# a stitch in time: tackling educational disengagement interim report

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# acknowledgements

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# about the project

This is the interim report of a year-long Demos research project on tackling educational disengagement.
The work is generously being funded by the Private Equity Foundation. This interim report is based on scoping research: desk-based literature review, conversations with charities and organisations working with children and young people on the issues covered in this paper, and a panel of practitioners working with children and young people who discussed with us the symptoms and causes of educational disengagement. For more information about the research as it takes place throughout the rest of the year, please go to www.demos.co.uk/capabilities.

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# summary

Almost one in ten 16—18 year-olds were not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) in late 2007 — a status associated with huge costs both in terms of later life outcomes for these young people and for society. These are young people whom the system has failed. There has rightly been a strong focus on trying to reduce these numbers, but it has met with limited success.

This is because politicians and policy makers have failed to recognise the extent to which the very visible problem of disengagement post-16 is only the tip of the iceberg. It is symptomatic of some deeper problems that run through our education system. Many of these young people have had poor experiences of the education system and experiences of social deprivation that long predate their NEET status. It is clear we have a problem with disengagement among younger groups:

- England has some of *the poorest attitudes towards learning* and enjoyment of learning internationally, with one of the highest proportions of children with poor attitudes towards reading in the developed world, and four in ten children partly or mostly agreeing with the statement 'I hate school/ college'.

- Although England tends to perform at average or better in international league tables, we have *a long tail of underachievement*, with a significant minority of young people failing to make good progress in their education; 16 per cent of children make no progress in English and maths between the age of 7 and 11, and 8 per cent of children leave primary school with levels of literacy and/or numeracy below those of the average 7-year-old.

- Social background plays a stronger role in predicting attainment than in many other countries; at every level of our education system, children from deprived backgrounds with good prior attainment are less likely to make progress than their peers.

- More than one in 20 young people persistently *truant* from secondary school, missing more than a fifth of the school year. Truancy itself is associated with a host of negative outcomes spanning attainment, anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and youth offending.

- While behaviour in most schools is good or outstanding, one in three secondary schools suffers from *poor behaviour*. Disruptive behaviour disproportionately affects schools in deprived areas. Certain groups of pupils are more likely to end up excluded, often as a result of poor behaviour: children from deprived backgrounds, children with special needs and children in local authority care.

Thus we are never going to tackle disengagement in older groups effectively unless we engage with why it is that some groups of children and young people seem to switch off from or experience problems with their education at an earlier stage. But the education system, and child and youth services more broadly, have failed to get to grips with this issue. Although there has been a strong commitment to early and preventative intervention in the national agenda, this has not always been translated locally. Two issues have got in the way.

First, there have been two competing agendas: the standards agenda, focused on improving standards in schools as measured by quite narrow indicators of attainment, and the Every Child Matters agenda, focused on improving outcomes over a broader range of domains. While in theory there is no tension, some areas of national education policy – particularly the accountability policy — have been characterised primarily by a narrow standards agenda, meaning that schools have given priority to this in the short term as it is what their progress is measured by.

Second, politicians and policy makers have over the last decade failed to recognise the limited power of top-down levers such as curriculum reform and centrally directed initiatives. Much of what we review below in terms of what works in tackling educational disengagement is not within the remit of bureaucrats in Whitehall but of schools and local service providers. Yet what happens at the local level — particularly the relationships between local authorities, schools and the charitable and private sectors as purchasers and providers of services — have been sorely neglected issues in children and young people's policy.

Clunky systems at the local level are getting in the way of spreading what works.

The result is a system in which there are patches of excellent and innovative provision — but in which these are the exception rather than the norm.

The challenge is even greater in today's tight fiscal context, in which spending money wisely on initiatives and interventions that work and that deliver proven savings in the long run is more important than ever.

In moving forwards, education and children's policy should be focused on:

• Developing our understanding of where we should be focusing our efforts in tackling disengagement

• Understanding the nature of the tools available in tackling disengagement

• Making the tools more widely available.

This summary highlights the topline findings of our scoping research on each of these.

## Where should we be focusing our efforts?
Our research suggests there are five key areas:

• *The core academic skills: literacy, numeracy and speaking and communication.* Each year 8 per cent of children leave primary school with literacy and numeracy levels below those of the average 7-year-old. Children who never acquire good levels of the core skills of literacy, numeracy and oral language are much more likely to become frustrated and disengaged with their learning — between half and three-quarters of children excluded from school have significant problems with these and the vast majority of young offenders have very poor language skills. The costs to the public purse of failing to master basic numeracy skills during primary school have been estimated to be up to £2.4 billion each year, and those who fail to master basic literacy skills cost the public purse up to £2.5 billion each year. Research suggests that focusing intensively on these skills early on before children fall significantly behind can be

very effective. For example, Reading Recovery, an intensive one-to-one tuition programme for children who are very poor readers at age 6, brings 80 per cent of them up to average levels for their age. There are similarly successful interventions for numeracy and speaking.

- *Social and emotional competencies*. Competencies such as empathy, motivation, understanding and managing feelings, being able to get along with others, and self-understanding are the foundational skills a child needs to fully realise the benefits of learning in the classroom, and enjoy a broader range of positive outcomes. Research has demonstrated conclusively that these skills are just as important as academic skills in explaining success, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parenting in the early years, and a supportive school climate and culture, are important in fostering these competencies.

- *Building aspiration.* Low aspirations are linked with poorer educational outcomes—both reinforce each other. A child's aspirations are strongly influenced by the aspirations the adults have for them as they grow up—particularly their parents and teachers. Research has stressed the importance of role models in making children and young people aware of their options and building aspiration.

