alterline

Cumbria Community Foundation

Brighter Futures - Year 2 Evaluation Report

August 2026

CUMBRIA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

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Foreword

Brighter Futures exists because of the generosity and commitment of the individuals, businesses, trusts and foundations that believe every care experienced young adult deserves the opportunity to thrive.

We would like to thank our funders and supporters whose investment has made this programme possible, alongside our delivery partners, Cumbria Youth Alliance and Inspira, the many employers who have offered opportunities, and colleagues across local authorities and partner organisations who continue to champion care experienced young adults.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the young adults who have engaged with Brighter Futures and shared their experiences as part of this evaluation. Their honesty, resilience and ambition continue to shape and strengthen the programme.

This independent evaluation highlights the difference that trusted relationships, personalised support and collaborative working can make. We are grateful to everyone who has contributed to helping young adults build brighter futures.

David Beeby
Chair of the Brighter Futures Steering Group

Executive summary

Brighter Futures is helping care experienced young adults build more stable, confident and independent lives.

Since June 2024, the programme has supported 18 to 25-year-olds across West Cumbria and Barrow to achieve their goals and build positive futures. Drawing on the expertise, relationships and local knowledge of the charitable sector, Brighter Futures combines personalised support, practical opportunities and tailored interventions to help young adults overcome challenges and thrive.

This Year 2 evaluation draws on quarterly monitoring data, steering group feedback, and direct engagement with care experienced young adults and employers to assess the programme's impact and contribution to its aims.

In its second year, the programme supported 42 young adults, including 15 newly engaged participants and 27 who had continued their involvement from the first year, bringing the total number supported to 45. Through trusted relationships, flexible one-to-one support and strong partnership working, Brighter Futures is creating opportunities that many participants may not otherwise have accessed and helping young adults make meaningful progress towards independence.

Key achievements

Young adults are making meaningful progress in their lives

Participants demonstrated improvements across nearly all areas measured, including emotional wellbeing, social involvement, communication, employability, motivation and key skills. Emotional wellbeing showed some of the strongest gains, with young adults describing the value of having a trusted person to turn to during challenging periods.

The programme is creating routes into education, training and employment

During Year 2:

- 13 young adults gained employment
- 14 secured work placements or work experience opportunities
- 10 took up work placements
- 6 entered further or higher education
- 6 completed training
- 4 gained qualifications

These achievements reflect the programme's highly personalised and flexible approach, helping young adults overcome barriers and pursue opportunities that match their aspirations.

Trusted relationships are the foundation of success

Young adults consistently highlighted the importance of having dedicated advisers who listen, advocate for them and provide practical support. These relationships have improved confidence, resilience and engagement, while enabling support to be tailored to individual circumstances.

Employers are becoming part of the solution

The programme engaged 19 new employers during Year 2, raising awareness of the challenges faced by care experienced young adults and creating opportunities for placements, training and employment. There is growing evidence that employers are adapting recruitment practices and becoming more confident in supporting care experienced young adults into work.

Partnership working is a programme strength

The collaboration between Cumbria Youth Alliance, Inspira, local authorities, employers and other partners has enabled more joined-up, responsive support for young adults. Stakeholders identified this approach as an example of effective partnership working and sector best practice.

Looking ahead

The evaluation highlights strong evidence that Brighter Futures is improving outcomes for care experienced young adults. Future opportunities include extending reach across Cumbria, strengthening engagement before young people reach 18, and building further employer capacity to create sustainable pathways into employment. Continued investment in the programme would enable more young adults to benefit from the intensive, flexible and relationship-based support that has proven so effective.

Introduction and evaluation method

Introduction and aims

The Brighter Futures programme has been running since June 2024 and supports care experienced young adults (aged 18-25) in West Cumbria and Barrow to achieve their goals and build positive, independent lives. Drawing on the expertise of the local charitable sector, the programme combines personalised support, opportunities and practical interventions to help young adults thrive. The programme is managed by Cumbria Community Foundation (CCF), which brings together funding from local businesses, charitable trusts, individual donors and other supporters, and delivered in partnership with Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA) and Inspira, with the support of Cumberland Council and Westmorland and Furness Council.

CCF commissioned Alterline to conduct an independent evaluation of the programme. The evaluation sets out to answer the following research questions:

Programme effectiveness

How effective had the Brighter Futures programme been in:

- Delivering the programme outcomes?
- Engaging with care experienced young adults?
- Improving independent living, self-confidence and personal ambitions of care experienced young adults?
- Increasing work-readiness, employability skills, career pathways and projected income for care-experienced young adults?
- Engaging with employers, including the creation of work-experience placements, paid employment opportunities, and increasing knowledge/awareness/adjustments of businesses to support care experienced young adults into employment?

Working practices

To what extent have collaborative working practices between the public, private and third sector organisations improved, and how are these relationships ensuring that tailored support is offered to care-experienced young adults by the right organisations, in the right manner and at the right time?

Has the Brighter Futures programme demonstrated good examples of best practice and/or innovation?

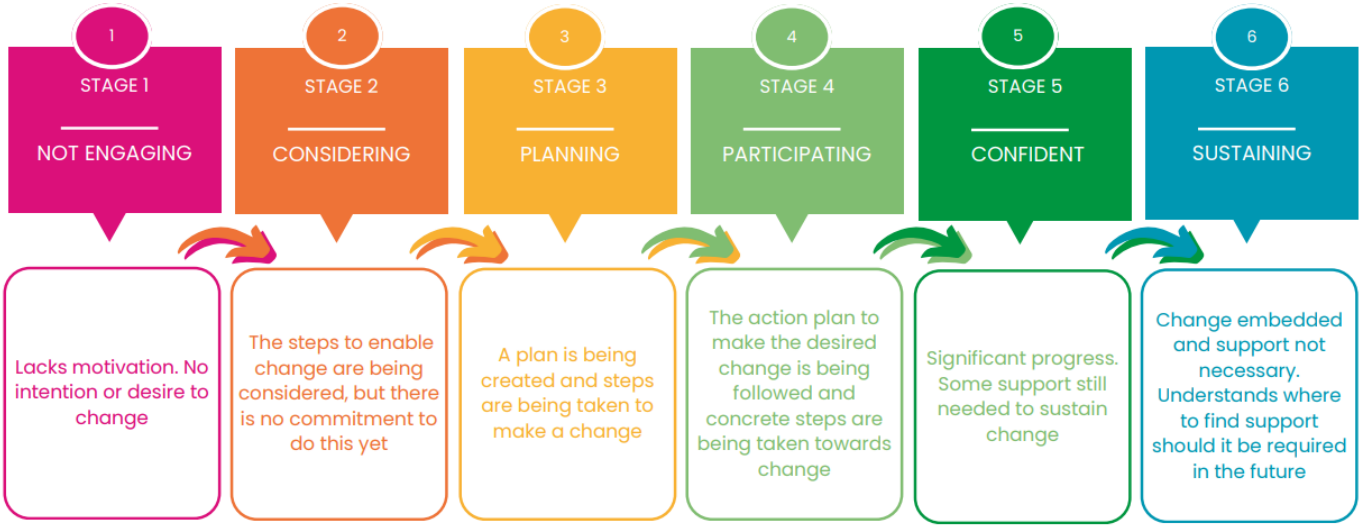
This report summarises evaluation findings from the second year of the programme's delivery.

Method

The evaluation is supported by a wide range of evidence to holistically understand the programme's strengths and areas for further development, including:

- Quarterly monitoring reports
- Stories of Most Significant Change
- Steering Group minutes and presentation
- ME Tool data (11 of whom had repeated assessments)
- Interviews with care experienced young adults (5) and employers (2)
- Surveys with employers (8), and steering group members (6).

