

Blackpool Opportunity Area Evaluation of Strand 1 Final Report for Blackpool Council

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Executive Summary

The Blackpool Opportunity Area programme aims to improve the experience, engagement and employment outcomes of young people transitioning from compulsory education into Post 16 education, employment or training (EET). The Blackpool Opportunity Area Programme and Lancashire Careers Hub worked together to deliver with key stakeholders (schools, colleges, employers), the Blackpool Careers Journey – an offer of interventions for all children and young people to help them prepare for work.

The Opportunity Area Programme investment has been used to minimise gaps and add value to the existing offer under the Blackpool Careers Journey. The investment has two elements:

1. Meaningful Employer Encounters
2. Digital Careers Journey

A team from Edge Hill University, in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Cumbria, were commissioned to evaluate this part of the Opportunity Area Programme. For purposes of convenience this part was called the Blackpool Opportunity Area programme Strand 1. Strand 2 of this programme was evaluated by the same team previously. The final report is available [here](#).

The overarching objectives of the present evaluation were to:

- 1) Measure the impact of the programme, identifying best practice within each distinct project, guided by the questions: how does the programme work, for whom and under which circumstances?
- 2) Assess the strengths and weaknesses, and the enablers and barriers, to support the effective implementation of the programme as a whole, as well as for each of the two projects
- 3) Identify the wider benefits of the programme for Blackpool

To achieve the objectives of this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach was undertaken. In summary, the following methods were incorporated into the evaluation:

- 1) Evaluability assessment, including a review of available data and scoping interviews
- 2) Semi-structured interviews with project stakeholders
- 3) A series of focus groups with young people
- 4) A review of aggregated routinely collected project data

Our analysis showed that employer encounters were valued by school staff, career leads and young people. We also obtained evidence that the programme coped extraordinarily well with COVID restrictions, delivering a range of events, and reaching a significant number of pupils across several Blackpool schools. However, findings suggest that it would be beneficial to conduct a more in-depth assessment of the

potentially differential benefits that employer encounters may have on young people in general, as well as on those at risk of NEET.

Our analysis suggests that, at times, the careers providers commissioned to deliver employer encounters thought feedback regarding the employer encounters was difficult to obtain from participating schools. This may reinforce the impression of an information gap, occurring between schools and event providers, on the impact of the Employer Encounters project. The Lancashire Careers Hub (LCH) indicated to providers that all communication in relation to the delivery and evaluation of their programmes was their own responsibility.

With regard to the Digital Careers Journey project, the website was perceived by all stakeholders as providing added value to other programme activities and was thought to be appreciated by active users. There was a recognition by some stakeholders that a universally accessible website for registered users was not a targeted intervention per se which could address specifically the needs of young people at risk of NEET. However, as a universal service it was deemed to offer useful local content for young people in Blackpool, including those at risk of NEET.

Whilst the website clearly represented a success in terms of making practical employer related content available to registered users, it was difficult to measure whether this had the desired impact on young people. The analysis of our interview data suggests that linking website use with impact remained an under-conceptualised aspect of the project.

In summary, stakeholders were clearly appreciative of the achievements of both the Employer Encounters and the Digital Careers Journey projects in this strand of the Blackpool Opportunity Area Programme. They indicated that it would be imperative, for the effectiveness of the programme, to generate and collect relevant data to assess the impact of the projects. They also specified the need to ensure that data and information flows are improved to increase the capacity of providers, schools, and programme partners to track and monitor the impact of the projects on young people in general and young people at risk of NEET. Whilst schools have a tool (Compass+) which enables them to track individual students participating in employer engagement and wider careers provision this may not be enough to monitor at programme level the impact of the events on young people at risk of NEET.

Background

Description of project interventions

The Department of Education created the Opportunity Area programme to address concerns about social mobility and educational attainment in England. It selected 12 areas through a specific methodology and provided funding to selected local authorities to remove barriers for young people to achieving their full potential.¹ The Opportunity Area programme adopted a 'place-based' approach, targeting areas of greatest disadvantage to address some educational inequalities.

Within Blackpool, the Blackpool Opportunity Area is intended to 'raise education standards locally, providing every child and young person in the area with the chance to reach their full potential in life. The programme includes three priority focused areas including: raising attainment in Blackpool's schools; supporting vulnerable children to stay in mainstream education; and improving advice, support and aspirations for young people when considering their career paths, or moving into work or further education'.²

The third priority aligns with the Lancashire-wide Skills and Employment Strategic Framework and the strategic priority of 'Future Workforce' which aims to ensure that young people have access to good quality careers provision which enables informed choices regarding next steps, which aligns with local labour market intelligence and which balances technical education as well as academic routes. A key mechanism for the delivery of the priority is the Lancashire Careers Hub, which is funded by the Careers and Enterprise Company, the Lancashire LEP and the three top tier authorities, with the LEP's delivery partner being Inspira. The Lancashire Careers Hub supports every secondary school and college across the Lancashire area to develop their careers provision, which includes boosting the number of encounters and experiences with employers working collaboratively with local business networks, in Blackpool this is primarily the Fylde Coast Responsible Business Network. The schools and colleges work towards the achievement of the 8 Gatsby Benchmarks, which is the DfE and Ofsted recognised benchmark for careers excellence.

The Blackpool Opportunity Area programme, along with a range of partners (Lancashire Careers Hub and Primary Futures) and stakeholders (schools, colleges, employers), created the Blackpool Careers Journey – integrating the work of the Lancashire Careers Hub and the work of Primary Futures to enable a journey from primary, through secondary and post 16 provision. This is an offer of interventions for all children and young people to help them prepare for work. The Opportunity Area Programme investment has been used to minimise gaps and add value to the existing offer under the Blackpool Careers Journey, by investing in provision to support the achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks for employer encounters and experiences and the Gatsby Benchmark aligned with access to local labour market intelligence, as well as investing in Primary Futures. The evaluation focuses on the investments in:

¹ Accessed on 27 December 2021 at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-and-opportunity-areas>

² Accessed on 27 December 2021 at <https://blackpoolopportunityarea.co.uk>

1. Meaningful Employer Encounters
2. Digital Careers Journey

In this section we provide a brief summary of these projects.

Meaningful Employer Encounters

This element of the programme relates to the work of partners to support:

- Increase the capacity of voluntary sector providers, previously funded by the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), to provide meaningful employer encounters (online and face to face) which are valued by schools but could not be sustained in 2020/21
- The planning and delivery of the Year 8/9 careers events in schools (either as a face to face or virtual events)

Guidance from the CEC details the parameters of what constitutes good practice in delivering meaningful employer encounters. It sets out three general requirements for this activity:

- Learning outcomes are defined, based on the age and needs of students
- The encounter involves two-way interaction between students and employers/employees
- There is evidence that the student actively participated

Resources to plan employer encounters, made available by the CEC³ suggest:

- Using destination data and Learning from Career and Labour Market Information (LMI) to identify any gaps and implement appropriate intervention.
- Using relevant destinations data and LMI to inform continuous improvement.
- Harnessing employer and alumni voice through multi-BM approaches where young people can be supported to understand learning opportunities through encounters and experiences of the workplace.

This evaluation aimed to determine whether the Opportunity Area funding to complement existing meaningful employer encounters is successful in providing sustainable online and face to face employer encounters during the programme.