- *Supporting parents.* Parenting and a child's learning environment, particularly in the very earliest years, have the strongest predictive power in explaining child outcomes—both academic and social and behavioural. A difficult and chaotic home environment makes focusing on learning in school much more difficult. There are a number of targeted, evidence-based programmes that work to improve parenting skills and have a knock-on impact on child outcomes, such as the Incredible Years and Triple P parenting programmes, and the Nurse-Family Partnership. These should be supplemented with more universal interventions that build bridges between home and school and signpost parents to other services as needed.

- *What we are offering children and young people to engage with inside and outside school.* The above four key areas deal with some of the 'risk' factors for disengagement. But debates about disengagement and young people tend to take place on adult terms: there tends to be an implicit assumption that the current educational offer is good enough and that a failure to engage reflects problems with children and young people rather than the offer itself. But it is perfectly plausible that a child might develop the core skill sets above, have high aspirations, and enjoy a positive and supportive home environment, yet still disengage from learning if they find it insufficiently challenging or exciting. Too often, discussions about bringing broader forms of learning into schools are limited to discussions of 'work-based learning' for 14+ young people who have already disengaged, but there are excellent examples of initiatives introducing broader forms of learning for younger groups.

## Understanding the tools for tackling disengagement

Tools for tackling disengagement can be grouped into three broad categories: central government levers such as curriculum reform and the accountability framework; prescriptive and targeted interventions; and looser initiatives often tailored to local contexts and run by external organisations in conjunction with schools.

### Central policy levers

The key objective should be setting up an overall framework within which teaching and learning can flourish and that supports interventions that work. It has been tempting for successive governments to overplay the importance of central policy levers such as curriculum reform, assessment and accountability policy and stipulations about teacher training. This is perhaps because—within political con-straints—they are easy for politicians in Westminster to tug. However, the link between these kinds of levers and what goes on in schools and localities is often weak.

The *national curriculum* is an oft-utilised tool when government decide it wants to change teaching and learning in schools—but it is an over-rated and fragile tool. This is because although it sets the tone for learning up and down the country, it is not the case that tweaking the curriculum automatically leads to change (as previous

attempts at reform have shown) and the curriculum is easily overloaded by adding on stipulations. Recent reform has moved away from an overly prescriptive focus on content to a more flexible curriculum stressing the importance of speaking and communicating, and the social and emotional foundational competencies outlined above, and this is to be welcomed.

The national policy framework perhaps falls most short in the area of *assessment and accountability*. There are a number of issues with the way in which our system of standardised testing and targets work. There are doubts over how accurate a picture it gives over school performance anyway — given that the tests measure a narrow set of skills and have been shown to give an inaccurate picture of pupil progress. There is convincing evidence testing has had a significant impact on teaching and learning, shifting the focus of schools to that which is measured, and that it has had a negative impact on children and young people's attitudes towards learning. Finally, there are concerns that threshold targets encourage schools to focus on children most easily helped over the threshold. Given children from disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to progress, it is unclear the extent to which new progress targets will get around this as the government claims.

To better equip teachers in tackling disengagement and other school staff in tackling disengagement, there is room for a greater focus in *initial teacher training and continuing professional development* on strategies for improving pupil behaviour; special educational needs; teaching children from different socio-economic, cultural and ethnic backgrounds; emotional literacy training including creating the kinds of classroom and school environments that research shows are most conducive to the development of social and emotional competencies; and age-appropriate pedagogies, for example teaching through play for very young children and keeping early adolescents engaged at Key Stage 3.

### Prescriptive and targeted interventions

The most rigorous, longitudinal evidence that compares the impacts of an intervention on a group of children with a control group who do not experience the intervention (randomised control trials) tends to be on very prescriptive, targeted interventions delivered by skilled practitioners that often operate on a one-to-one basis.

For example, one-to-one Reading Recovery tuition for 6-year-olds and Numbers Count tuition for 7-year-olds have had high success rates in returning children with very poor reading and numeracy levels to average rates for their age group. It has been estimated that every pound spent on Reading Recovery saves the exchequer between £11 and £17 over a child's lifetime, and every pound spent on Numbers Count between £12 and £19.

The Nurse-Family Partnership, a programme developed in the US, and currently being piloted as the Family-Nurse Partnership here in the UK, is a programme of intensive in-home support provided by highly trained nurses for young, at-risk pregnant women and during the first two years of a child's life. A longitudinal evaluation in the US found it significantly improved outcomes for children, and a very conservative estimate was that every £1 spent on the programme saved the state £4 by the time the child turned 15.

Similarly strong evidence exists for targeted therapeutic interventions designed to tackle serious behavioural problems (for example, multi-systemic therapy) and on some other parenting programmes targeted at families who are significantly at risk (for example, the Incredible Years and Triple P parenting programmes).

### Looser initiatives tailored to local contexts

As outlined above, there is very clear evidence about what works around a group of targeted and prescriptive interventions. But there is less understanding of what it is that makes high-quality and more flexible interventions often aimed at wider groups of children work, for example those run by charities in schools. We reviewed a number of case studies with positive self-evaluation evidence in the course of our scoping research:

- *The Place2Be,* a charity offering counselling services and emotional support in conjunction with 146 schools across the UK.

- *School-Home Support,* a charity that places highly trained school–home liaison workers and learning mentors in schools to build bridges between the school and home for disaffected pupils and families.

- *IntoUniversity,* a charity that runs project-based learning programmes and after-school homework support for primary and secondary pupils at centres in and around London with the explicit aim of building aspirations.