The ME Tool is an evaluation tool to identify young adult's barriers and strengths to help them move forward and is used within the delivery of the programme. Young adults are assessed at multiple stages to understand improvements in and continued areas for support across relationships; essential skills; Maths, English and IT; aiming high; social involvement; a healthy lifestyle; staying positive; home and stability; communication; and identity. Across each of these areas, individuals are assessed to establish the point at which they are at across the following stages:



The ME Tool can be used one-to-one or in group settings, ensuring personalised discussions and accurate assessments. Discussions include:

- Identification of starting points and monitoring progression;
- Recognition of individual strengths and barriers;
- Identification of sustainable progression options;
- Addressing additional support needs;
- Establishing goals and strategies for action plans.

Key workers help the participant identify underlying issues and barriers, refer to the descriptions, and work together to agree on an appropriate level for each area. This informs the action plan and places the participant at an appropriate stage on the Pipeline.

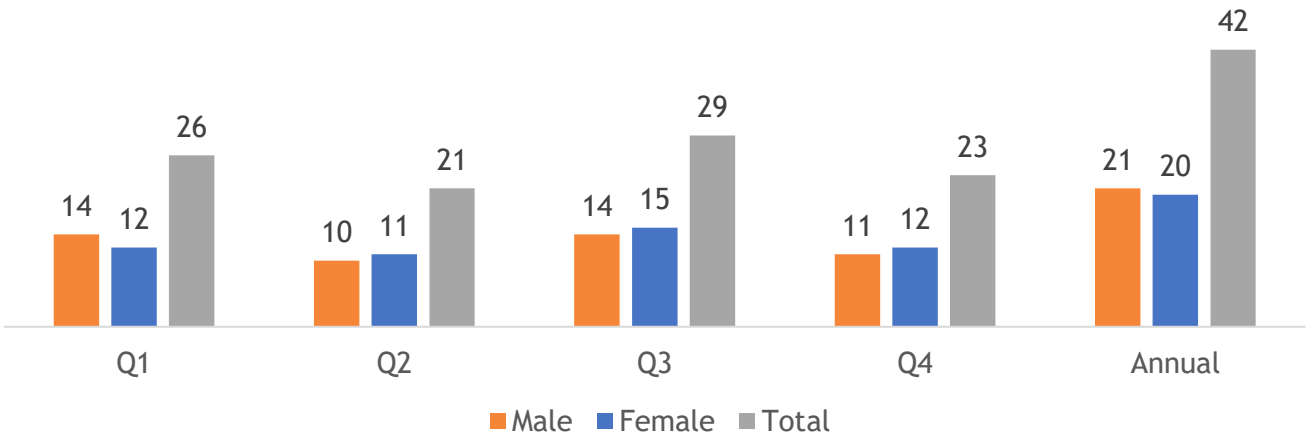
11 young adults had multiple ME Tool assessments, and these form the basis of the analysis in this report to aid understanding of progress through the programme. The length of involvement in the programme of the 11 young adults who had repeated assessments ranged between 35 and 95 weeks, with an average length of involvement of 78 weeks. As most had been involved in the programme for a similar length of time, this meant that analysis based on length of involvement was not possible.

Engaging Young People in Brighter Futures

Programme engagement

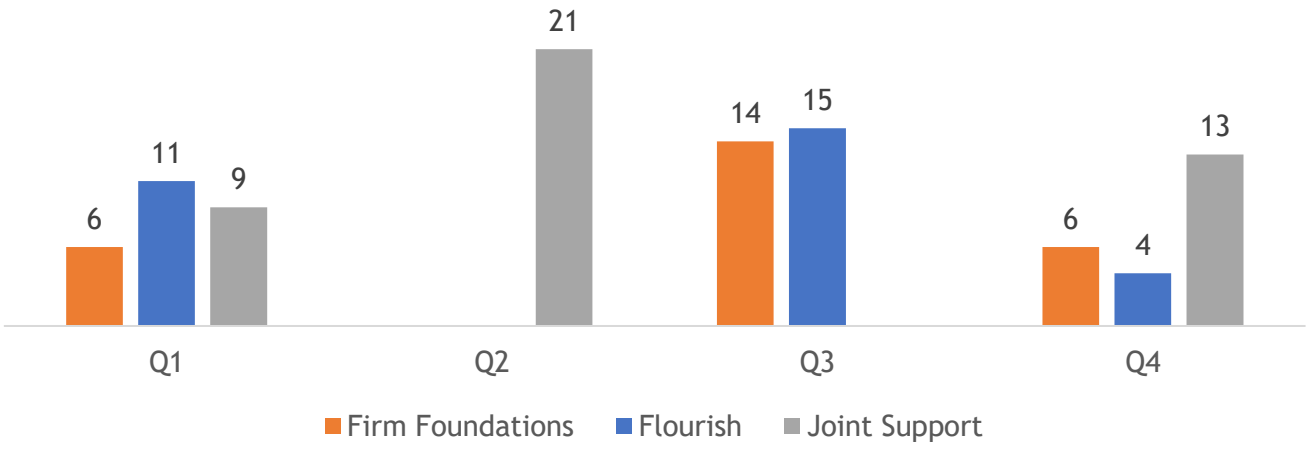
Over the course of year 2, 42 young adults engaged with the Brighter Futures programme. Of these 42 young adults, 15 were newly engaged in the second year and 27 had been engaged during the first year of the programme. This meant the total unique number of individuals supported by the programme over its first two years was 45, slightly below the target of 50.

Engagement figures varied by quarter. Quarter 1 saw the lowest number of young adults engaged which was attributed to lower levels of referral over the summer period when key stakeholders were on annual leave. Participation peaked in quarter 3 with 29 young adults actively engaged in the programme in this timeframe.



Number of young adults supported by Brighter Futures in Year 2.

Through the programme, young adults are supported through both Firm Foundations and Flourish, and at points in time they will receive joint support across the two. Higher levels of provision of joint support were associated with months where fewer young adults were supported overall, and higher levels of need among the young adults involved in the programme at these points may have impacted the overall numbers the programme was able to support.



Number of young adults supported by Firm Foundations, Flourish and through joint support across the two in Year 2.

Activities to increase programme engagement

Overall, steering group members were positive about the ability of the programme to engage with young adults and maintain meaningful engagement with them through the programme. Many activities, several of which demonstrate partnership work across the region, had taken place over the course of the year to enhance awareness of, and referrals to, the programme, including:

- Increasing connections with Westmorland and Furness and Cumberland councils through activities such as attendance of their Education, Employment and Training (EET) meetings, Corporate Parenting meetings, and Virtual Schools;
- Exploring collaborative support opportunities with Cumberland Council to increase referrals coming from multi-agency meetings;
- Ongoing collaboration with DWP and Job Centre Plus, including hosting workshops during National Care Leavers Month;
- Delivering outreach at the Foyer in Whitehaven and Northwest Leaving Care Services in Barrow;
- Working with schools and colleges to raise awareness of Brighter Futures as a progression pathway post-18;
- Promotion of Brighter Futures embedded into the launch of Connect to Work;
- Attendance at the Chamber's Annual Conference in Keswick, along with two careers fairs (one in Barrow in October and another in Workington);
- Attendance at the Sellafield Ltd Social Value Sustainability Pillar meeting to raise awareness of the programme with supply chain employers;
- Involvement in Barrow's new Care Hub Steering group, an ongoing physical presence at the hub, and attendance of careers events at the hub;
- Further presence at careers events in Grasmere and the Festival of Work.

Over the course of the year, these activities generated 19 referrals into the programme, though it was noted that 8 of these referrals needed to be placed on a waiting list mainly due to young adults being under the age of 18 at the point of referral. Despite this, referral pathways remained a key indicator of risk throughout the year, and continued activity is needed to maintain and expand referral levels to maximise the impact of the programme.