Digital Careers Journey

Programme leads previously identified that young people had limited knowledge of local career opportunities resulting in U Explore Ltd being funded to customise their national careers website “Start” to create “Start Blackpool”, the ‘go to’ site for young people to prepare for work. The website is now accessible through this link: <https://blackpool.startprofile.com/page/home-page>. During 2020, work was

³ <https://resources.careersandenterprise.co.uk/resources/making-it-meaningful-benchmark-7>

undertaken to further enhance this resource to support young people and schools during the pandemic. The resource includes:

- Information and advice on local careers, education and training routes
- Online learning activities (bite sized courses) including virtual work experienced
- Support for evidencing and developing skills through evidence-based competency frameworks (Skills Builder and Digital Skills)

The evaluation sought to determine the perspectives of stakeholders about the accessibility of the 'Start Blackpool' platform, and their views as to whether the content increased young people's awareness of careers and other pathways open to them, and whether it built skills to increase young people's chances of participating in post 16 education, training, or employment, thus reducing their chances of becoming NEET.

Method

To achieve the objectives of this evaluation, a mixed-methods approach was undertaken. In summary, we conducted the following activities:

1. Evaluability assessment, including a review of available data and scoping interviews
2. Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and staff
3. A series of focus groups with young people
4. A review of aggregated routinely collected website data

Further details of the data collected are outlined below.

Data collection

A systematic evaluability assessment of the two projects was undertaken, supported by the framework developed by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (2019). The evaluability assessment included a content analysis of relevant existing programme documentation and findings from semi-structured interviews with strategic programme leads. The evaluation team obtained relevant policy documents from both projects, including Logic Model templates, Programme Summaries and information about data currently routinely collected.

The evaluation team then conducted semi-structured interviews with a purposively selected number of key stakeholders ($N=5$), including the four project leads at Lancashire Careers Hub (LCH), BITC and U-explore and the Director of the Lancashire Skills Hub. The aim of these interviews was to support the evaluation team's understanding of the projects. Where further clarity was needed, follow up queries were posed to project leads through email and responses were received.

We also conducted interviews with front line staff ($N=9$) in all partner organisations to assess implementation barriers and enablers. Interviewees included Careers Leads, Provider Leads and Employers contributing employer encounter sessions.

We conducted a series of focus groups with Young People ($N=18$) to assess the accessibility and utility of the Blackpool Careers Journey programme components. We asked questions about the perception young people had of the Digital Careers Journey website, about the meaningful Employer Encounters, as well as enquired about their views on Year 8 and 9 careers events.

Existing project data and findings from the analysis of interviews and focus groups were then mapped against the evaluation objectives.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The project team undertook a series of semi-structured interviews ($N=15$) to examine the programme components operating under this strand of the Blackpool Opportunity Area. Participants included front-line staff delivering the services, and Blackpool

Council Managers involved in NEET strategy development (a breakdown of participant demographic information is provided in table 1 below).

Table 1. Number of participants by type of participant

Participant group	Number of participants
Focus Groups – Young people	18
Front-line staff (including Provider Leads, Career Leads and Employers)	9
Blackpool Council Managers involved in NEET Strategy development	6

All interviews were conducted remotely either online using Microsoft Teams or by phone, at a time convenient to the participants between September 2021 and January 2022. A semi-structured approach was followed, with the evaluators utilising an interview schedule and exploring concepts and responses in more depth through follow up question. The interviews lasted between 18 minutes and 1hour 10 minutes and were on average approximately 38 minutes long.

All the interviews with young people were recorded with the consent of the interviewee, transcribed and anonymised.

Focus Groups

The Focus Groups were conducted as part of an observation of an Employer Encounter event organised by one of the providers and conducted by one of the key employers in November 2021. The focus groups took place face to face at a school located in the Blackpool Area. Three (n=3) individual focus groups were conducted, with 6 participants in each (N=18), preceding three identical Employer Encounter sessions conducted that day. A semi-structured interview schedule was followed, with the evaluators utilising the interview schedule to explore the impact of the sessions on young people. All focus groups were recorded with the consent of the Young People and school, transcribed and anonymised.

Data Analysis

The anonymised interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For the analysis, two researchers read through the transcripts independently and identified initial codes. These codes were then compared and refined into a series of key themes. Disagreements were resolved and consensus achieved through in-depth discussions. The themes were then examined against the aims and objectives of the Blackpool Opportunity Area evaluation.

Information provided by project partners

The Fylde Coast Responsible Business Network (RBN) is a group of businesses committed to supporting our local community. The network has been created, and is supported, by the Blackpool Pride of Place Partnership, which is a flagship initiative of Business in the Community (BITC) who directly facilitate the Responsible Business

Network. The BITC/RBN is a project partner which aims to create connections between employers, schools, and young people, primarily through interactive activities and the sharing of career stories from local businesses. They provided written summary reflections on project progress, and aggregated data on how many businesses have been approached and recruited, as well as a draft press release.

Another project partner is the Lancashire Careers Hub (LCH), whose services are delivered by Inspira and funded by the Lancashire LEP and the Careers and Enterprise Company and three local authorities in Lancashire. It is a collaboration of 156 secondary schools and colleges across the whole region who work together to support the achievement and delivery of best practice in Careers Guidance. LCH is collaborating with business partners, the public, education, and voluntary sectors to help improve careers outcomes for young people. LCH shared with us activity data generated by delivery providers from five school events. This data provided information about Employer Encounter events in schools, detailing the total number of participants for the programme as a whole. The data is aggregated and contains some limited information relating to demographic characteristics of participants. It also provided an end of programme case study, which outlined learning points from the programme, shared experiences of working with Start Lancashire, and provided feedback from employers and schools, as well as key impacts of the programme. This study covered the period April-July 2021.

U-Explore, the partner charged with developing and implementing the Start Lancashire website, shared a range of aggregated quantitative data relating to interactions with the Start in Lancashire Website; some these data were Lancashire wide, other specific to Blackpool. The data documents interactions of schools and individuals with the website between 01/09/2021 and 30/12/2021. It also provides information relating to the number of registered active user of the website and total page views, as well as a monthly report (04/01/2022) indicating website utilisation.

Further to these documents, U-Explore provided a report, from July 2021, relating to progress in website utilisation against targets that provided quantitative data on active users.

A report produced in June 2020 for the Opportunity Area partnership was also made available to the evaluation team. This reviewed the Blackpool Careers Journey programme and its delivery of career interventions for children and young people in Blackpool. The report also outlined the projects methodology; overall progress; and the views of stakeholders, including YP from four cohorts, as well as young people at risk of NEET, careers leads, employers, college staff and project teams. Key findings, observations and recommendations were also provided.

A two-part report from December 2021 outlining the progress of targets for the Opportunity Area/Lancashire Careers Journey project was also shared with us. This included school/employer buy in; approaches to targeting young people at risk of NEET; headline KPIs; the development of digital platforms; summary of activities to data; and sustainability of the programme and exit planning progress.

Findings

The findings section is divided into two parts, each focusing on one programme component. We will report the results of analysis for the Meaningful Employer Encounters first, and then report those for the Digital Journey project. Consideration will then be given to some wider programme findings which span both projects.

Meaningful Employer Encounters

Project data

We obtained data illustrating that a series of Employer Encounters had taken place within the life of programme (August 2020 to March 2022). The events took place across 9 schools, with one of these being a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). We also obtained records of practical day events which were held in four schools across the Blackpool Opportunity Area and engaged between 10 and 18 pupils per school, with a total of 53 pupils being involved.