- *Beatbullying,* a charity that runs peer support programmes in school to reduce bullying and improve school culture, relationships and emotional wellbeing.

- *Open Futures,* a skills and enquiry curriculum-based education initiative for primary schools that aims to improve children's engagement in their learning by helping them to discover and develop practical skills, personal interests and values.

- *Fairbridge,* a charity running programmes for young people focusing on strengthening disaffected young people's soft skills and emotional resilience.

- *Every Child a Chance Trust,* a charity that brings together funding from business and charitable foundations to support the rollout of programmes such as Reading Recovery and Numbers Count in primary schools.

A number of commonalities that contribute to their success stand out:

- Successful charities working in schools *fully engage the school*, working in conjunction with schools and school staff to deliver their services.

- They also *engage parents* as far as possible in their work.

- They focus on *building positive relationships* between children and adults, and children and other children.

- They often *use activities or examples young people can relate to.* But learning activities are not activities for activities' sake — the best designed initiatives involve self-evaluation and *self-reflection.*

- Many successful initiatives combine *a universal approach with more targeted interventions* for children and young people that need them.

- Many interventions are *genuinely holistic, providing support* for children and young people across *a range of risk factors.*

- *Getting non-teachers — especially people from the local community — into schools* characterises some successful interventions.

- There is an emphasis on using *trained and highly skilled practitioners,* who can rely on systems of support and supervision.

These are important lessons given that the charitable sector now makes up 8 per cent of the paid education workforce and over half of the paid social work and social care workforce.

## Making the tools more widely available

The evidence above about what works is all very well and good. But despite early prevention being one of the five key principles underpinning the Children's Plan, the evidence suggests that this is yet to filter through on the ground. Several charities we spoke to felt there was something being 'lost in translation' in the move from central to local policy, reflecting other findings that a preventative approach is not widespread. Why is this?

### Disengagement and national education policy

Central government policy over the last decade has been well meaning but not as effective as it could be, with too much of a focus on brittle and blunt levers like curriculum reform, and too many initiatives that are not always evidence-based and often associated with short-term pots of money, hampering their sustainability in the long term. The approach to national policy needs to be more strategic over the next decade:

- The accountability framework should be reformed, so it captures richer notions of success.

- Stipulations about teacher training should be increased, so it more effectively equips teachers and other school staff to tackle disengagement as outlined above.

- Rather than rolling out countless national initiatives, the Government should focus strategically on building up a long-term infrastructure around specific initiatives that have a strong evidence base and which would not happen on a wide scale without this kind of support — programmes such as Reading Recovery, Numbers Count and Family-Nurse partnership. The focus should be on these rather than trying to scale up the looser, more flexible initiatives run by charities mentioned above — evidence from the national rollout of a Parent Support Adviser scheme based on School-Home Support suggests that in doing so, some of the elements that make these schemes successful (such as systems of training, supervision and support) can get lost.

- Last, the government urgently needs to review its role in supporting local governance and commissioning at the local level, as set out below.

### Disengagement and the local policy context: towards a more intelligent localism

To properly understand why there has been a disjunct between a commitment to prevention and early intervention nationally, and what is happening on the ground, we need to look in more detail at local policy making. It is local authorities, primary care trusts (PCTs) and schools — not central government — that primarily make decisions about what services children and young people can access in their roles as service providers and commissioners of services. There is an increasing expectation from government that the charitable sector will be commissioned to provide public services. There are five key barriers that exist to early prevention and intervention approaches becoming more widespread:

- The tendency to prioritise fire fighting — resources tend to be channelled to children with the highest levels of need, so children's needs often need to escalate before they access intervention — when they are often more difficult to tackle.

- Short-term political pressures do not fit the long-term time horizons of successful prevention work.

- Unclear lines of responsibility exist for many broad, holistic outcomes — with agencies such as PCTs, local authorities, schools and the police all jointly responsible for achieving outcomes.

- The financial benefits of intervening early are often realised later down the line — and not by organisations that need to do the upfront spending.

- There is a tension between the desire to roll out strongly evidence-based initiatives and to foster local innovation.

Our research has revealed three important blockages that get in the way of effectively tackling disengagement at the local level:

- Problems in the commissioning process

- The impact the national accountability framework has on the commissioning process

- The supply side of children's services.

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Problems in commissioning process — First, there is not enough easily accessible and high-quality information for local authorities and schools as commissioners of services about what works. The onus is on service providers in the charitable and private sectors to self-evaluate their services and make this information available. But good examples of self-evaluation are the exception rather than the norm — the majority of charities do not undertake good quality self-evaluation. To help commissioners and commissionees:

- There needs to be a much more concerted effort to build up a national evidence base about what works across the range of interventions described above.

- There needs to be more support given to charities on how to self-evaluate and the role and scope of self-evaluation, using established outcome measures.

- Charities should be able to apply for a national kitemark of quality from an Ofsted-style body that inspects organisations working with children and young people in the same way that we do schools.

- The evidence base needs to be made available to schools and local authorities in an easily accessible format — there is currently far too much and too detailed information to be able to expect all practitioners to keep on top of it.

Second, commissioning is a highly skilled job spanning needs analysis, strategy design, partnership, procurement, monitoring and evaluation, and project management. More research needs to be done on the extent to which local authority commissioners and head teachers, deputy heads and business managers in schools are equipped to do the job well. We also need a better understanding of the balance between local authority and schools commissioning in different areas, which depends on the extent to which local authorities delegate budgets.