Building trusted relationships with young adults

Building trust with young adults was also considered a challenging area. Steering group members reflected that young adults lacked trust in authority figures and there was a large amount of work to be done to build trust in the first instance before young adults wanted to engage in the programme. This was considered to be slightly easier as a third sector partner which could distinguish itself from social work, care teams, probation and police, with whom young adults may have had poor experiences in the past.

Once trust had been established, engagement was easier and the evaluator observed during the interviews the close, tailored and personalised relationships which had been built with individuals, providing them with a safe and trusted advisor who could support them to develop. This was also reflected in how young adults themselves described their experience of the programme, and how the relationships they built through the programme meant they had a trusted adult with which to share their needs, wants and experiences with.

"This was one of the biggest things for me because when I met Claire I thought, oh great, you know, it's just going to be another one of these f*ing people that come in and they ask me to do this, and they ask me to do that. It's just going to be more of the same essentially. But it's not. She asks how I am and that's one of the biggest things which leads me to feel like it's all about me. I feel like, instead of it just being another person who's come to drone on at me and nag me about why my life's not like this, all these things that are wrong. It's not. It's a person coming to me, as a person, trying to help me be a better person and do the things I want to do as a person better."**

Care experienced young adult

"But they're not just here to get you ready for certain things, they're also here to be your buddy. The person you want to go up and speak to or just ramble off. They've seen me angry, they've seen me cry, they've seen me laughing, frustrated, they've seen it all."

Care experienced young adult

This contributed to further engagement also, as young adults expressed that, because of the experiences they had through the programme so far, it gave them confidence that they would have support in the future when taking on new things:

"They listen to what my needs are and they advocate for my voice and get that across, and they make sure that they give me back, saying this has happened, and this is what's going to happen but we're going to have to work on it to get there. I feel like even though I haven't started [a youth work course] yet, I'll still have the help and support, getting through the whatever it's going to be for the course. Because I do have a rough idea how it's going to be for me, but I also know that I'm not going to be alone completely doing it."

Care experienced young adult

This also highlighted the need for consistency in the staff supporting young adults, which was highlighted as a strength of the programme:

"The main strength is the quality of assistance available and consistency of the workers involved. Many of the young people will have experienced multiple changes of social workers."

Steering group member

Further challenges to engaging young adults included the transient nature of care experienced young adults, which was further exacerbated by the focus of the programme being in the West and Barrow but not extended throughout Cumbria. It was noted that provided a young adult was within the correct geographical area at the start of their engagement, the team could still continue working with them if they moved out of area, however, this restriction did impact referrals into the programme. There are current aspirations to expand programme coverage to the whole of Cumbria and from three to five years to mitigate against these challenges and respond to young adult's needs.

The inability to support young adults until they turned 18 was also raised as an issue. The programme's founding donation was specifically restricted to supporting care experienced young adults aged 18 and over. However, stakeholders noted that the transition to adulthood is often the point at which formal support reduces, while many young adults are still building confidence and navigating significant life changes. As developing relationships and trust can take time, there was a view that earlier engagement could help create a stronger pipeline of support and enable smoother transitions into the programme when young adults become eligible.

"[A main challenge or limitation is] Not being able to support YP until they turn 18, sometimes working with YP 16/17 who are in education or NEET can help to establish positive relationships and help them to access work-experience/shadowing/part-time work/increased hope and aspirations for the future."

Steering group member

Despite these challenges, steering group members reflected that the holistic, tailored and personalised experience that was currently offered through the programme was a key part of its success, represented best practice and ensured that value for money was delivered through the programme:

"Brighter Futures has provided strong value for money. The programme delivers a holistic and flexible approach to supporting care experienced young adults, addressing barriers that can often prevent progression into education, employment and training. There are very few services that offer this level of personalised support whilst also working proactively with employers to raise awareness and create opportunities for this cohort."

Steering group member

Overall impact on young adults

Across the ten areas assessed in the ME Tool, young adults had shown improvements across all outcomes. Outcomes which saw the largest numbers of young adults improve were in employability, social involvement and key skills. Areas where lower numbers of young adults improved tended to be those where they were assessed at least at the participating stage on their initial assessment, suggesting lower levels of needs in these areas. This applied mostly to young people's communication skills and identity.

Few young people declined in their scores across all outcome areas during their time in the programme, and the outcome which saw the most sustained decline (home and stability) is likely reflective of the challenging and variable home circumstances that care experienced young adults encounter and demonstrates the need for continued work with young adults across all areas of independent living.

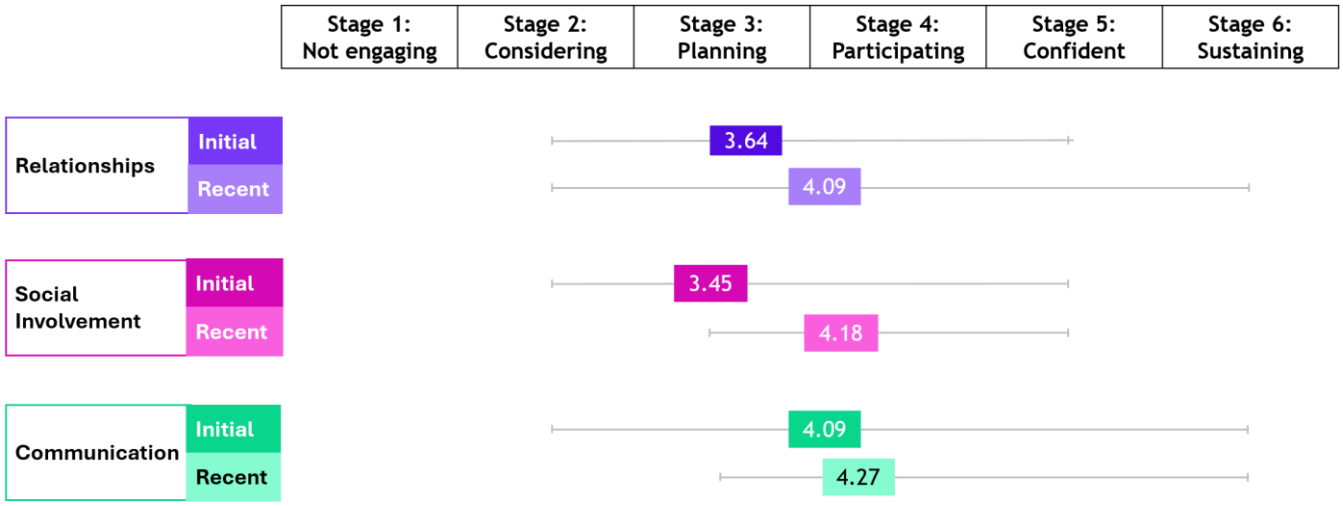
Outcome area	Improved	Stay the same	Declined
Relationships	5	5	1
Social involvement	7	4	0
Communication	2	9	0
Healthy lifestyles	4	5	2
Emotional wellbeing	6	4	1
Home and stability	2	5	4
Identity	2	9	0
Employability	8	1	2
Key skills	6	5	0
Aspiration and motivation	5	4	2

Number of young people who had improved, stayed the same, or declined in their ME Tool assessments across all outcome areas between their initial and most recent assessment.