The programme lead provided aggregated data on the Employer Encounters held during the programme period. However, we were unable to receive detailed information on the breakdown of the aggregated data for individual schools. Across the three providers, a total of 1,605 pupils were engaged through Employer Encounters, the majority of these pupils (n=1,345) accessed the programme through one provider (YE), 144 pupils accessed it through EBP North West, and 116 young people engaged via VIY.

The nature, content and outcomes of Employer Encounters and career events varied significantly as they were tailored to the needs of each school. Although we only managed to observe one Employer Encounter/career event, we obtained written evidence and testimonials from some stakeholders about other Employer Encounters and career events. Variation of Employer Encounters in terms of what is delivered, and how, may explain differences in numbers of pupils who engage with the events. For example, through our interviews and reviewing narrative summaries of some Employer Encounters and practical days, we learned that one provider, VIY, tends to work with a small number of pupils at their events. The selection of pupils to invite to attend the events is undertaken by schools (in their case a PRU); this ensures that the events are targeted at those in need. In contrast, the event we observed was delivered to entire year groups at the school.

Summary

The lack of detailed information about selection processes for young people in schools for the Employer Encounters events impeded our analysis to conduct a systematic analysis and draw robust conclusions about the reach and impact of the Employers Encounters project for schools and pupils. Whilst there are some ad hoc testimonials and case study narratives about the positive impression Employer Encounters have made on school staff and pupils, there is evidence from only one provider, VIY, delivering employer encounters in the Pupil Referral Unit, that schools and providers 'used destination data and LMI to identify any gaps and implement appropriate interventions' and 'to inform continuous improvement' as stipulated in the guidance.

This does not mean that all Employer Encounters were not meeting these requirements but rather that it was difficult to ascertain if they did or not. The available data and our observations clearly showed that different approaches to delivering Employer Encounters and practical days were adopted; in some cases, a universal approach was adopted and in other cases a more targeted approach was utilised by schools. We argue that it would be beneficial to conduct a more in-depth assessment of the differential benefits that Employer Encounters events may have when delivered to entire year groups in schools.

It is important to collect data and information about Employer Encounters in a more systematic way, to enable an assessment to be made about the value and impact of the events on pupils in a school cohort, as well as specifically on those at risk of NEET. Whilst schools have access to the Compass+ tool, it would be important to ensure that at programme level, the relevant data can be obtained. At present, schools do not share these data with the programme for reasons of GDPR. Thus, it was not possible to generate a robust picture of the impact of Employer Encounters on both the pupil population and, specifically, the young people at risk of NEET.

Due to schools collecting and owning data relating to pupil participation and how the events contribute to benchmark progression, there is a gap in the information flow between LCH, providers and school careers leads, about the impact and effect of employer events for pupils (see also further evidence in our section below).

Themes from interviews

Project Value - Employers

An important dimension of the programme success was that the project was valued by employers, young people and school staff or career leads in school. Our evidence demonstrates that all three stakeholder groups were highly appreciative of the Employer Encounter events.

'It's all very organised as in they source the materials and have them delivered the week before to school and liaise, I organised it but then the Centre Lead for A [company] led on it in a sense that he liaised with B [colleague] and arranged for how it was going to work with any risk assessments and the employers coming in. it was all very organised.' [career lead]

Respondents also noted the excellent collaborative working relationships of programme partners which made things happen.

'There is a lot of good collaboration and I think that the responsible business network, careers and enterprise are doing a great job at starting to build that up.' [employer]

This collaborative spirit was matched by the high levels of motivation amongst programme partners.

'Even on a local level, there was a lot of enthusiasm, which is really good to see.'[provider]

Key support for the Digital Careers Journey programme activities came from the LCH Cornerstone Employers, a group made up of six large national businesses operating in the Blackpool area. Their input was favourably mentioned and perceived as critical.

'[T]hat group [of cornerstone employers] have supported us on multiple strands of work, whether that be supporting employer encounters, experiences of the workplace, but also just generally building relationships and what that looks like.'[project partner]

A report produced by CEC equally highlighted the facilitating role of the Cornerstone Employers and acknowledged: 'Using their employees and wider networks, the Cornerstones have helped to deliver employer encounters in local schools.' (CEC Blackpool Opportunity Area Report [no date], pp. 3-4) Our respondents were also complimentary about the role of the Responsible Business Network (RBN) which had played a pivotal role in facilitating content for Employer Encounters and the website.

'The Responsible Business Network are fantastic, we've got a brilliant relationship with them that's very open in that we can make an ask and they can do the same and we do get results.' [project partner]

Project Value – Schools and Young People

Young people echoed the positive comments from the other stakeholder groups. In our focus groups we gathered clear evidence how valuable young people thought the Employer Encounters were.

'The best thing I thought about the session was figuring out what you want to do in your career.' [young person]

Incidentally, careers lead and school staff also reflected on the impact the encounters had on their young people in school and reiterated the importance of these events for building up knowledge about careers and jobs, as well as developing a better understanding of the world of work.

'It's young people are making informed choices, the choices might be the same to go to FE, but their awareness of the choices has improved I would say as well, which is a measurement of success, so young people are more aware of the pathways and young people should be more prepared. I think the next generation will start to realise that careers is not all about a guidance interview.'[project partner]

'I think when our young people have people that come in and will talk about their passion for their job, they will listen and engage with them.'[career lead]

This was closely aligned with the need to adapt Employer Encounters with the business needs to maximise the ability of employers to establish positive, meaningful and lasting links with young people.

'We have delivered Employee Encounters before but we're now working collaboratively with the RBN and other organisations to really veer that to the areas that we need to.' [employer]

'So, the more people, the more the young people and teachers speak to myself and the other STEM ambassadors, the more they learn about the opportunities that we have. ...So, after some conversations with those students and their parents, we really got down into linking subjects to industry and the reality of what that might look like.' [employer]

There were also interesting voices which highlighted the differential impact employer encounters may have on young people depending on their risk profile for NEET. There was a sophisticated understanding and acute awareness amongst our respondents that young people at risk of NEET may require more tailored support or would respond better to a more targeted approach. Some thought that such a purposefully targeted approach, as opposed to delivering generic content, would produce significant benefits and returns for those at risk of NEET.

'I think when you put on something like that for somebody who's at risk of NEET, sometimes they really appreciate the effort and value that you're putting into them because sometimes the perception is that school does nothing for them other than get on their back, or whatever, so when you're seen to be doing something positive for them, and I think there's value in that in itself, and also I find a lot of the pupils that are in that risk of NEET group, when they struggle to engage with a maths lesson or something like that, and they have the opportunity to do something a little bit different, they do take it seriously and get value out of it in that respect as well.' [provider]

Respondents also highlighted the difference Employer Encounters made for school staff directly and their perception of students.

'I think the most rewarding thing is, ... it shows there's an impact, but I think the importance of teachers seeing these young people, these students, in a different light...that's really valuable.' [provider]

Delivery Format of Employer Encounters

We noticed that the Employer Encounters and career events were delivered in different formats. This flexibility was appreciated by those working with young people who had been identified as at risk of NEET.