Third, the establishment of children's trusts in 2004 was supposed to increase the amount of joint commissioning across different agencies towards a common objective, but they do not seem to have worked. There is still little experience or evaluation of effective joint commissioning.

Last, there are more general issues around commissioning and the way it works locally, including continuing experiences of short-term contracts and funding. Different local authorities have different ways of commissioning and tendering, making the process administratively burdensome for the charitable sector and it harder for charities to scale up. A kitemark quality guarantee and moving towards the use of more standardised contracts across the public sector might help.

The impact the national accountability framework has on the commissioning process — Anecdotal evidence suggests that the national accountability framework for local authorities and schools (although the local authority framework is in many ways more progressive than that of schools) may be impacting on the outcomes used in outcomes-based commissioning, which may not always be in the best interests of children and young people. We need to move towards a national accountability framework that accords the broader Every Child Matters outcomes, such as children and young people's emotional wellbeing, the same status as narrower academic measures.

The supply side of children's services — Mapping exercises of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector have revealed some significant gaps:

- Provision for some age groups is much less developed than for others. Services for the 7–13 age group remain underdeveloped.

- There is huge variation in what is available in different areas. Large, inner city areas often tend to have a much more active voluntary and community sector than, for example, rural areas, in which local authorities and schools may have a very limited — or even no — choice about services.

- Provision for some groups of people, for example Black and minority ethnic communities, is lacking in some areas.

This suggests the government needs to be much more strategic in channelling funds towards organisations undertaking evidence-based work in areas in which there are gaps.

## Conclusion

If we are to tackle educational disengagement successfully and improve outcomes for children and young people across the board, children's services need to be more holistic and geared up around the principles of early intervention and prevention. But gone are the days when we can solve the problem simply by tugging on central policy levers. Central government needs to focus on creating the national policy context in which learning can flourish, and focusing more strategically on building national infrastructure around tightly evidence-based interventions that lend themselves to scaling up. Beyond this, there is a major role for it to play in improving how things work at the local level. This has been a neglected issue in education and children's policy — but if it can be got right, the impact could be very significant indeed.

# introduction

Almost one in ten 16—18 year-olds were not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) in late 2007.[1] These are young people whom the system has failed. Most of this group cycle in and out of employment or education, and the associated personal costs and the costs to society are huge. For individuals, being out of employment, education and training during these years — a flag for broader disengagement — is associated with a wide range of poor outcomes later in life, including poorer employment prospects, poorer health, and a higher risk of offending and ending up in prison. For society, the long-term costs of each young person being NEET has been estimated to be £97,000 over the course of each of their lifetimes.[2]

To say that this is a huge policy challenge would be an understatement. Despite a significant policy focus on this age group, there has been limited success in bringing down the numbers of young people who are NEET. The agenda has been given renewed political focus with the government's announcement that the participation age is to be raised from the age of 16 to 17 by 2013, and to 18 by 2015. This is an ambitious agenda that will see compulsion used as a last resort in ensuring that the NEET problem exists no more. But it will be unlikely to work unless policy makers find a way of tackling the underlying causes of disengagement among the 16–18-year-old age group. Even during compulsory education, it is estimated that 5.6 per cent of children and young people are persistent truants, missing a fifth or more of the school year.

A central argument of this interim report, however, is that the very visible problem of being NEET — and the disengagement from learning among 16–18-year-olds that underpins it — is only the tip of the iceberg. Many of this group will have had poor experiences of the education system that long predate their NEET status. Sir Mike Tomlinson, the government's chief adviser on London schools, recently estimated that at least 10,000 young people are lost to the school system before they even reach key stage 4 at age 14,

thinking that education 'has nothing to offer them'. There is some evidence that some boys in particular are becoming disengaged from their learning at ages as young as 9 and 10 — or even earlier.[3] Trying to tackle the NEET issue only using remedial measures is doomed to fail unless this is accompanied by a policy approach that seeks to understand children and young people as learners in the round, and takes a preventative approach towards the root causes of disengagement from learning at the very earliest stages when they occur. If issues are left to fester the consequences for children and young people — and the costs of trying to fix these consequences for society — escalate.

It is clear that the NEET issue is symptomatic of some deeper structural problems within the English educational system, which have been highlighted for a number of years, but remain unsolved. The UK and England's performance internationally is around average in reading and maths, and much better in science.[4] However, early successes made in the late 1990s have plateaued: the jumps in attainment seen at ages 7 and 11 in Key Stage 1 and 2 results in the late 1990s seem to have levelled off from 2000 onwards.[5] In particular, we have a 'long tail' of underachievement, with a significant minority of children being left behind. It has been estimated that 16 per cent of children make no progress at all in English and maths between age 7 and 11,[6] and 8 per cent of children leave primary school with very low levels of literacy and/or numeracy (below level 3).[7] Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are outperformed by their peers at every stage of the educational system — and the gap gets wider as we move up the system.

These statistics are underpinned by some worrying trends in wellbeing and attitudes towards learning. Studies suggest that one in five children suffer from declining or consistently low wellbeing during primary school.[8] When it comes to attitudes towards learning, there is the suggestion that our education system is poor at inculcating a love and enjoyment of learning. In 2003 England had one of the highest proportions of 9 and 11 year-olds measured as having poor attitudes towards reading in a group of 41 countries[9] and more recent research has found that there has been no improvement since.[10]

So gaining a deeper understanding of what underlies educational disengagement earlier on is key to improving outcomes across the board and effectively tackling the

NEET issue. However, the education system, and children and young people's services more broadly, are not doing enough to get to the root of the issue — as is evidenced by some of the poor outcomes above.