Impact on independent living, self-confidence and wellbeing

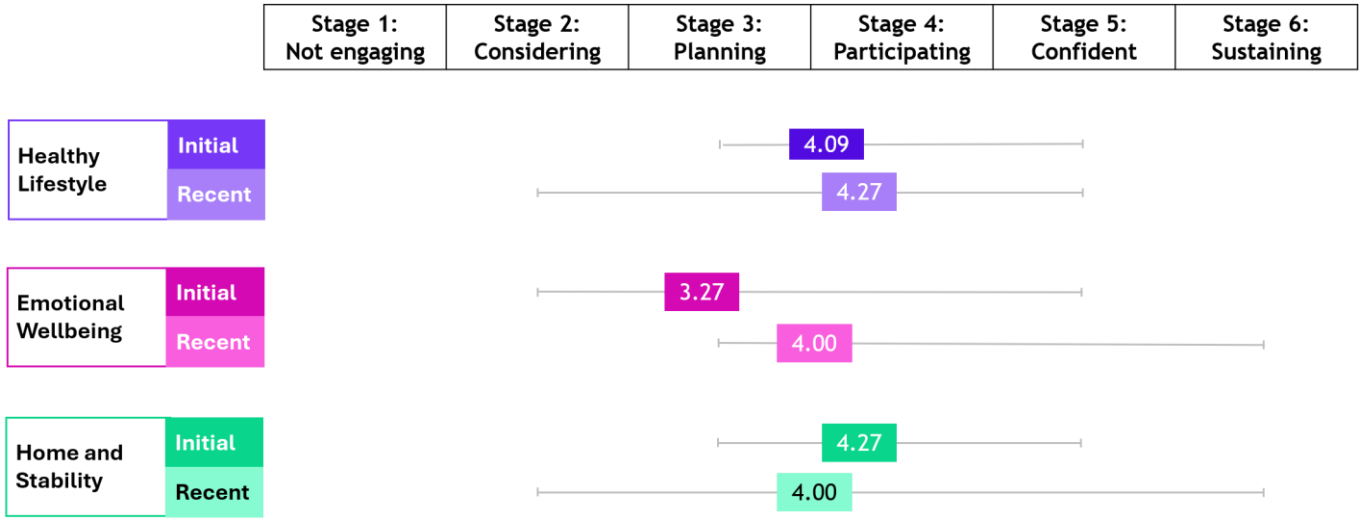
Overall progress in living, self-confidence and wellbeing

The ME Tool assessments showed positive changes across young adult's relationships, social involvement and communication. On average young adults had moved from the planning stage to the participating stage in their relationships and social involvement. In communication, there was a slight increase in the average assessment, still remaining within the participation stage.



Progress on the ME Tool among young adults who have completed at least one follow-up assessment. Displaying the average stage at the initial assessment and most recent assessment (coloured boxes) and the range of stages across the young adults included (grey bars).

In the initial assessment, participants on average were in the participating stage for healthy lifestyle and home and stability. There was a small increase in the average stage for healthy lifestyle between the initial and most recent assessments, though a small decrease in home and stability. Despite this decrease, on average, programme participants remained in the participating stage. Emotional wellbeing had the lowest average score of all measured areas at the point of initial assessment, and programme participants had moved from the planning to participating stage during the course of their engagement.



Progress on the ME Tool among young adults who have completed at least one follow-up assessment. Displaying the average stage at the initial assessment and most recent assessment (coloured boxes) and the range of stages across the young adults included (grey bars).

The final measure in the ME Tool was young adult's identity. Across the 11 young adults with repeated assessments, nine were rated as sustaining (the highest level) at their first and most recent assessment. The two which were not both made improvements during their time in the programme, indicating both the impact on the programme on this area and the flexibility included within it to work on young adult's needs as and where they are relevant.

Progress in relationships

In the relationships area, five young adults made positive progress between their initial and most recent assessment, which moved the three young adults who were in the planning stage into the participating stage. One young adult had moved back a stage; however, they were still within the participating stage in their most recent assessment meaning they were still actively engaged in their relationships. Only one young adult remained below the participating stage.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	1	1
Planning	3	0
Participating	6	8
Confident	1	1
Sustaining	0	1

Progress in the Relationships area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

Progress in social involvement

In social involvement, seven young adults moved forward at least one stage, representing five of the six young adults who were assessed below participating in their initial assessment. In three instances, young adults had become confident. Only one young adult remained below the participating stage.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	2	0
Planning	4	3
Participating	3	3
Confident	5	5
Sustaining	0	0

Progress in the Social Involvement area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

For young adults, the act of being involved in the Brighter Futures programme in and of itself was an important form of social involvement and routine. They described the benefits that having a place to go to and discuss their lives and get out of the house:

> **"Well social skills in that the fact that I have become a social person, but not like a sociable person in the way of liking to be sociable. I'm sociable in the way that I come and see Claire, I come and see Amy and I go down to the place I help out in."**
>
> **Care experienced young adult**

"[The programmes' helped me by] Probably just being able to go out and do stuff, realistically. Because when I first started, I used to come through, every now and then, to the office and it was getting us out, and being able to come out and actually do summat."

Care experienced young adult

Progress in communication

Fewer young adults made progress in their communication, however, it should be noted that nine of the 11 young adults assessed in this area were already at the participating stage at their initial assessment which indicated lower levels of need in this area. One young adult below the participating stage had moved up to planning, and another had moved from confident to sustaining.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	1	0
Planning	1	2
Participating	6	6
Confident	2	1
Sustaining	1	2

Progress in the Communication area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

Case study: Applying new communication skills outside the programme

One young adult described how the programme had not only helped them with their ability to talk to people on the programme, but that they had used this to improve upon their communication skills in the role they volunteered at:

"They've gave me opportunities with different events and venue places. Working on myself, like growing up. Not just in the way of like growing up, naturally, I mean like in a way of when you're working on certain things and the way you've changed through that over years. I don't know how to explain it properly but it's like they're helping me in that way, it's like being there to just let me ramble on about stuff. You know when work was a hard topic to talk about because I used to get frustrated with that topic coming up. But now we're working on what I'm going to do next in life.

Communication skills wasn't my thing at the beginning. My communication skills probably weren't the best at the beginning because I avoided them quite a lot. But I was very good at avoiding people, especially new people, so I would say the communication skills was worked on through the year. I am better at communicating with them [the kids where I volunteer] now than I was then. The kids at the place that I volunteer at, they at very good at telling you stuff when they feel comfortable knowing who you are as well. They like to have a good chit chat with you. At the very beginning, at the start of when I started, I didn't want to go to the teenagers and speak to them, but now I literally go up and speak to them, play games, this and that."

Similarly to how young adults described the impact of Brighter Futures on their social involvement, the process of being involved in the programme could also improve their communication skills, particularly among those who had particular challenges around confidence, anxiety and speaking up:

> **"It's helped me with my confidence to be fair because when I first started coming, I wouldn't really speak to many people and that. Being able to come out and speak to someone else, it helps me to be fair. Once I wouldn't have been able to go out and do it with other people there. I would just rely on my earphones and that with my anxiety. And then obviously, when I started coming to this, I would turn it down progressively to get speaking and that. And then I got to the point where I would take it [my earphones] out."**
>
> **Care experienced young adult**

Progress in healthy lifestyles

8 of the 11 young adults who were assessed were at the participating stage or higher at their initial assessment. Overall, four young adults made improvements between their initial and most recent assessment, which moved two of the three young adults below the participating stage into this phase. Two young adults moved back a stage in this area between their initial and most recent assessment.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	0	1
Planning	3	0
Participating	4	5
Confident	4	5
Sustaining	0	0

Progress in the Healthy Lifestyle area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

One young adult, who had taken part in Multiply, a financial awareness and budgeting course, through their involvement in Brighter Futures, also commented on how the air fryer they received for completing this helped them to eat more healthily:

> **"[I've improved my] independent living skills. Purely because I can make food, albeit in an air fryer, but I can still now make food that is to an edible degree. At least more edible than me putting a pizza in the oven."**
>
> **Care experienced young adult**

Progress in emotional wellbeing

Five of the 11 young adults assessed were at the participating stage or above at their initial assessment on emotional wellbeing. Of the six who were not, five had made progress during their participation in the programme, though one had moved back a stage. In one instance, a young adult had moved from planning to sustaining (the highest level).