'A key one for us would be the Volunteer It Yourself, the VIY, that got involved. With our provision we're obviously smaller and have smaller groups so what is always quite nice with this, but also with everything else that comes in, we can tailor it or those providers let us tailor it to our young people because they are

obviously used to working in small groups, there are advantages to that as well in terms of engagement with the young people' [career lead]

Impact and Value to Young People at risk of NEET

An important question to investigate in the evaluation was whether the Employer Encounters were delivered in such a way that the primary beneficiaries of the programme, young people at risk of NEET, gained from them. We conceptualised this as a 'targeted approach' and recognised that the format was often determined by the funding or school context in which these encounters were designed and delivered. Within the given parameters of the programme delivery restraints, it seemed important to detail any benefits of the Employer Encounters for the young people at risk of NEET. Respondents highlighted that there was a deliberate push to ensure that the career development needs of these young people were at the core of programme delivery.

'There is some targeted activity towards young people that potentially could be at risk and I think it's been a journey over the past few years ... So we have had to have those conversations with schools to make sure it's fully inclusive and that actually it's more beneficial to pull through those young people. One of the benchmarks does indeed include that inclusive approach to make sure you are supporting all young people, but I think it's a journey. I wouldn't say we've cracked it. We're still working at it I would suggest. And it is quite tricky when you have got attendance issues and things like that as well, to make sure the young person is in the school on a day that a particular activity is going on and so on.' [project partner]

A quite nuanced picture was in evidence on a case-by-case basis when we inquired about the format, structure and content of the various Employer Encounters.

'So, for activities like the world at work and mock interviews, we worked with whole cohort numbers on them so it was pretty much whole year groups, so there was not really much selection taking place. And based on the funding guidelines we knew which year group the funding was targeted at so they didn't really have much choice in that matter.' [provider]

Where young people were selected for the Employer Encounter events, respondents stressed that the selection process was appropriate.

'I do think they picked the right young people. I think because of our historic working with the schools, they could almost pre-empt what we were going to say to them. It wasn't any shock when we said right, we need you to be looking at x, y and z type pupils. So yeah, I think the young people that were forwarded were ok for the programmes, there was a good fit.' [employer]

There was acknowledgement amongst our respondents, however, of the wider barriers to effectively involving young people who are in the target group at risk of NEET. Practical barriers were noted which may have been outside the control of event organisers.

'[O]ften a lot of the people that are at risk of NEET have poor attendance and so they might not be in school when the particular events are taking place. I think that's quite a big thing actually.' [career lead]

'In Blackpool, all the schools I've worked with, I think, have erred on the side of let's get the—let's target this on young people who will particularly benefit 'cause they're not served by other offers in school.' [provider]

A solution offered appears to be to adapt the content of the Employer Encounters if, and where, they were aimed directly at those of risk of NEET. This permits organisers to vary the content of the event as to make it suitable for this particular group.

'Practical is always good, as in doing something, and I think [providers] don't normally know a lot about us and our provision so actually when you talk to someone, its tailoring it, we have those discussions and they'll be like we could do this this way, we could change, it's just really once they understand how many young people working together, group sizes, support needs then the employer would normally tailor something.' [careers lead]

'I mean a lot of the talks that went on were targeted generally towards pupils that might be particularly interested in that particular area but at the school I was working at we had data and things that put, so we had a list of pupils that were at potential NEETs and so things were put on for them specifically as well.' [career lead]

Respondents were clear about the positive impact that well designed and targeted Employer Encounters could have on young people at risk of NEET.

'[A] lot of the pupils that ended up on that potential NEET list just didn't engage with school and although they didn't engage with school, as soon as you put certain employers in front of them, the engagement level jumped right up and it's a case of getting away from that traditional academia that doesn't motivate them and actually if they can see that there are other pathways and things that can make a big difference.' [career lead]

It was also commented that career development events offered different content adapted to the needs of young people which means that a more targeted approach could be taken at different year groups.

'I would say that the majority of events were not, were just general ones, just targeted to everybody. And I guess the thing to add as well is that the things that were targeted towards NEET pupils probably happened more towards when they were year 10, year 11 pupils. And actually I think we were heading this way in [town] before, just before I left, is that rather than just having that target group of potential NEETs when they're in year 11, that actually you have that target group of potential NEETs almost right from year 7, year 8 and then you're in a position to target some of those at Employer Encounters and speakers when they are at a younger age so that it kind of helps potentially going through.' [provider]

'Perhaps some, I mean we used to do a whole year group visit to [company]. Not all at once, but over the course of a few visits, we used to make sure that every single pupil went along so they had that encounter. But I think for a lot of pupils, it was not a particularly meaningful trip because they had absolutely no interest in it whatsoever. They would walk around talking to their friends and then go back on the bus back to school again and so in order to make it meaningful, you need to think through carefully about who attends what.' [employer]

There was an eagerness of some respondents to ensure that the programme activities were directly benefiting those most in need of career development.

'We'll take on, we take NEETs on but again, so much is focused at mainstream ... but I want to go the children who cause anti-social behaviour and I want to go to the NEETs and I want to go to the care leavers because we get mainstream kids. When you get a mainstream child from a mainstream school, you know what's going to come in that package or thereabouts but when you get a care leaver or a NEET or somebody that's disruptive, you don't know what you're getting so we all need to learn because later on in life, that disruptive kid will possibly stop being disruptive, will want to come back into work. So, there's so much out there for children that are in mainstream... We don't have anybody knocking on our door saying this cohort of people are at the risk of falling out of education and just, we don't have the DWP saying please can you.' [employer]

There was a recognition, however, that, when it comes to young people with disabilities, things still had a long way to go.

'[A]t the minute we've got, I'm working with a couple of disabled children because they don't feel like they're valued in the community, especially on public transport which to me, hurts my heart. So again, this is a project that has been funded somewhere down some sort of pipeline.' [employer]

Business community support

The programme documentation identified the willingness of the business community to support the Digital Careers Journey programme as a key outcome. We found that there was an enormous amount of good will and generosity amongst businesses to assist in supporting the programme aims by providing content for digital profiles to be uploaded to the website or by joining one of the Employer Encounter events.

'I think that there's really good participation from local employers which is really good. There seems to be a general interest, a community interest in giving back.' [employer]

There were, however, significant challenges to recruit suitable employers or volunteers at times.

'We struggle to get volunteers [laughs] full stop. It can be very difficult.'
[provider]

There was also a concern about identifying the most suitable employers to support events.

'[The] quality of presenter obviously makes a difference as well. And I think quite often with the kind of different areas and sectors that we had in school, often it was just a case of what was available whereas perhaps we needed to have a bit of a better look to make sure everything was covered.' [careers lead]

These challenges, however, need to be seen in the context of COVID restrictions which placed extraordinary burdens on the business community during the time of the programme.

'At times it was very painful keep going and making that ask to the business community with so much else going on, and not necessarily a coordinated approach with just like the one main contact coordinating lots of activity. So, we would be approaching them, then colleges would be approaching them, the schools that were delivering their own activities would be approaching them and then, particularly when we went into lockdown, to then move everything online, it just created extra demand. So, I would say probably employer engagement was the biggest challenge.' [provider]

Enterprise Advisers

We also came across strong impressions that the role of enterprise advisors may be currently underutilised in the programme.

'[I] definitely think that sometimes there's a bit of a missing link... I think even with my role as an enterprise advisor with [sixth form], they forget to use you outside of the meetings.' [employer]

'I don't think [schools] always know what they want because that's the problem that we have with the link of industry and the education sector. So, and that's why I think that the enterprise advisor roles are excellent for things like.'
[employer]

Measuring impact of employer encounter events

A key difficulty of delivering complex intervention programmes with many different partners is how to ensure that, over time, learning from the various partners is collected and utilised effectively at project, as well as programme, level. One aspect of this is to put in place active feedback loops where participants in the Employer Encounters could feed back and their voices be perceived as relevant for future programme improvements.