The rhetoric around the need for early intervention and prevention in tackling children and young people's disengagement is nothing new — in fact, it has its roots in government policy documentation dating back to 2000, and much earlier still in terms of the initiatives that many charities and services have been running. But there is strong evidence that there is a disjunct between commitment to early intervention and prevention in national government policy — for example, as expressed in the government's Children's Plan — and what is happening on the ground. While there are some excellent examples of innovative and evidence-based practice occurring in some schools and some areas of the country, these are not as widespread as they should be. There are two key reasons for this.

The first is that the education system has, in recent years, been characterised by two agendas that have too often been in tension. The first, the standards agenda, is rightly focused on improving standards in schools. But it has sought to do so by using a fairly narrow measure of attainment and outcomes for young people — Key Stage testing and public examinations. Unfortunately, many would argue that we have now reached a situation in which what is measured — primarily this narrow measure of academic attainment — is driving our educational system. The second agenda is the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda, which stresses the importance of improving outcomes for children across a broader range of five outcomes: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing. Of course, almost anyone acknowledges that the two should not be in tension: improving children's wellbeing across a broad range of outcomes needs to and should be the foundation for improving educational standards. However, the fact that some areas of national education policy — most notably, accountability policy — have been characterised primarily by a narrow standards agenda has meant that many very good policy initiatives based more deeply on the Every Child Matters agenda have failed to bed in across the whole school system. There is some evidence that this has had an impact on children and young people's services more widely, as local authorities also have similarly (although not quite so) narrow statutory educational targets.

The second reason why innovative and evidence-based practice is not as widespread as it should be is that national educational policy has failed to recognise the limited power of top-down levers such as curriculum, school accountability, stipulations about teacher training and centrally directed initiatives. We argue here that national policy levers are essential in creating the kind of school system in which successful learning can flourish. But success cannot be guaranteed by national policy levers alone. To gain a better understanding of what is and what is not working we have to dip deeper into education policy as it is made at the local level. Much of what can be done to tackle educational disengagement is not within the remit of bureaucrats in Whitehall but of schools and local service providers. Yet even a quick glance at the government's flagship Children's Plan suggests there has been a failure to engage with this issue in Westminster and Whitehall. So in order to tackle educational disengagement effectively we not only need to get the national policy levers right, we need to ensure that schools, local authorities, families and communities are supported in the best way possible.

Yet herein lies a significant problem. Our clunky systems of local government and service provision at the local level mean that children and young people often do not have access to what works in tackling educational disengagement. National education policy is only part of the problem. The research presented here suggests there are a number of barriers and blockages operating locally.

So, the biggest challenge in tackling educational disengagement — and for education and children and young people's policy more broadly — is to develop our understanding of what works, and to create a system in which what works is accessible by all children and young people who need it, not just a few — a move from patches of excellence to a universal and comprehensive offer for children and young people. Importantly, this needs to be viewed in the context of our current economic and political climates. Economically, the tight fiscal context we are now facing means that the Gershon efficiency agenda has been given a renewed focus. Local authorities are under more pressure than ever to make efficiency savings from the services they provide and commission, and children and young people's services are feeling the pinch along with the rest of the public and voluntary and community sectors.

Politically, two out of the three main British political parties are signed up to the idea of increasing decentralisation of budgets to schools. The Liberal Democrat and the Conservative parties are both in favour of a pupil premium, with schools receiving per-pupil funding that is weighted in favour of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. This policy would be accompanied by increased flexibilities and freedoms for schools in how they spend their budgets. Given the increasing political momentum, there is a real possibility that an incarnation of this policy will be adopted in some form over the next decade. This gives renewed urgency to an agenda that seeks to move us towards a more intelligent form of decentralisation and flexibility than the one we currently have.

Last, it is clear that much of the discourse about disengagement and young people has been about disengagement on adult terms: engagement as defined by politicians, policy makers, and perhaps some teachers and parents. But actually tackling disengagement effectively means we need to take the time to understand what it is that children and young people themselves find engaging. There is strong evidence — and excellent examples — of schools and services that attribute some of their success to placing pupil voice at the centre of what they do. This is a challenge in a society characterised by intergenerational distrust and some of the poorest adult attitudes towards children and young people internationally. During the rest of the year a crucial part of the project will involve speaking to and consulting children and young people themselves about their views on disengagement and which aspects of their learning they find more and less engaging.

In this interim report we:

• Pull out headline findings about the extent of educational disengagement across a number of indicators — but with the health warning attached that many measurable indicators of disengagement are *symptoms* of disengagement rather than the act of disengaging itself.

• Outline a model of the drivers of disengagement, drawing on the rich evidence base that exists on this.

- Highlight some lessons about what works in tackling educational disengagement, drawing on case studies of innovative practice that we have reviewed in the course of the scoping stage of this project and drawing out some general lessons about evidence-based practice.

- Consider why there is considerable variance in the quality of what is on offer to children and young people across different areas of England, focusing specifically on our findings about the local policy context, which has often been underplayed in education debates.

# 1 understanding educational disengagement

## Mapping educational disengagement

Here we pull out the top-level findings of our research relating to educational disengagement. However, there are some issues to bear in mind when we attempt to map the scale of disengagement and who it afflicts. First, disengagement is not as easily defined or measurable directly as other educational outcomes — such as attainment. It is not a clearly defined or tidy category. Thus many of our indicators relate to the symptoms of a young person switching off or disconnecting from their learning rather than the act of doing so itself. In this section, we look at a range of symptoms, including attitudes to learning, educational underachievement, truancy, exclusions, and behaviour both in and out of school.