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	3	1
Planning	3	2
Participating	4	5
Confident	1	2
Sustaining	0	1

Progress in the Emotional Wellbeing area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

Young adults often commented that their involvement in the programme helped their emotional wellbeing. This could be simply due to having a person to speak to and a place to go to do this or be related to improving young adult's confidence. Young adults also referred to support provided to help them seek diagnoses for mental health conditions and treatment.

The programme's impact on young adult's emotional wellbeing could be incredibly profound. In one instance, a young adult said that their engagement with their key worker had prevented a suicide attempt. In the context of the government's planned inquiry into the disproportionate numbers of deaths of young care leavers, this demonstrates the role the programme contributes to national agendas as well as local ones.

"It's not a thing in particular, it's more just for some reason it helps my mental state be less s* when we have a bit of a talk about things. This is something that I haven't said before and that is that, if you really think about it, it's kind of one of the only reasons I'm still here. Because, one of the times I was going to not be here, I actually ended up having you [key worker] turn up on the day, and it kind of changed things."**

Care experienced young adult

Progress in home and stability

At initial assessment, only two of the 11 young adults were considered to be below the participating stage in their home and stability. Overall, two young adults made progress in this area: one moved from planning to participating and the other from participating to sustaining. However, four young adults went back at least one stage in this domain, which moved three young adults from the participating stage or over to below the participating stage.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	0	1
Planning	2	3
Participating	4	3
Confident	5	3
Sustaining	0	1

Progress in the Home and Stability area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

These results likely reflect the challenging and variable home circumstances that care experienced young adults encounter and demonstrates the need for continued work with young adults across all areas of independent living. A steering group member also reflected on the impact this had on preparing young adults for work, and how the programme adapts to meeting these challenges:

"Progress is not always linear. Young people ready for work placements or employment may face setbacks, such as housing or legal issues, requiring a temporary return to more intensive support. This flexibility ensures the programme remains needs-led and supports sustained, meaningful outcomes."

Steering group member

Despite this, young adults reported clear impact on their home and stability, particularly independent living skills and budgeting.

"I would say money management, budgeting. That was the number one thing that they wanted me to be able to do from the beginning. I think the next thing was living independently because that came with the money and management, them two was the main things, having to work and stuff like that."

Care experienced young adult

One young adult was particularly enjoying using a budgeting tool, introduced to them through the programme, which gamified the concept of saving:

"It's like a ring binder, a mini ring binder, and it's got plastic wallets and it's got these cards, and you put these cards in and they've got an amount of money on them like £20. So basically the idea is, every time you get that £100, you just put 20 away. And then over time, every time you put it away, you cross one out on the thing, and so then when you've filled it all up, you get to a certain amount of money on the bottom. They don't even make me think about the saving, because it's like, OK, great I'm saving money. I don't care. I'm winning the game. And the game is those cards need to all be fully filled out on both sides, and when they're done, I win the game."

Care experienced young adult

Case study: Support with managing life challenges

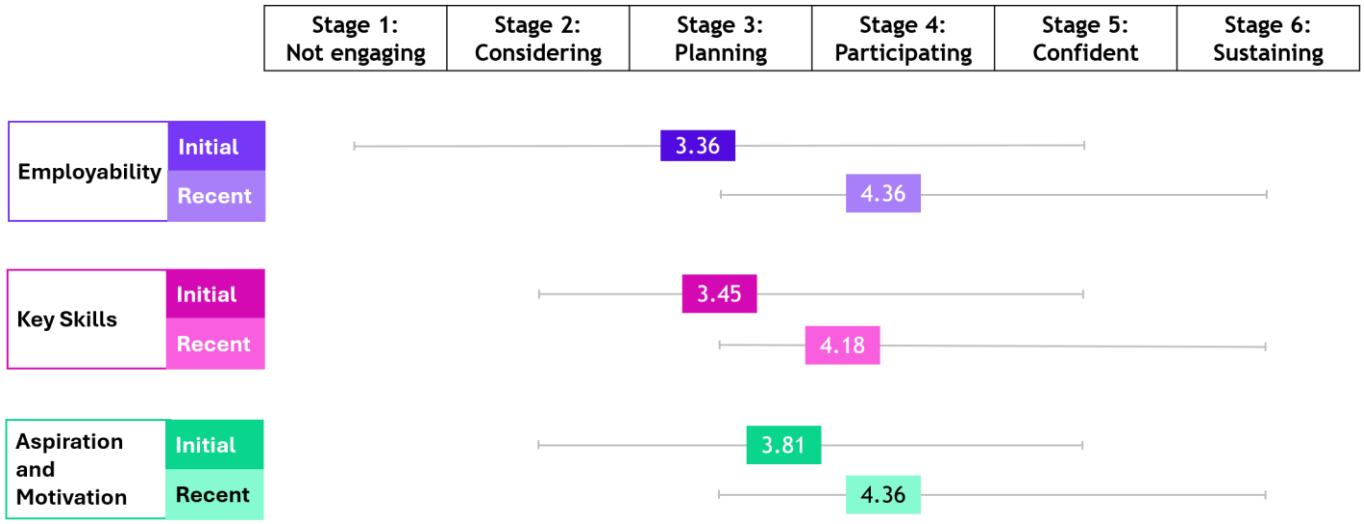
A young adult used their sessions with Brighter Futures as a way to discuss problems and challenges that they had in life and come up with ways in which they could solve those problems; this appeared to fulfil the role of a trusted advisor in this young adult's life to lean on when something happened that they were unsure how to approach. The topics this covered were varied and included conversations about how to handle arguments with their partner and their neighbour, seeking a mental health diagnosis, managing money and what to do when getting behind on their bills, and solving issues with Universal Credit overpayments.

"Problem solving, I'd say that's got a lot better, being able to talk things through and actually have someone there that listens instead of just going, it'll be fine. It gets better once I've got it out and actually discussed an idea of what we can do about it instead of just whinging. So yeah, I do a lot of whinging and then she helps me come up with ideas to fix the problem."

Impact on work-readiness, employability skills, and career pathways

Overall progress in work-readiness, employability, skills and career pathways

ME Tool assessments showed positive changes across employability, key skills and aspirations and motivation with young adults entering the programme in the planning stages and, on average, had moved into the participating stage, indicating good improvement in young adult's work readiness.



Progress on the ME Tool among young adults who have completed at least one follow-up assessment. Displaying the average stage at the initial assessment and most recent assessment (coloured boxes) and the range of stages across the young adults included (grey bars).

Progress in employability

At the initial assessment, five young adults were below the participating stage; during their most recent assessment, four of these five young adults had moved to at least participating. Progress was variable among those entering at the planning stage or higher; improvements were made across 6 of the 9 young adults who entered at these stages though 2 young adults had moved backwards in this time.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	1	0
Considering	1	0
Planning	3	3
Participating	5	3
Confident	1	3
Sustaining	0	2

Progress in the Employability area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

Progress in key skills

Six young adults were assessed at below the participating stage in their initial assessment. The two who were assessed at the consideration stage made progress between their initial and most recent assessment. A further four young adults, who entered at or above the participating stage, made progress in the same time period. However, those that entered at the planning stage tended to stay at this stage (four out of five young adults who entered at this stage).

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	2	0
Planning	4	5
Participating	3	1
Confident	2	3
Sustaining	0	2

Progress in the Key Skills area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

In the interviews, young adults described different ways in which the programme had helped them with their key skills depending on the stage of their employment journey they were at. This ranged from support with CV writing, to finding appropriate jobs, to preparing applications and for job interviews. The resulting impact on young adults of these activities was often increased confidence in their ability to find appropriate work which matched their aspirations and the ability to find, and apply for, a wider range of roles, which in turn made them more confident they would successfully find a job.

