.

"I was referred in year eight [now in year 10] for misbehaviour, talking, being late to school. It has taught me to think before I act. I always ask myself, what advice would my mentor have?" (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

"I one hundred percent think differently since I started seeing him. One time, [something happened] and I started getting really angry....but I thought, if I lash out, I will probably get arrested and then that defines the whole thing. I thought I don't want my mum or [mentor] to go through that pain so I left empty handed. Before I would have lashed out, no question." (Mentee, St. Mary's)

They also described the changes in how they think in terms of their sense of self and identified issues such as improved self-confidence, self-worth and self-respect as having improved as a direct result of having been mentored.

"The mentoring has one hundred percent made a difference to me, opened my eyes. I understand consequences now, I distance myself, I want to better myself. I have more self-respect and understand my actions better. I think about my future now." (Mentee, Haileybury Turnford)

However, both students and staff recognise that mentees don't always make the right choices despite perhaps being more aware of what the right choices might be. Most see progress and development as a long-term journey for which the mentoring programme lays strong foundations to be built upon.

"You learn to just pause and think, what am I going to do next? More thinking, less doing." (Mentee, St. Mary's)

"They have just gained more knowledge and thought about their actions a bit more. For the more key players it's the push pull factors and I guess the influences out there that are much stronger than family or school but they've still got the information and if they don't act on it now, they will draw on it as they get older." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

Life-saving – A powerful message delivered by a number of staff, half the parents and three of the mentees interviewed is that without the mentoring programme, young people might have died. While this is clearly not a measurable outcome, it is worth noting the strength of feeling about how valuable a programme 'Aspire Beyond' is.

"If not for [mentor] and the mentoring, my son wouldn't be alive today." (Parent of mentee)

"The people who decide whether or not to fund programmes like this in secondary schools need to recognise that actually it's quite likely that some of our kids might have died. I don't throw that out lightly and we can't measure that but there's a genuine chance that some of our students could have had or been involved with serious knife incidents locally, could have been even more deeply involved in gang culture and been exploited and ended up seriously hurt, injured, traumatised or killed and that's the genuine reality." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

5b. Impact - Quantitative data

All of the programme's data capture tools were scrutinised and analysed for the eleven mentees who had completed the programme and for whom a complete data set was therefore available.

At initial assessment, mentees are asked to self-assess their circumstances in relation to a number of fields relating to themselves and their relationships and attitudes relating to school, family, associates and the community. They repeat this rating exercise at an interim point and

again when their involvement in the programme ends. This data shows the change in mentees' attitudes across time and indicates whether progress has been made in relation to issues that they consider to be problematic.

Analysis of this data shows that change can be up and down and progress is not linear. For the majority of students, some degree of progress is made over time. For a few, the issue/s that are problematic for them remain so even at the end of the programme and these mentees are then referred on for additional, specialist support, for example in relation to substance misuse.

The following case study is a good example of how complex and inter-related the issues can be and gives an over-view of the kinds of change that can happen from the perspective of the mentee (through their self-ratings) and the mentor (through case closure notes and the end of engagement assessment).

Case study

X was referred because he was at increasing risk of exclusion due to anger management issues and an inability to manage conflict. He engaged with the programme for approximately two academic years. Over time, his feelings about school and teachers in particular became more positive. His initial low scorings in relation to anger management and dealing with conflict suggest he was aware that these were problem areas for him and he does show improvement over time, albeit modest. He also appears to feel safer in the community and at school and have fewer concerns around weapons. However, his rating in relation to drugs suggests this has become more of a problem as, to a lesser extent, has his friendship group. This is supported by the mentor's assessment of the situation:

"X has grown in knowledge and understanding as it relates to the dangers of gangs and county line, knife crimes, drugs and substance misuse, and joint enterprise. Also decision making, direction and purpose. I am confident that he is fully aware of the consequences of making wrong choices and decisions relating to non-productive activities, criminal attraction, involvement, participation, identification, and the acceptance of the gang culture.

His attitude has improved as it relates to his risk areas (dealing with conflict, anger management, risk of exclusion) but not when it comes to drugs and substance misuse and his general attitude towards the gang culture. He continues to use cannabis and I have recommended a referral to a community support service which he has refused. I am concerned that he seems comfortable with the instant gratification elements of the gang culture."

An important point to note is that an increase in a mentee's knowledge and understanding of the issues and risks, and a certainty on the part of the mentor that a mentee understands the consequences of making negative choices does not necessarily equate to making the 'right' choices. It is likely that a number of factors will play a part in this decision-making process such as: the age of mentees; their level of maturity; the strength of the external 'push and pull'

factors; their personal and family social and financial circumstances; and crucially, the extent to which their critical thinking skills are developed.

A limited amount of monitoring data relating to attendance, punctuality and discipline was provided by the schools. It was not possible to draw conclusions from this about the potential impact of the programme on these areas, mainly due to the impact of Covid-19. Attendance was so impacted by lockdowns that for most mentees there was no normal period of attendance pre-mentoring and pre-lockdown to compare against post-mentoring data.

5. Covid-19

Despite the many challenges caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the mentoring programme appears to have remained engaged with mentees as much as possible at a time when the interventions provided by many other services have been greatly stripped-back. During lockdown periods and times of school closure, this was necessarily virtual and all parties agree that ideally, face-to-face engagement is preferable and more effective. Nonetheless, the schools, mentees and families appear to have felt 'held' by the service.