Second, there is a distinction to be made between passive and active symptoms of disengagement. Apart from attitudes to learning and educational underachievement, the symptoms that we are looking at here are very much active symptoms of disengagement — 'acting out' or young people physically removing themselves from participation. In the course of this scoping research we spoke to several practitioners from the charitable sector working with children and young people inside and outside school, many of them working with disengaged groups. A concern they expressed was that looking simply at active signs of disengagement would underestimate the extent of disengagement among children and young people who passively withdraw from their education by withdrawing cognitively or emotionally, particularly girls. Furthermore, by the time some of the more serious signs of disengagement are being displayed — for example, truancy — it might be more difficult to re-engage young people with their learning than if the signs had been picked up earlier.

There is also often a distinct overlap between the causes and symptoms of disengagement. Some factors — for example teen pregnancy, and the act of bullying — might be both a cause and a symptom of disengagement.

So the measures of disengagement we are using here are necessarily quite crude. In the course of the rest of this research project we will be looking to gain a deeper understanding of how children and young people view and understand disengagement themselves. While there has been much research with young people focusing on disengagement during the 14+ years, there is more to be done with younger groups; there has been less literature relating specifically to the nature, causes and scale of disengagement in the primary and Key Stage 3 years than there has to Key Stage 4 and post-16 learning.[11]

However, bearing these stipulations in mind, building up an overall picture across the above symptoms suggests that — as the high number of 16–18-year-olds not engaged in learning activities might indicate — we do seem to have a problem with educational disengagement in this country, as discussed below.

- *Attitudes towards and enjoyment of learning.* There is a close relationship between a young person's enjoyment of learning, their expressed attitudes to learning and disengagement, with international data suggesting that enjoyment of learning is linked to success.[12] But the UK fares poorly on international measures of attitudes, with one of the highest proportions of children with poor attitudes towards reading in the developed world.[13] In national surveys, one in ten children say the statement 'I hate school/college' is mostly true, and a further three in ten that it is partly true.[14] Research has suggested that learner attitudes in England are instrumental in their nature, with children internalising implicit messages signalled by assessment and testing.[15] There is some evidence that children and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to say they have had a positive learning experience.[16] But research has found poorer attitudes to school among children living in poverty are underpinned by a lack of confidence in their own ability.[17]

- *Educational underachievement.* While not all educational underachievement is linked to disengagement, it is an important indicator of disengagement. The best measure of underachievement is to look at pupil progress. The data shows that there are significant numbers of pupils not making the expected National Curriculum progress each year, and that these figures are higher for pupils from deprived backgrounds (although the attainment gap between children from disadvantaged and advantaged backgrounds has begun to close in recent years). At every stage, children with good prior attainment who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) (a good indicator of deprivation) are less likely to progress than their peers: as children grow older, children eligible for FSM move down the attainment spectrum and children not eligible for FSM move up on average.[18] While socio-economic gaps have narrowed over time,[19] they remain significant: seven out of ten non-FSM pupils who reach the expected level of attainment at age 7 in English go on to achieve the expected level at age 11, but for FSM pupils the figure is six in ten. Similarly for maths, 60 per cent of non-FSM pupils make the expected progress, compared with 53 per cent of FSM pupils. The link between deprivation and attainment is strongest for White boys: less than one in five White pupils eligible for FSM get five A*–C GCSEs including English and maths.[20] There is a close link between attainment and being NEET: over a quarter of those who obtain no GCSEs go onto be NEET.[21] And only one in ten of those who are below expected levels of attainment at age 10 go on to get five good GCSEs.[22]

- *Truancy.* Truancy may be a late sign of disengagement. Truancy increases with age: 5.6 per cent of secondary schools are 'persistent truants', missing more than 20 per cent of the school year, compared with 1.7 per cent of primary pupils.[23] Worryingly, persistent truants account for over a third of all school absences between them. Truancy is highest among pupils from deprived backgrounds: over eight in 100 pupils eligible for FSM are persistent truants, three times the rate in the rest of the student population—this is probably partly because young people from deprived backgrounds are more likely to be carers. Perhaps surprisingly, the rate of persistent truancy is slightly higher among girls than it is among boys. Truancy is itself associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and young people that span attainment, anti-social behaviour, drug and alcohol misuse, and youth offending.

One study found a quarter of those truanting in year 11 went on to become NEET the following year.[24]

- *Behaviour and exclusion.* 'Acting out' in the classroom is a classic outward sign of learners switching off, and behaviour in classrooms is intimately linked to the quality of teaching and learning. While Ofsted classes behaviour in the majority of primary and secondary schools is good or outstanding, in one in three secondary schools pupil behaviour is no better than satisfactory,[25] and disruptive behaviour disproportionately affects schools in deprived areas.[26] When behaviour is repeatedly poor, fixed-term or permanent exclusion can be the result for some pupils. About half of the 135,000 pupils a year in alternative provision to mainstream schooling are those who have been excluded from school or deemed at risk of exclusion.[27] Certain groups of young people are much more likely to end up excluded: three-quarters of those who are excluded have special needs, almost a third are eligible for FSM, and looked-after children are seven times more likely to be excluded than their peers.[28] Like persistent truanting, exclusion is associated with a range of negative outcomes, including a much higher chance of being NEET aged 16–18.