Case study: Increased aspirations through skills support

One young adult had recently started to work on their CV through the programme. They described losing two jobs in the past and having limited success with finding a new role, even for positions which require little experience, which had a negative impact on their mental health and their self-confidence. After working with Inspira on their CV, however, the young adult described how this made them realise that they had not wanted the types of jobs they were applying for and that they understood which jobs they might be able to do in the future.

"After I lost both of those jobs, I was like, maybe I just can't have a job. Maybe I'm the problem and I'm going to be completely honest here, I have had times when I've looked for jobs and I've gone down the list and I've just sat there and thought, I can't even do this. The worst one was, I got declined, I got told no to an interview, to be a pot wash at a pub. So you can imagine where my mental health was a few days after that. I was in that sort of, well what use to the world am I? I'm not even qualified to be a pot wash. And Lewis came along and put together a CV that made sense, and we was talking about the different kinds of jobs that I potentially could get based off the jobs I've had and based off the stuff I am able to do. And that took me from feeling, well what good am I? Can't even be a pot wash, to OK, maybe I don't want to be a pot wash anyway."

Case study: Increased opportunities through skills support

Another young adult had been looking for a job without success since graduating from university and a work coach at the job centre had referred them into the programme for further support around December 2025. They described working with Inspira to help them find suitable opportunities, understand what employers are looking for, and improve how they approach applications. They felt their experience had helped them to better understand how to present themselves to employers and increase the number of opportunities they applied to.

"Although I currently am looking at different job websites and stuff like that, he helps me find different jobs I haven't applied for yet, he helps me apply for them, he gives me any advice I need, like if I have an interview coming up, he'll help me plan it out of what to

say, and what to include when I'm in the interview. And stuff like that. Yeah, he's done loads of things, like every time I see him, he always has jobs I haven't found or haven't seen yet and he helps me apply for them. It's expanded how much I'm able to apply for because I understand much better when companies put out for more staff, they have a basic description, and I don't really understand it most of the time because it's very brief. But he'll actually help me dissect it a little bit and understand what they are actually looking for."

These stories also demonstrated the wider impact that working on key skills and employability had on young adults, transferring into improvements in areas related to independent living, self-confidence and wellbeing.

Case study: Independent living, self-confidence and wellbeing gains from employment

Another young adult had been looking for a job without success since graduating from university and a work coach at the job centre had referred them into the programme for further support around December 2025. They described working with Inspira to help them find suitable opportunities, understand what employers are looking for, and improve how they approach applications. They felt their experience had helped them to better understand how to present themselves to employers and increase the number of opportunities they applied to.

"I started working with CYA when I was still in 6th form and continued throughout a number of moves and supported me when I transitioned from leaving care to independence. Claire has been a constant support to me, and she has supported me through a lot of trauma.

I have been working with Claire to build my confidence, emotional, housing and independence support. Claire has also worked with me to help me budget my money.
When I met Claire to sign onto Brighter Futures, she mentioned a Care course L2 that Inspira were running, I met the leader of this course that day and I agreed to do an assessment, which I passed, I then joined the course the following week, the course ran for 2 and a half weeks and then through Inspira had interviews and the next day I was offered a role with a care home.

If it wasn't for Claire and the support she has given me over the years I would not have been able to sign on to the course nor gain employment. There have been times where I didn't think I could have worked due to numerous issues. The whole thing is down to the relationship that Claire has built with me. Being able to trust her and accept advise has meant I am now in a full-time role.

Working has helped me to gain a routine, improved my personal care and improved my patience and people skills. My mental health is so much better, I feel in control again and I feel I can get up in the morning. I honestly believe that I have found my long-term career, I am taking all training opportunities and I am taking my Care Cert in April. I really enjoy my job and I am proud of myself."

Progress in aspiration and motivation

Only three young adults entered the programme below the participating stage in terms of their aspirations and motivation; all three of these young adults had moved up to at least the participating phase, with one moving from planning to sustaining (the highest level). Beyond this, most young adults had either stayed in their starting stage or moved slightly up, though two had moved back a stage.

Communication stage	Initial assessment	Most recent assessment
Not engaging	0	0
Considering	1	0
Planning	2	2
Participating	6	4
Confident	2	4
Sustaining	0	1

Progress in Aspiration and Motivation area in the ME Tool among those who had an initial assessment and follow-up.

There were a number of challenges associated with young adult's aspirations and motivations which resulted from external factors. Young adults who were actively applying for jobs could struggle to hear back because the job market was particularly challenging. This could be demotivating and part of what the programme supported young adults with, alongside the support to apply for jobs, was sustaining their motivation and confidence in the face of knock-backs.

> **"I've been able to put it [my CSCS card] on my CV but I haven't been able to find a job, have I? So, I've just been getting knocked back."**
>
> **Care experienced young adult**

It was also noted that young adults did not want to take up unpaid opportunities which could result in them disengaging after initial support with their CV and job applications had been received. This was exacerbated by limited job opportunities. This meant that some young adults required alternative routes to employment and the programme had to adapt its offer to ensure it could accommodate this.

> **"Some young people express a clear preference to move directly into paid employment rather than undertake a work placement, often because they are seeking immediate income and greater financial independence. However, this group can face significant barriers, including unstable home circumstances, limited support networks and a lack of work readiness. Whilst some may benefit from existing employment support programmes, others do not meet eligibility criteria or are unwilling to engage with structured interventions."**
>
> **Steering group member**

> **"Advisers noted that this has resulted in a more flexible and collaborative delivery model than originally anticipated, with employment support and barrier reduction often taking place simultaneously rather than through a staged progression. Examples of support delivered during the quarter included college visits and interview preparation, referrals into training, home visits to support young people experiencing mental health difficulties, employer engagement activities, careers events, and the development of progression opportunities such as a bespoke Level 1 Youth Work qualification."**
>
> **Quarterly monitoring reports**

Education, training and employment opportunities

Quarterly monitoring data demonstrated many opportunities taken up by young adults during their time in the programme and highlighted the range of different pathways taken by those participating. Across the second year, 4 young adults gained a qualification, 6 went into further or higher education, and 6 completed training. On the employment side, 14 had a work placement/experience confirmed, 10 had taken up one of these opportunities, and 13 had gained employment.

Quarterly monitoring data on education, training and employment opportunities.

Activity	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
Gained a qualification	1	2	1	0	4
Went into further or higher education	5	1	0	0	6
Completed training	2	2	1	1	6
Work place/experience confirmed	2	6	6	0	14
Work place/experience taken up	2	1	6	1	10
Gained employment	0	2	9	2	13

The evidence suggested that the programme supported young adults across a wide range of activities and to pursue a multitude of opportunities. Training and qualifications which the programme supported young adults to access included Sea Farers courses, Security Industry Authority (SIA) licenses, CSCS cards, youth work qualifications, bike maintenance courses, and college and university courses. One young adult who experienced transport as a barrier to pursuing their goals was also supported to access driving lessons, showing the importance of a wider range of skills development opportunities to access employment.

Case study: Supporting young adults to achieve their aspirations

A young adult, who was currently in work in an area which was not their main goal, discussed how the support through Brighter Futures was helping them to pursue their career goals. This included support to gain an SIA license (a legal requirement to work in private security roles across the UK) and to look at further training which would improve their skills in this career.

"So my SIA badge. So I had it taken from me, it was two years of a ban and I've obviously been discussing with Lewis as well about how to go about getting my SIA badge back. Because it was what I enjoyed, and still want to go back to it. I've also been also looked into doing some courses, so understanding mental health, autism, and there was an extra first aid one that I was doing as well that was specific to drugs or something. Because it's more realistic on the door that you're going to see that."

When pursuing job roles, young adults were supported to access opportunities in retail, defence and security, the third-sector, energy, business administration, construction and trades, emergency services and many others. Young adults who discussed their experiences pursuing these opportunities reflected that the programme was highly tailored to their ambitions, and that staff worked with them to identify appropriate opportunities in line with their goals. This could be at odds with their experience of work coaches who encouraged young adults to pursue jobs outside their field of interest; this further enhanced the trust young adults had in their relationships with CYA and Inspira.