"[Mentor] was always there and always available. St Giles kept in touch with us, there was contact there. It wasn't perfect because face to face is always better but it was there and we could personally message [mentor] as well if we were concerned about something. He would always get back to us there was never any fear of that. You just know that he would support if there was a need for whatever during the lockdown." (Senior leader, Haileybury Turnford)

The responsiveness of the service, even when schools' provision and mechanisms for remote teaching and learning were in their infancy, was greatly valued by schools in particular, but also parents and mentees themselves. While very few new referrals were taken on under these circumstances, the continuity and containment provided to existing mentees was important.

"He did virtual sessions in lockdown which was good because we didn't want them to be isolated and not have anything and it was when a lot of our boys were vulnerable, when they weren't in school, particularly in the first lockdown when there was some online learning but it wasn't as structured as it went on to become for the second one. That was really important to continue working with the boys already working with him." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

"During Covid, he was still on board to check in with [my son] and with us parents. We went through a difficult period and [mentor] has been there to support us." (Parent of mentee)

One of the clearest benefits of this continued engagement has been in relation to risk management and contributing to safeguarding at a time when arguably risk increased for the most vulnerable young people. For some of them, unstructured time, away from the school environment and routines created the conditions for increased involvement in risky activities. At

times, parents were unaware of their children's whereabouts and the strong, trusted relationship established between mentor and mentee was the only line of communication for some.

"He kept in touch with as many of our students as he possibly could. He was reporting back to me all through lockdown on whether he'd been able to contact them or he hadn't and if he hadn't then obviously I was checking in with the achievement coordinators because we didn't want them to go completely off radar." (Staff member, St. Mary's)

Similarly, strong and trusted professional relationships established through being embedded in the schools, meant that staff continued to feel supported and benefitted from the mentor's specialist skills and expertise, just as under normal circumstances.

"The support was absolutely vital. I had a few causes for concern raised from a couple of families during Covid and [mentor] was able to step in and help me immediately. One was very serious and straightaway I knew I needed his expertise and I was on the phone and he was there, amazing, brilliant. If I hadn't had access to the mentoring scheme, I would have had to deal with that on my own and I'm not that au fait with those things and [mentor's] got the knowledge. He was a great support to me during lockdown." (Staff member, Haileybury Turnford)

6. Conclusion and recommendations

Data from interviews with mentees, parents, senior leaders, year leads, behaviour managers, intervention officers and child protection leads at both schools clearly indicates that 'Aspire Beyond' is highly regarded and valued. The programme is considered to have a positive impact on mentees, families, school staff and the wider school community and to be an important component of the schools' safeguarding approaches.

The programme has been delivered by a highly skilled and professional mentor with outstanding personal qualities and engagement skills, which make them effective in their role. When such unique individuals are involved in developing and delivering pilot projects, there is a risk that success is due to their qualities and skills, and the operational relationships that they have formed around them, rather than the particular model or service, thus making it un-replicable. However, evidence shows that a strong set of operating principles and practices has been developed, suggesting the programme could be delivered by any suitably experienced and well supported mentor. This is a challenging role and field of activity, and robust and dedicated recruitment, ongoing support, training and personal development should be maintained in order to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the mentor and the programme.

Measuring impact for a programme such as 'Aspire Beyond' is challenging; without counter-factuals and the opportunity to gather and assess longitudinal data, it is impossible to

definitively attribute change and/or other outcomes. However, for future evaluations, some improvements could be made around the provision of quantitative data to potentially provide proxy indicators, for example in relation to simplifying the way project outcomes data and schools' monitoring data is recorded.

A number of gaps in the programme's reach have been identified. Preventative work, undertaken with younger year groups and students not so involved (and even entrenched) in gang related activities/youth violence and risky behaviour has not been as much of a focus as was intended. Also the needs of, and particular issues that exist for, vulnerable girls have not been a focus and have been flagged as a gap.

A question exists about the representation of BAME boys within the programme. It is important not to reinforce conscious or unconscious bias in identifying mentees, but there is also a need to acknowledge the particular social pressures that different groups may face and put in place interventions that tackle disadvantage, within the context of a wider equalities framework.

All stakeholders clearly recognise that mentoring offers no 'quick fix' and the strength of the programme is its genuine responsiveness and needs led approach. Some of the mentees interviewed have been engaging for most of the three years and see the support as an important, ongoing element of their school life and often the thing which enables them to remain at school. This approach requires schools to be fully invested; the programme needs to be seen as an integral part of schools' safeguarding and wider pastoral support in order to contribute to bringing about a change in culture.

Schools know their children well and with the right specialist input and support, are well placed to be front and centre in early identification and safeguarding in relation to youth violence.

"What we find, time and again, is that early identification is paramount to safeguarding young and vulnerable people, and identifying and tackling gang/ group exploitation." Safer London in response to Youth Violence Commission (July 2020)

Recommendation one: a greater focus on prevention

More focused work is needed in the younger years (seven, eight and nine), with the aim of preventing involvement in gang related activity. This should be in addition to, not instead of, the much needed work with young people already involved or on the periphery of involvement.

Recommendation two: a greater focus on girls

The programme should be expanded to include a specific focus on girls. The materials and approach should be reviewed and adjusted where necessary to meet the needs of and issues for girls at risk of involvement in gang related activity, who may present differently to boys.

Recommendation three: better collection and use of quantitative data

Programme paperwork and data capture tools should be reviewed and streamlined if necessary to eradicate any duplication. Schools should have a clearer understanding of and expectations about the data they need to make available, and timely guidance about the format it needs to be in.

Recommendation four: bridging support into further education

Consideration should be given to the possibility of continuing engagement for a small number of mentees still requiring support post sixteen. Forming relationships with further education and apprenticeship providers could facilitate this and also provide a potential means of obtaining longitudinal outcomes/impact data.

Laura Thorne, Confluence Partnerships Limited

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laura@confluence-partnerships.co.uk