- *Risky behaviours.* The link between young people's risky behaviours — such as drinking, drug use and risky sexual behaviour — and disengagement from school is perhaps more tenuous than the links drawn above. However, it is common for studies that look at educational disengagement to include some measure of risky social behaviours as a measure of disengagement, especially as they can be regarded as a broader form of disengagement. Indeed, some research suggests that, for example, teen pregnancy among young women can be underpinned by a dislike of school.[29] Risky behaviours need to be seen in the context of adolescence, when an increased desire to take risks is a natural part of growing up. However, the number of young people engaging in unsafe risky behaviours associated with negative outcomes is high in England. Two in five 15-year-olds say they have got drunk in the last week and one in five that they have smoked cannabis; these are some of the highest rates in Europe.[30]

## The drivers of educational disengagement

Explaining what underpins educational disengagement is complex. There are a range of risk factors that operate at the child level, including low levels of core academic skills, low levels of social, emotional and behavioural competence, low aspirations, and poor emotional wellbeing and mental health. However, we cannot understand these without looking at the environment a child grows up in, including their experiences of home, school, the community and their peers. The impact of one context mediates another, and children with good experiences in one sphere of their lives (say, at home), are more likely to have good experiences in other spheres (say, at school).[31] These environmental factors all impact on the extent to which children develop resilience or display risk factors.

However, the relationship between environmental risk factors and child-level risk factors is not one-way. An added complexity is that how a child's home or school environment responds to child level risk factors may further worsen a problem or contribute to disengagement—a very good example of this would be how a school deals with children with special educational needs. Furthermore, experiences of structural disadvantage, such as poverty, will impact on a child's experiences at a home and at school.

Table 1    **Risk factors for disengagement**

| Child-level risk factors | Environmental-level risk factors | Structural factors |
|---|---|---|
| Low levels of core academic skills—communication and language, literacy, numeracy | Parenting and family factors | Experiences of disadvantage |
| Low levels of social, emotional and behavioural competences | School-level factors | |
| Low aspirations | Community factors | |
| Poor emotional wellbeing and mental | Peer group factors | |
| Special educational needs | | |
| Neuro-development disorders (eg attention deficit hyperactivity disorder; ADHD) | | |

### Child-level risk factors

Low levels of core academic skills — Language, literacy and numeracy skills have been highlighted as one of the three key protective factors (alongside social and emotional competencies and parenting support) that increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and young people by the early intervention work being done by the Every Child a Chance Trust and the MPs Graham Allen and Iain Duncan Smith.[32] Each year, eight in 100 children leave primary school with literacy and/or numeracy skills below those of an average 7-year-old.[33] It has been suggested that up to 50 per cent of children are starting primary schools without the language and communication skills they need for school.[34] Children who never acquire good levels of the core skills of literacy, numeracy and oral language are much more likely to become frustrated and disengaged with their learning:

- Between half and-three quarters of children excluded from school are estimated to have significant literacy and/or numeracy difficulties,[35] and more than half of permanently excluded pupils are in the lowest 2 per cent of the student population with respect to numeracy and literacy.[36] Truancy rates are four times higher in secondary school for children who were very poor readers at the end of primary school, and more than double for children who had very low levels of numeracy at the end of primary school. Over a quarter of the NEET group had poor literacy and/or numeracy skills when at school.[37]

- Poor communication skills are associated with lower levels of self-esteem, and increased incidence of bullying and behavioural problems. Between six and nine in ten of young offenders have poor language skills.[38]

Low levels of social, emotional and behavioural competencies — Social and emotional competencies — in other words, personal and inter-personal skills — are the foundational skills that a child needs to fully realise the benefits of learning in the classroom — as well as enjoy a range of other positive outcomes in life (see box 1). Research in recent years has demonstrated that these skills are just as important as academic skills in explaining life success, and are even more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[39] Child development in the early years is crucial for providing a foundation for these skills. However, studies into brain development suggest

that the development of social and behavioural competencies continues throughout adolescence and into early adulthood, with the part of the brain that is responsible for many of the social competencies seen as desirable in adults (for example, the ability to delay gratification, to make complex decisions and to self-regulate behaviour) developing throughout adolescence.[40] This suggests that the early adolescent years are an important time to for young people to be building on earlier social and emotional development.

Box 1     **Social and emotional competences**[41]

The social and emotional competences are:

- *Self-understanding:* having a positive and accurate sense of yourself, acknowledging your own strengths as well as recognising your responsibility towards others, and being realistic about your limitations.

- *Understanding and managing feelings:* for example, knowing how to soothe yourself when you are troubled or angry, cheer yourself up when you are sad, and tolerate some degree of frustration.

- *Motivation:* showing optimism, persistence and resilience in the face of difficulties; planning and setting goals.

- *Social skills* of communication, getting along with others, solving social problems, and standing up for yourself.

- *Empathy:* being able to see the world from other people's point of view, understand and enjoy differences, and pay attention and listen to others.

Low aspirations — Low aspirations have been found to be linked with poorer educational outcomes, although the relationship between aspirations and attainment is a reciprocal one.[42] Groups that are particularly at risk of lower aspirations are boys, young people from some minority ethnic groups and young people from disadvantaged back-grounds. However, for some groups of young people there is an aspiration–achievement gap, with higher aspirations not always translating into better outcomes, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Parental aspirations

are also very important. One study found that maternal aspirations were the single most important parental value or behaviour in predicting Key Stage 2 scores after previous attainment and family background had been controlled for.[43] Another study found that parental aspiration was relatively more important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.[44] A child's aspirations are also closely linked to their perception of their ability and the value they attach to their school.[45]