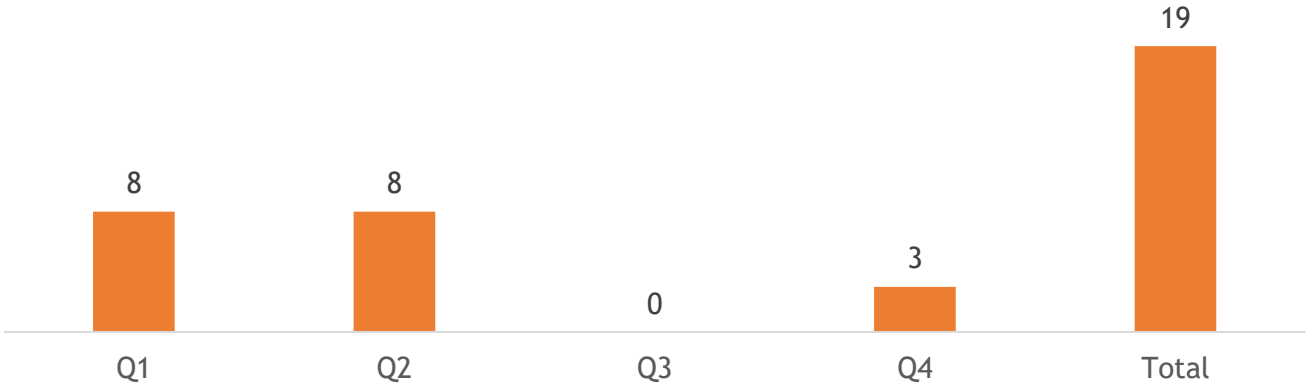
"[They help me with] owt really, just give them a message and they find a way to make it happen really quickly to be fair. So I wanted to go and do security, I'd just give him a message and he'd probably find a way to do it. Dave does that quite a lot to be fair. Because when I first started, he asked me what my preferences were for jobs and that. And since then, he's never came across like being a beautician. He's never come at us with something like that as a job route. Because obviously once you've got your preferences down for what you want, they're going look and find what that is."

Care experienced young adult

Employer Engagement

Employer engagement

During the second year of Brighter Futures, 19 new employers were engaged with. These were predominantly engaged during the first and second quarter of the year, with new engagements dropping in the third and fourth quarters.



Number of new employers engaged in Year 2 by quarter.

Employer engagement activities focused on raising awareness of the challenges faced by care-experienced young adults to ensure employers were equipped to employ adults from these backgrounds and creating future job, training and placement opportunities for young adults. There was also cross-over in these activities between the efforts made to increase referrals to the programme (as detailed here), in particular careers events which served a dual purpose of raising awareness among young adults and their parents/carers and increasing the programme's profile among employers.

Further examples of employer engagement throughout the year included:

- Reaching out to a wide variety of local companies to identify those who would be open to receiving applications from young adults on the programme or who could offer work placements and apprenticeships. This also included identifying collaborative opportunities to work with local employers;
- Workshops to raise awareness of the challenges faced by young adults who are care experienced, delivered to employers during National Care Leavers Month; and
- Co-chairing the Social Value Group for the West Cumbria Business Cluster.

Feedback received from employers who had engaged in such activities was positive, and five of the six employers surveyed who had taken part in formal support through the programme (events, training and signposting) said that their experience had been positive, that there had been good collaboration between their company and the Brighter Futures team, and that they were happy with the communications they received from the Brighter Futures team. One person reflected:

"Inspira were my contact for an employer visit that I organised for care experienced young people at Furness General Hospital. Inspira's engagement was positive - they engaged with and brought the young people to the event. We sought Work Experience opportunities at the hospital."

Employer

Raising awareness and gaining buy-in

Successes in employer engagement typically were concentrated around awareness raising and gaining buy-in that care experienced young adults are a group which require specific intervention, and steering group members noted that interest and engagement in these sessions had a strong level of interest. There was a clear recognition from employers that care experienced young adults had specific needs and that employers had a role to play within this.

"I think it's just knowing that when you're going to take these young people on, they do need that extra support but that doesn't mean that they won't thrive, because they will. You just have to put that ground work in first. Because that's what they deserve, that's what they need, and that's what we owe them."

Employer

However, while more isolated in nature, there were some employers who, despite understanding that care experienced young adults may face additional challenges, were sceptical of the extent to which young adults needed to be supported in the workplace. This suggests further work to engage with employers and raise awareness of these challenges, a fact that steering group members were acutely aware of.

"The employer engagement element is particularly valuable and should be incorporated into mainstream services. There is currently limited awareness among employers of the challenges faced by care experienced young people, and Brighter Futures has played an important role in championing this group, promoting inclusive employment practices and creating opportunities. This is an area where there remains significant scope for further development."

Steering group member

In spite of these challenges, there was evidence that employers were engaged and actively considering changes, including looking at employment practices and willingness to receive applications from care experienced young adults. Work with social value managers was a particular strength of the programme which had generated progress in equitable recruitment practices.

Case study: Implementing equitable recruitment practices

An employer, who had been involved in workshops through Brighter Futures to raise awareness of the challenges faced by care-experienced young adults, reflected on the actions that their organisation was taking to change recruitment practices.

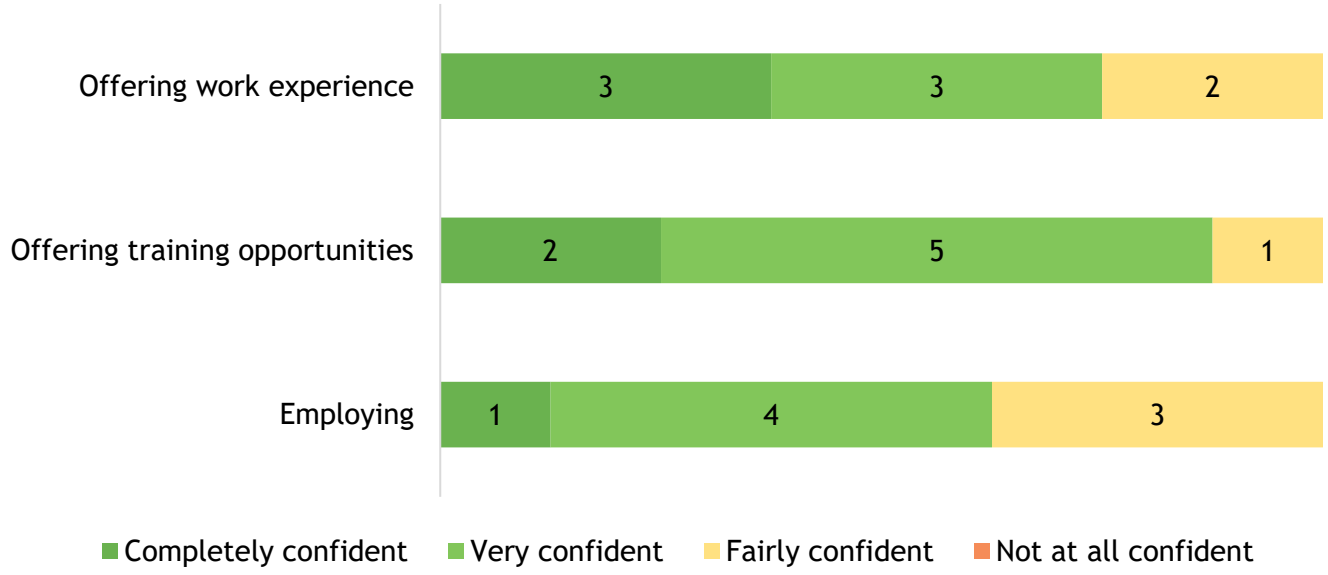
"Also we are working on having a bit of a pledge that all care leavers, if they suit the criteria of the job, if they have the qualifications, if they meet the criteria, they'll go straight to an interview. You know, just giving them that little bit, because they've never had that hand. And that's become apparent from within Brighter Futures, they don't have that back up. There's nobody, especially once they get past that age. They're left to their own devices to a degree, that's maybe going too far, but I don't think so. I haven't heard much about it just recently but it's something we were wanting to run right through the supply chain and everyone was in agreement with it that we discussed it with. But obviously it's a bit of a lengthy process, it needs to go through HR, all those sorts of things."