'[M]y last event ...went really, really well. It went really well because, ok, so we're there to do one job which is interview but at the same time, we're getting feedback about our services and how we can improve them.' [employer]

'We really struggle to capture that impact as well, so if there's a way to link up with particular teachers just, yeah, like you say, for a case study, I'd be very, very keen to try, see how that works.' [employer]

'Feedback, yeah absolutely, always is useful. We often find we could be feeding back, because we take feedback really seriously and, yeah, that's true actually because they often ask for feedback off us, how we could improve and we don't get that. They only way I think we receive feedback is by getting invited to something else.' [employer]

The importance of feedback is underlined by the need to understand what actually works and for whom during the employer encounters.

'I mean my general knowledge of the area is that some schools are very good at it and they would put together a very bespoke programme for that young person but I do know through experience that there are other schools that it's so ad hoc that it's different teachers and different members of staff coordinating different programmes and never the two shall meet.' [provider]

Feedback from employer encounter events

The evidence from our interviews on how effectively the programme partners captured and used the feedback from the employer events is mixed. There was good awareness about the difficulties of measuring impact but there was also a feeling that feedback was at times not actively requested by the providers or the schools.

'I haven't had the opportunity to share that feedback so I have asked and sent a polite email just to say 'thank you' for inviting me, it was great to speak to the students but I have some insights on some potential improvements for future dates where employers are invited if you'd like to have a discussion about that. So, I haven't actually heard back.' [employer]

'[I]n my experience, they don't ask for feedback from the employers, so I recently have offered and said would you like to have some feedback? but I haven't been taken up on that offer. So, it's not necessarily to criticise, it's just to say if you worked it in this way, the students might get more out of it.' [employer]

'[T]here was a major careers event going on at [school] and I hadn't heard diddly-squat from the careers lead and I think it's just because they get, they just manage things themselves and it's just normal business.' [employer]

Data sharing and tracking of participants

In our interviews we also picked up some challenges around data sharing and making use of the existing data to effectively track students through the programme and beyond. These issues were not thought to be central to the programme, nor were they in the control of programme leads. However, it was noted that insufficient data sharing may make measuring the programme impact over time challenging.

'In terms of the data, again, I am aware that other providers struggled collecting data but in terms of us personally, we were all ok, and I think it's because we already had the data sharing agreements in place, the service level agreements in place and that historic working, so, having to collect students' names and date of births and home postcodes, we didn't encounter any problems.' [provider]

'[Y]ou'll find that the schools that are meant to track, they're meant to track students from school to college or wherever they go, the time isn't there for that tracking to take place. So if I wanted to go and say, home in on a certain community because we know that that demographic from that community are not in education, and we say, right, let's go into their community centre and put on a workshop on [company] and how to travel on a bus, which we've done before, we could go into that community but we don't have that data.' [employer]

The issue of data sharing also applied to the information providers sometimes needed from schools. This may affect the claims about activities, made by organisations who provide services as part of the Employer Encounters, or may affect their ability to plan and design their visit to schools in the first place.

'I know when we've attended provider meetings, some of the other providers have really struggled to get basic information off the schools which then impacted on their claims because we had to report that sort of information through our claims process.' [provider]

Selection of Young People for Employer Encounters

As we investigated the impact of the Employer Encounters on pupils, we were keen to establish whether or not there were any patterns for recruiting students to take part in these events and, if so, whether or not this was perceived as relevant for improving the programme in the long run. Our respondents indicated that, in those instances where selection took place, males were more likely than females to take part on the events.

'I generally find is, very, very, broadly, is disproportionately young boys sort of...with very few women and girls that are put forward to what we do, which is a shame. And also, I think, predominantly, the kind of the narrative we get from teachers when we're talking to them on the ground, is often these are young people who don't engage in, quote, 'more academic subjects.' [provider]

Whilst there was a simple explanation for this, given the observed educational achievements disparity between the genders, with males doing less well than females,

some respondents also noted that this may in fact disadvantage females in some circumstances where employers were keen to improve awareness amongst female students about previously male dominated career pathways.

‘So, when we go out for to do STEM activities or career activities with schools and colleges to collect more data in terms of gender, ethnicity and build a bit of a picture from our outreach to our recruitment when it comes to our apprentices. So, we do have several female apprentices, but we would like to see an increase in applicants and therefore we would ideally have a more equal number of hires when it comes to those apprentices.’ [employer]

Notions of ‘meaningful’

The logic model developed by the programme team puts some emphasis on the concept of ‘meaningful employer encounter’ as defined by the ‘Can Do’ Guidance. We inquired with our respondents how they interpreted the notion of ‘meaningful’. The wider programme and policy parameters defined ‘meaningful’ within the context of the Gatsby benchmarks and most of our respondents pointed to this as a useful parameter representing good practice. The development of the ‘Can Do’ guides by CEC was also noted as a positive contribution to a shared understanding of what constitutes ‘meaningful employer encounter’. A key feature of ‘meaningful’ was perceived to be the ability of young people to be challenged and to motivate them to think differently about themselves.

‘It’s about getting them thinking differently about themselves because you’re not just disabled, you’re not just this. [Company] don’t do things to tick. We always say the box gets ticked, but we don’t set out and think how can we tick this box. We genuinely mean that we want to make a difference.’ [employer]

Some respondents indicated that the notion of ‘meaningful’ came under strain due to conditions imposed by COVID restrictions, where face to face interaction was impossible to maintain. This was also clearly reflected and addressed in the guidance provided by the Careers and Enterprise Company.

In addition, it was noted that there was a personal dimension to meaningful employer encounters, allowing people to inspire others through shared experiences and their ability to relate to these. Again, this was considered to have been negatively impacted by COVID restrictions.

‘[M]eaningful is personal. So, it’s sharing my experiences or, you know, my colleagues sharing their personal experiences and being relatable for students to believe that they can follow similar paths. It’s about being genuine in those sessions as well and, you know, showing some level of vulnerability that’s appropriate.’ [employer]

The impact of COVID was particularly acutely felt with young people who had disabilities or communication issues.

‘[A] meaningful encounter is actually sitting with young people. I spoke with some disabled children and this is again, probably a different meaning to

meaningful but one young chap said I'm disabled, I don't think I'll be able to get anywhere but. ...So just to see these children think differently but also, again, meaningful to me.' [employer]

Tailored versus non-tailored support

A further aspect of how 'meaningful employer encounter' was interpreted related to ensuring that the content of the encounters was relevant to the young people and trying strike a fine balance between generic and personalised or tailored content.

'The students, I guess, would be able to demonstrate if it was meaningful. But I think that with the example that I'd used, so it was mock interviews. We were given a set of generic questions. ... But the questions that were being asked were just so irrelevant.' [employer]

Workplace visits

Whilst workplace visits are firmly established in the career development curriculum, there was some evidence that our respondents were split on the utility of workplace visits versus work experience. Young people were particularly keen to have them.

'Maybe if we had, like an earlier little taster of it, kind of like an apprenticeship...just like a day or two and then get to see what it's actually like working in that kind of environment and if it's too much pressure, or if we enjoy it.' [young person]

Staff, however, emphasised how workplace visits had now a substantial virtual component which reflected a change in what constituted a workplace experience.

'I think it's interesting that term, work experience, because we wouldn't use that term on its own in isolation, we use, that's not a criticism, we work with the schools on workplace experiences and for us it's that building block... so just to give you an example, you might have a student that explores the workplace in a virtual setting in key stage three, so they might, pre-pandemic they might visit workplaces, that's happened in Blackpool schools, in key stage three they might currently explore those virtual work experience and virtual employer insights which there are a huge number of now to get that appreciation of what does it mean to be in that workplace, what does employment look like in the digital sector or the construction sector, so it's giving them those tools and just because a young person hasn't done work experience pre-sixteen, doesn't mean they haven't had a workplace experience.' [project partner]

Funding for work experiences was of course a key facilitator for work experience and it was noted that where this was not available may also influence the selection of students who could participate

'What was a traditional two week work experience, is that it's all about individual school funding as well, which is something that we have no influence over whatsoever, so if a school budget does not allow for work experience, experiences of the workplace, staffing around that, health and safety, all the

things that go into it, we're looking at those innovative other ways of doing it.'
[project partner]

'It's very much school-driven about who attends. I think if funding has a particular need, so, for example, you know, in this case the most recent funding was focused on Year 8 and 9; that will have a factor.' [provider]

'I mean sometimes you'd work with organisations that would put you in contact with people and there may be certain stipulations attached to that. So, they'd need to be communicating to a certain number of pupils and things.' [career lead]

In contrast, young people and employers were more forthright about the benefits and advantages of work experience.

'I just want to try things that are about the job and see if that makes me feel, oh I like this, I enjoy it so I'm going to do it.' [young person]

Whilst there was a recognition that work experiences had been seen in the past as of lower value to some students, in justifying the move to workplace visits, there was a feeling that this shift had a differential impact on students. Employers, in particular, were keen to point out that work experiences were critical for making a meaningful connection between the world of work and career and job opportunities.

'I'm a big believer in the work experience, you never know what you're going to like until you've done it.' [employer]

There was a perception amongst respondents of clear advantages to workplace visits, but also an acknowledgement that the shift to workplace visits was aligned with the Gatsby Benchmark framework.

'Gatsby Benchmarks has enabled that shift because to meet Benchmark 6 it can just be a workplace experience and not just a work experience placement and I think in Blackpool it's those work insights that are seen as an ability to explore the workplace that can make a much more informed choice of work experience when it happens which might be post-sixteen, so it's actually seen as a benefit because you're not just picking a work, in the past where work experience was those two week traditional blocks and nothing else... so you don't repeat that same experience post-sixteen, you are able to explore different sectors, different opportunities and get that understanding prior to then completing work experience which might be a longer term placement now through T-Levels if you're on that programme for example.' [project partner]

Innovative practice

We also found strong evidence that project partners improved programme collaboration by bringing together the career leader group with the Cornerstone Employer group so that learning could be shared. This was an indicator of excellent

innovative practice which may be extended to the enterprise advisor group to maximise programme coordination and impact.

‘So, one thing that we did in December was bring together our career leader group and our Cornerstone Employer Group, something that hasn’t been done before, we brought them together so that they could virtually meet each other and I always talk about the group to the careers leaders and I talk about the careers leaders to the group. So, it was actually nice to bridge that gap so that they knew why one was a part of what was going on in [city] and understood the offer that they’ve got and why they’re there, so that was a really successful meeting back in December.’ [project partner]

Impact of COVID restrictions

Most of the programme activities were delivered during the period of COVID restrictions in England. This has had a significant influence on the way in which activities were planned, how they were delivered, and how project leads were required to adapt to ensure student engagement when events took place virtually. Respondents spoke of challenges in understanding how benefits would accrue to the participants when activities were administered through video platforms, rather than face to face. A loss of connection and rapport were most often mentioned as the casualties of virtual delivery.

‘[W]hen you’re delivering digitally, the understanding how, you know, how much benefit that has been to a student is quite difficult...you lose that personal aspect when it’s digital.’ [careers lead]

However, respondents also noted an advantage to virtual delivery of Employer Encounters. It allowed them to broaden their volunteer base and draw on a wider range of employers, some of them national and geographically more distant to Blackpool.

‘What we’ve realised is digital allows us better and probably more expansive employer opportunities.’ [provider]

‘[When the employer encounter] took place online, took place virtually, what it did enable to happen is that the kind of, I say the quality of speaker that was available to us went up because travel wasn’t involved for people.’ [career lead]

Overall, however, the virtual mode of delivery was thought to be inferior to face to face delivery, not least, because some of the volunteers appeared not to present themselves as they would have done in the workplace as their participation in the Employer Encounters took place when they were working from home. This made it difficult to convey the atmosphere of a workplace which limited the ability of volunteers to increase the awareness of young people about the specific workplace they ‘visited’.

‘[I prefer] definitely face to face.... I think there was a group of four and a group of three so you are just talking all the time and chatting to the staff as well and at the end of the day you’ve got something to show for it as well. I think having something at the end of the day to show for it is really nice.’ [career lead]

*‘One issue was a lot of the people were doing it from home at the time, which probably wouldn’t be the case now but because they weren’t in the workplace, it felt a little bit strange that the people were talking to them from their living room or dining room about being a hairdresser or a mechanic or whatever.’
[career lead]*

Summary

Our analysis of the qualitative interviews demonstrated that employer encounters were valued by school staff, career leads and young people. There was undoubtedly a gain in knowledge and improved understanding that came from employer encounters for the young people and, some events also contributed to more awareness amongst staff of the abilities and skills of some young people who had previously disengaged academically. This is an aspect of the programme that is to be commended.

Our interviews also demonstrated that the programme coped extraordinarily well with COVID restrictions, delivering a range of events, and reaching a significant number of pupils across several Blackpool schools. Some innovative partnership work led by LCH, and additional efforts by RBN and employers ensured that engagement activities continued during the pandemic. Enterprise Advisors were seen to play a key, if somewhat underutilised, role in connecting employer knowledge with schools and providers of employer encounters.

Since employer encounters and career events were highly variable in format, content, reach and targeting of pupils, it is relevant to ask, however, how the impact and benefit of the employer encounters for different groups of pupils, in particular for those at risk of NEET, can be gauged. Our respondents have had a range of views and opinions on this.

Where employer encounters were targeted at a select number of young people at risk of NEET, the benefit accrued by that group was obviously higher than on those occasions where a less targeted approach was utilised, delivering talks and instructions to whole school years. However, our respondents were of the opinion that the latter approach could be effective for some young people and we obtained strong evidence from a sample of young people in our focus groups to support this.

Respondents highlighted that feedback from the employer encounters was difficult to obtain from schools, and this may reinforce the impression of an information gap occurring between schools and event providers, as to the impact of the employer encounters. It would be difficult to see how providers can consistently ‘use destination data and LMI to identify any gaps and implement appropriate interventions’ and ‘to inform continuous improvement’ as stipulated in the guidance on employer encounters without systematic and actionable feedback from schools.

In the absence of robust information about the impact and effectiveness of those employer encounters delivered in an untargeted way to whole school cohorts, the question may arise why these particular funded events are delivered as part of the Opportunity Area Programme which aims to improve career awareness specifically for those at risk of NEET.

Digital Careers Journey

The evaluation was tasked to investigate the value perceived by stakeholders of the Digital Careers Journey project and measure the impact on its target population. In this context, we gathered robust evidence about the value various respondents associated with the Start Lancashire/Start Blackpool website and obtained some information about the potential impact of the project on young people and their career awareness and career planning.