One of the challenges associated with awareness raising and building buy-in with these concepts was the time and effort it takes to change processes, particularly within larger institutions; this poses both a challenge for improving working practices and for evaluating the impact of these within an annual cycle. This was further reflected in employers' awareness and engagement with the Care Leaver Covenant. Three employers surveyed said they were aware of the Care Leaver Covenant and knew what it was and four had heard of it but did not know what it was. One had not heard of it at all. Four of the eight said that their organisation had plans to sign up to the Covenant, however, progress in this area could take some time.

Providing direct opportunities to care experienced young adults

Employers who took part in the survey and interviews were broadly very confident in their knowledge of care experienced young adult's needs and their abilities to offer opportunities to them. 7 out of 8 surveyed said that they understood what support care experienced young adults needed to succeed in the workplace, and 6 of the 8 said that they offer adjustments to its working practices for care experienced young adults (the remaining two were unaware if they did or did not).

While no employer reported that they lacked confidence in their abilities to offer work and training opportunities to care experienced young adults, there was slightly greater confidence in supporting young adults through short-term placements (work experience or training opportunities) compared to longer term commitments like employing a care experienced young adult.



Number of employers who felt confident in offering opportunities to care experienced young adults.

This reflects comments from employers who wanted further support from Brighter Futures once they were employing someone care experienced to ensure that they were well equipped to support them. This included supporting employers to apply appropriate flexible working arrangements to care experienced young adults. Indeed, those who reported that they offered flexible working arrangements also reflected that this was not unique to care experienced young adults and that their flexible working policies in place for all staff would be sufficient to accommodation a care experienced young adult. However, this could create confusion about the extent to which additional flexible working arrangements should be in place for some individuals if they would not be able to be offered to all staff.

There were also suggestions that more opportunities to engage with the Brighter Future team would be helpful, particularly around understanding the ongoing support they are providing to the young adult

once they are employed and more direct training for line managers to ensure they were best equipped to manage care experienced young adults would be valuable.

The need for further support and guidance in this area was also recognised by steering group members:

"There remains significant potential to build on this work, as awareness of this group is relatively limited compared to other underrepresented groups in the labour market. Future opportunities could include further employer awareness-raising, mentoring programmes, trauma-informed management and supervision training, and support for inclusive recruitment and selection practices. These approaches could help employers feel more confident in recruiting and supporting care experienced young people whilst improving employment outcomes and retention."

Steering group member

Collaborative working practices

Partnership working and collaboration between CYA and Inspira

Steering group members were positive about the way in which public, private and third sector partners worked together through the Brighter Futures programme, with all saying that it was working well. The working practices between CYA and Inspira were often cited as examples of positive collaborative working efforts and illustrations of best practise. Through regular formal meetings and consistent communication, both organisations were working effectively to deliver joint support to young adults. This was also aided by CYA staff using Inspira working spaces in Barrow, enabling close communication.

Working practices, prior expertise in the sector, and a shared understanding of the goals of the programme were attributed to the success of the collaboration between these two partners:

"Effective partnership working has been supported by strong relationships built on trust, open communication and a shared commitment to improving outcomes for care experienced young people. Partners have demonstrated a willingness to work collaboratively, drawing on each other's expertise and operating as one team rather than as separate organisations. Both organisations brought significant experience of working with this cohort, enabling a good understanding of the barriers and challenges care experienced young people can face."

Steering group member

A key strength to this approach was recognising that progression through the programme was not always linear, and working practises between the two organisations enabled them to adapt the programme's offering, ensuring that young adults were accessing the most relevant programme elements at the time that was right for the individual. For future work, it was recognised that building upon the success of this approach and continuing to offer flexibility in the way the programme is delivered between the two organisations, while maintaining a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of each, would be essential.

"There have been very few barriers to effective partnership working. At times, CYA and Inspira have worked together to undertake joint visits and meetings with young people, which has enabled resources and expertise to be pooled in the best interests of the individual. This collaborative approach has been particularly beneficial where additional engagement or support has been required and highlights the value of maintaining flexibility within programme delivery. Looking ahead, continued flexibility within the programme would help ensure support can be tailored to individual circumstances. While some young people benefit from a more intensive and structured journey, others may already have stable support networks, clear career goals and be closer to employment readiness. In these cases, allowing access to the most appropriate elements of support at the right time could help maximise engagement and outcomes, whilst ensuring resources are targeted effectively. The strength of the programme is its ability to respond to differing levels of need rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach."

Steering group member

Partnership working and collaboration with other partners

Outside the joint working between CYA and Inspira, many examples of collaborative working focussed on building referrals into the programme (as detailed here) and working with employers to raise awareness of the challenges faced by young adults and generating further employment and training opportunities through this (as detailed here).

Further examples of collaborative working practices with other partners included:

- The input from the steering group, made up of a variety of different perspectives and experiences with working with care experienced young adults;
- Close working practices with DWP to provide consistent, joined-up support for young adults which reduces duplication of efforts between the organisations;
- Communication with all services involved in support individual young adults to enhance the support provided and reduce duplication.

Through these partnerships, steering group members reflected that this has enabled a deeper understanding of young adults and their support needs which, in turn, improved the level of support they were able to provide:

> **"Through Brighter Futures, we have developed stronger relationships with services supporting care experienced young people and gained greater insight into the barriers they can face when progressing into education, employment and training. This learning has influenced our wider delivery, including how we support young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) through other contracts and programmes."**
>
> **Steering group member**

Reflections

Successful engagement with young adults

At the end of the second year of Brighter Futures, it has shown success in engaging young adults in the programme and building trusted relationships, with young adults and with stakeholders across the sector, to further enhance engagement with the programme.

A wide range of improvements experienced by young adults

Young adults who had taken part reported a range of improvements across their independent living, self-confidence, wellbeing, work-readiness, employability and career pathways. Specific areas of development included their emotional wellbeing, social connections, cooking, budgeting, communication, problem-solving and confidence. There was also clear evidence of young adults being supported into work placements and training opportunities, despite challenges in the labour market.

Strengthened employer engagement

Employer engagement has strengthened through the year, and the team has engaged employers through a range of awareness raising initiatives and the development of work placements and training opportunities for young adults. Employers overall understood the challenges that care experienced young adults faced and were invested in putting in place measures to support this.

Collaborative working practices

Collaborative working practices were also strong between CYA and Inspira, local employers and local stakeholders, contributing to more holistic working practices and better support for young adults.

Maintaining programme flexibility and partnership development

The evaluation findings suggest a number of areas which should be maintained and built upon to further enhance the impact of the programme going forward, including maintaining the flexibility built into the programme, continuing to establish strong, personal relationships with young adults, and building on existing partnership relationships across employers and stakeholders locally to increase referrals and work opportunities for young adults.

Expanding provision for young adults and employers

Further areas for consideration in future years are ways in which the programme can expand access to reach a wider audience across the whole of Cumbria and how relationships can develop with younger age groups to ensure that young adults are amenable to engage when they are eligible.

Further expansion of employer engagement to increase opportunities available to young adults and to ensure that they are well equipped to employ care experienced young adults and support them to succeed in the workplace would also assist in increasing the future impact of the programme.

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