The project partners RBN and U-Explore provided us with a significant amount of data capturing the recruitment of employers to the Responsible Business Network and relating to the utilisation of the website by registered users. We synthesised these data in the first section below. However, only aggregated summary data were provided, we were, therefore, not able to conduct any independent analysis of website utilisation data. In this second section of the report, we present a summary of the themes and topics that have emerged from our interviews with regard to the Digital Career Journey project.

RBN data

The Responsible Business Network received funding from the Opportunity Area Programme to facilitate the involvement of local employers with employer encounters. It also aimed to work with local businesses to create and upload employer content on to the Start Blackpool website.

The project set a range of targets for the RBN which were severely impacted by COVID restrictions during the programme period. The initial set target of contacting 72 new members and converting 36 of these new contacts into members for the Responsible Business Network turned out to be too ambitious under conditions imposed by COVID restrictions. RBN ultimately managed to contact 40 businesses and converted 20 of those into members over the lifetime of the programme.

RBN also managed to upload 24 new employee videos on to the Start Blackpool website consisting of mixture of 3-minute hero videos, VWEX insights and 3-minute hero videos converted to a VWEX insights. RBN also transformed 7 Learn Live Videos into VWEX which means that it produced a total of 31 pieces of content for the website. With the target of 36 pieces of content to be uploaded, this represents a considerable achievement under COVID conditions when many employers had furloughed their staff for several months.

U-Explore Data

Access to the website is open to all users, with users being encouraged to login/register to provide a personalised experience so that data can be captured. There are two ways to sign up to the website, either a school can register and give access to all its students, or, alternatively, individual students can sign up to the website. Data about the use of the website by students (active users) is linked to the school registration and can thus be monitored. Data are available about the type of interaction students do on the website, such as uploading content or requests. Measuring the utilisation of

the website by students at risk of NEET was not possible as there is no mechanism to link individual users with individual's risk of NEET profiles. Whilst Blackpool schools are encouraged to flag Pathways for All students through the system it is not clear how well this procedure has been followed.

A quarterly report provided by U-Explore shows that the number of registered users of the website steadily increased in the period from September to December 2021. Across all Lancashire schools, as of 13 March 2022, there were 34,164 learners and 1,307 school staff registered with the website.

The frequency of logins of those registered users over this period of time are around or slightly above the national average at about 50 percent. The use of the website naturally fluctuates during periods of school holidays. The average engagement time of users with the website content stands above the national average at 11mins (national: about 8-9 mins).

Across Lancashire (the reporting area), as of 31 March 2022, there were 4,110 learners who actively used the website and 143 members of staff. A majority of these were learners in year group 10 (n=1,062), with significant numbers of learners in year 9 (n=873) and year 7 (n=414) also actively using the website. This speaks for a widespread adoption of the service amongst learners and staff members in Lancashire and a good, slightly above national average, utilisation rate.

Examining a breakdown of active users by school, however, reveals an uneven picture with some schools making considerable use of the website, whilst other schools not accessing the website in significant numbers. South Shore Academy, for example, has only 21 registered users actively using the site. This may not be necessarily reflective of a lack of willingness to use the site but may be due to challenges with access or IT issues at the school.

We were also supplied with helpful calculations of website utilisation by the programme lead broken down by Blackpool schools. The figures suggest that the use of the website varies significantly across Blackpool schools, with the number of active users per registrations at each school ranging from 1% to 100%. The aggregated data provided by U-Explore however did not allow us to replicate these calculations.

Summary

Summary information from RBN permits the conclusion that the network managed to create a considerable amount of content and increased its membership during COVID times. This constitutes an appreciable accomplishment given the conditions under which companies and local businesses operated at the time.

Currently available aggregated data provided by U-Explore through quarterly reports demonstrate that the website has landed successfully in the area and is enjoying widespread use and adoption by significant numbers of learners and staff across Lancashire schools.

It is more difficult to ascertain from the available data the utilisation of the website by Opportunity Area schools, or to obtain a more detailed picture of its use for the career

planning or career awareness of young people at risk of NEET. There is, currently, no process in place to systematically collect and analyse utilisation data at a level of granularity which would permit drawing conclusions about the impact of the website on pupils in the Opportunity Area or young people at risk of NEET. Whilst logged in users can be tracked by their school, there may be a need for training for schools to recognise the import of the information on the system for monitoring students at risk of NEET.

Themes from our interviews

The website was, overall, perceived as a positive addition to existing resources available to young people to increase their knowledge about the world of work.

'Start in [county] is that prime example, so young people can have those virtual encounters and they can share those with parents because you can participate virtually through your mobile phone and access that information which a face-to-face encounter can't do.' [career lead]

As a universal service, any website provider would not be able to ensure that its product is solely consumable by a specific group of users, such as young people at particular risk of NEET. Any attempt to ensure the take up from a particular group of young people is, hence, linked to the service's ability to gather information about the utilisation rates amongst the group and its capacity to analyse the obtained data in order to adapt the service to increase utilisation amongst the target population.

The U-Explore as the project partner was cognizant of the challenges around gathering relevant information with regard to young people at risk of NEET.

'We don't have a list, I don't think, of students that are NEET' [so we don't know how many of them access the website].' [project partner]

However, one respondent pointed to routinely collected RONI data as a potential solution.

'There's the risk of NEET indicator or RONI; I know that we were actively talking to schools because in the platform they can actively add flags to students to identify whether they sit within certain teaching groups, learning groups, risk of NEET groups and we were pushing in the early stages of, I can remember the exact timeline now but I know it was very high in M's [programme lead] agenda to be tracking the number of students flagged within our system within pathways for all students.' [project partner]

'[But] If that's being calculated somewhere, it's not been calculated at our side.' [project partner]

The service provider also emphasised that, during the project, the service has developed other innovative means of improving the utility of the website for young people at risk of NEET.

'The intention will be that we'll track users right from coming to the page with the content on it which will come from google analytics data and then we'll flow that through to pull the data to capture what students are doing when they get to that page.' [project partner]

Linking up data from the Pathways for All Project, which is part of the parallel Programme Stream Blackpool Engagement Journey, may offer an innovative solution to this.

'My interpretation was that the pathways for all flag was used as a risk on NEET indicator.' [project partner]

'The granular campaign approach will allow us to target more specific user groups with the primary target audience for the campaign that will launch next week will be year 11 and year 13 students but obviously using the same approach, we can target different campaigns for different user groups, and I think I see that very much as the direction of travel across [borough]. We've seen this across other regions as well that we can build on the core platform capability to target smaller groups be it year groups, be it a risk of NEET cohort.' [project partner]

In the absence of a neat solution to this lack of targetability of a universally accessible website, the impression was that benefits of the new service would accrue to users across the board and, through this universal impact, it was hoped to improve career awareness of those users who were at risk of NEET. There was a recognition by the website provider, however, that this remained a design and delivery challenge.

'You get hundreds of thousands of students on a national platform and hopefully that will lift up some of the student within that group but actually at the bottom of the funnel they are all individual students so it's how do you tap in and how do you grab smaller number of students?' [project partner]

A case study methodology to capture the individual experiences of some young people using the website was mentioned as a potential answer to the issue of providing a universally accessed website whilst also wanting to target some young people at risk of NEET.

From the perspectives of potential users, we detected some frustration with technical issues that were hindering the access to the site. This was particularly disappointing given that the issue was affecting those schools directly linked into the Blackpool Council IT system which in effect meant that those young people attending People Referral Unit were unable to benefit from the new service.

'We're still working on rolling out [the website] across the whole school which for us as a service has been more of an IT issue because we're linked to [town] Borough Council and they have, I don't know what's the correct word but very

intense firewall restrictions which means that there was a time where nothing gets through which is not really very helpful, it is helpful in a sense that it probably means our young people are very safe on IT but obviously it's an external IT thing around that.' [career lead]

Impact of COVID

COVID restrictions impacted on the implementation of the Digital Careers Journey of the Start Blackpool website, similar to how these restrictions impacted on all other projects in the Opportunity Area Programme. Much of this impact was considered to be a knock-on effect from the difficulties schools encountered during the pandemic. Impressing on young people and school staff the importance of careers development was seen to be a challenge at the best of times, and this was accentuated during COVID as schools considered it imperative to prioritise providing effective teaching.

'Careers is something that is always, in my mind, been at the bottom of the pile and it's suffered even more so [under COVID].' [project partner]

The move to virtual workplace visits (facilitated via the website) was perceived to be an appropriate response to the COVID restrictions, yet there was also a hope that things would get back to 'normal' again as that would allow young people to benefit from the programme activities in a much more rounded and fuller manner.

'I did virtual over Covid and it was good, and it gave them food for thought but it's nothing like getting in and seeing how it really works and the back areas you know, to give you the insight as to whether you want to actually work there or not.' [employer]

'I would say from an online perspective, it's not always the best way to engage with people as it is in person just because there's a different energy in the room.' [employer]

'But it's always nicer to see people face-to-face and get a feeling of how you know, their interaction is, you know sometimes on screen it can be quite difficult to get people to interact.' [employer]

Summary

The website was perceived as providing added value to other programme activities and was thought to be appreciated by active users. There was a recognition that a universally accessible website for registered users was not a targeted intervention per se which could address specifically the needs of young people at risk of NEET. However, as a universal service it was deemed to offer useful local content for young people in Blackpool, including those at risk of NEET.

Our interviews indicated that there was less of a shared understanding on how the website was supposed to 'build both the awareness of careers and pathways open to young people at risk of NEET'. The logic model identified clear outcomes such as

fidelity, reach and acceptability of the intervention but the data routinely collected were not necessarily capable to assess these outcomes.

Whilst the website clearly represented a success in terms of making practical employer related content available to registered users, it was difficult to measure whether this had the desired impact on young people. The analysis of our interview data appears to suggest that linking website use with impact remained an under-conceptualised aspect of the project implementation.

Wider programme themes

Our analysis generated some programme wide themes and topics which we summarise in the section below. Some of these were programme specific, but others related to the broader context of the programme and how it landed in the Blackpool area.

Respondents acknowledged that the programme and its two work streams were situated within ongoing work to improve careers engagement and careers awareness in Blackpool. In particular, there was repeatedly mention of the central role technical education played for those young people who were likely to be at risk of NEET.

'We've been doing an awful lot to raise the profile of technical education so that young people can take a balanced view of both academic and technical routes.'
[project partner]

There was also a recognition that a key factor in reducing risks of young people to become NEET is the ability of relevant organisation and the authority to identify, monitor and review the journey of those young people likely to be at risk.

'One of the things that again needs more work is the NEET tracking which is the local authority's statutory duty to track young people on leaving school into their destination.... And that has improved significantly in [town] over the past couple of years. They've got a much better view but it's then following up with those young people isn't it and trying to draw them back in.' [career lead]

Linking the various programme parts together and connecting the dots with other work going on in the community, was seen as an important task and respondents valued the effective role the programme played in bringing this about.

'I would say there's been quite a number of opportunities to discuss how things are evolving, how they're going, what impact they're having and so on. The [programme] chair is particularly keen on ensuring that we are making a difference.' [project partner]

There was, however, some scepticism about whether or not the enthusiasm and willingness of participating organisations could be sustained once funding had ended. Some of the programme partners' passion was attributed to available funding and it was thought to be critical for future progress to ensure that the momentum was maintained beyond the programme's end.

'It's kind of continuation and I guess it's how you maintain that because I think, if you bring a pot of money to the table, people gather don't they? If you don't have that pot of money, then things can fragment a little bit so it's how we maintain that cohesion.' [project partner]

Summary

Our respondents were clearly appreciative of the achievements of both the Employer Encounters and the Digital Career Journey projects in this strand of the Blackpool Opportunity Area Programme. They indicated that it would be imperative for the effectiveness of the programme to generate relevant data to assess the impact of the projects, and to ensure that data and information are linked up to improve the capacity of providers, schools and programme partners to track and monitor the impact of the projects on young people in general and young people at risk of NEET. Establishing and maintaining cross project information flow following young people at risk of NEET was seen as essential to demonstrate and improve the effectiveness of the projects.

Conclusions

Employer Encounters, virtual or face to face, are seen as making a direct impact on participants on the day, including teachers who develop different perspectives on the capabilities of some young people previously unengaged in school activities. The project worked well with those schools, providers and employers where good working relationships existed through 'champions' or proactive careers leads. Meaningful feedback from schools was perceived to be key to ensuring the events are effectively tailored to participants and their needs. It was also thought to be important to establish an avenue for feedback to providers and employers. Measuring the accumulative impact of Employer Encounters on young people depends on accessing and sharing of risk profiles held at school level. Moving forward, the project would benefit from exploring the possibility of combining risk of NEET information for the project target population, with Employer Encounter participation information.

The project has also successfully designed and implemented a local online offer to students in Blackpool's schools. The website was populated with content provided by the Responsible Business Network which has grown in size despite the challenges posed by COVID restrictions. The project has thus achieved one of its main objectives, to provide a local online offer to young people in Blackpool. At this stage, current utilisation data of the website do not allow effective monitoring as to whether or not young people at risk of NEET benefit from the offer. It is also difficult to gauge the impact the website has on their awareness of the local employer profiles and opportunities. Linking data sets, such as the website utilisation data with individual pupil profiles, and creating user journeys, may allow project leads to ensure that the website is targeted well at the group of young people most in need.

Recommendations

Employer Encounters

- Continue to fund employer encounters and career events in Blackpool schools
- Ensure schools provide useful feedback to providers of the events on the impact and areas for improvement
- Ensure data from employer encounters are linked to individual young people profile data to be able to measure accumulative impact of events on those most in need
- Ensure and monitor that employer encounters are designed and delivered to plug gaps in young people's understanding of the labour market
- Improve coordination between requests to local employers originating from Blackpool schools, LCH and other partners such as BIC and RBN
- Review involvement and use of enterprise advisor capacity throughout project planning and delivery processes
- Use consultations with young people at risk of NEET to discuss what works in terms of raising their awareness of career opportunities and labour market knowledge

Digital Careers Journey

- Continue to fund the Start Blackpool website as a digital offer with local content to young people in the area
- Examine the possibility to generate data to monitor identified project outcomes such as the use of the website and its impact on young people at risk of NEET
- Explore possibility to link website utilisation data with individual young people information held by schools to be able to measure impact on, and benefit of, project for young people most at risk of NEET
- Create user journey case studies which assist school staff in guiding young people at risk of NEET in maximising the use of the website for career awareness

Programme wide

- Explore the possibility to link data of vulnerable young people across projects to increase the targetability of projects and the programme as a whole
- Establish routine shared learning processes for all programme stakeholders