Poor emotional wellbeing and mental health — A child's emotional security and wellbeing grounds learning — unhappy children do not learn well and there is a rich evidence base pointing to the fact that stress and mood affect attention and the ability to concentrate.[46] Research suggests there has been a growth in poor emotional wellbeing and mental health among some children and young people: there has been a doubling in the incidence of emotional problems and conduct disorders in the UK since the early 1990s, a trend not seen in comparator nations in the study the US and the Netherlands.[47] Data indicates that one in five children in primary schools suffers from consistently low or declining wellbeing, and that these children are most likely to be boys, low achievers and from disadvantaged backgrounds.[48] Antidote, an organisation working with schools across the country to improve school cultures and wellbeing, runs an online survey in the schools where it works, which surveys students and staff on general wellbeing and the quality of relationships within the school. The 2006 survey of 8,000 young people found a 26 per cent decline in reported wellbeing between the ages of 8 and 16, with the most significant decline occurring between years 5 and 6, and 7 and 8.[49]

Special educational needs — We have included special educational needs (SEN) here because children who are classified as having SEN are at a much higher risk of disengagement than other children. Less than one in ten children with SEN gain five A*–C grades at GCSE, and children with SEN are four times as likely to be excluded.[50] But the relationship between SEN and disengagement is complex. Many children with SEN are disengaged because of the way in which schools deal with the issue of SEN.[51] Some schools tend to over-identify SEN in their pupils, with the SEN label sometimes being used to reflect low levels of achievement and disengagement, absolving schools and teachers of responsibility for this. Often, an outcome is that children's teachers develop low expectations

of them as a result, which can turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, in some schools, underidentification of SEN is common, which has a knock-on impact on disengagement and poor behaviour.

### Environmental-level risk factors

Many of the child-level risk factors described above may stem from issues in the child's broader environment — their home life, school life and community and peer group factors. We look at each of these in turn but what is clear is that it is a child's relationships with the adults around them that are a key protective factor: connection and attachment with adults is not just important in the early years (as evidence has conclusively demonstrated) but throughout a child's life.[52] Yet data from Antidote suggests that the quality of children's relationships with adults decline as they grow older.[53]

Parenting and family factors — Parenting factors and a child's home learning environment in the very earliest years have the strongest predictive power in explaining child outcomes across a range of domains: academic, and social and behavioural. Parent–child relationships that are characterised by warmth and love, stability and authority are associated with better social and behavioural development, as Demos' own analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study has demonstrated.[54] These parenting styles can be found in families across the income distribution — but parenting in the stressful conditions often associated with families from deprived backgrounds can make it more difficult.[55]

Looking at educational attainment, it has been found that a mother's highest qualification level and the quality of the home learning environment are among the strongest predictors of outcomes at ages 10 and 11.[56] For children from disadvantaged backgrounds who manage to 'buck the trend' it appears that the single most important factor in doing so was their home learning environment — there was more likely to be a range of supportive adults in the family who supported learning, education tended to be valued highly within these families and parents had higher expectations for their children.[57] A difficult and chaotic home environment can make focusing on learning in school much more difficult, and students who have experienced poor relations at home are more likely to 'act out' in the classroom. However, a secure emotional environment at school can be a protective factor.[58]

School-level factors — In raw terms, the impact that schools have on children's outcomes is quite limited — one estimate suggests that around 14 per cent of variance in achievement is attributable to school-level factors,[59] and quantitative evidence suggests that the most important factor in terms of school is the quality of teaching.[60] It is difficult to be quite so exact about how other features of the school impact on outcomes as they are less easily measured — and the quality of teaching itself is probably dependent on many other school-level factors. But there is certainly evidence that teaching styles and school culture has an impact on pupil behaviour and social and emotional competencies as well as pupil attainment. In particular, school culture and emotional climate have been highlighted as being of importance. Empirical studies in the US have found links between the 'emotional quality' of the classroom (as measured by the warmth of adult–child interactions and adult skills in responding to children's needs) and progress in literacy and numeracy.[61] This is echoed in English studies that find that school cultures that are supportive of student safety, individual expression, fair treatment and voice also help to promote better outcomes.[62]

There is often a marked change of culture in the transition from primary to secondary school: the change from a much smaller school in which pupils are taught primarily by one teacher to a larger, more anonymous institution in which pupils are taught by up to 13 teachers in a moving cycle of rooms. Data from Antidote surveys involving over 20,000 pupils shows that there is a significant decline in the quality of staff–student relationships from primary school through to Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, that children feel as though there is less emotional safety and fewer opportunities to talk about their feelings in secondary school, and that students feel less listened to on their teaching and learning as they grow older.[63] This jars with what we know about early adolescence as a developmental stage: as they start secondary school and enter adolescence, young people desire and need more autonomy and choice in their learning rather than less, and this mismatch is likely to hinder the quality of teaching and learning. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that studies have suggested that there is a slowing in academic progress during the first few years of secondary school, underpinned by a drop in attitudes towards learning, particularly in year 8.[64]

There are also important interactions between children's experiences of poverty and disadvantage and their experiences of school. A Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research programme on the interaction between poverty and a child's experience of school found:

- Teacher perceptions of pupils vary with a pupil's backgrounds. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds in one small-scale study were more likely to report that they were shouted at by their teachers.[65]

- Children from more advantaged backgrounds described a richer set of experiences at school, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience issues such as discipline and detention.[66]

- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to have a negative attitude towards school, but this was underpinned by a lack of confidence in their own abilities rather than a belief that school was not important.[67]

Schools in disadvantaged areas can find it more difficult to respond to the needs of children from poorer backgrounds, and research has suggested that some teachers find it easier to build relationships with middle-class pupils and parents.[68]

Community factors — There is now a consensus that place and community-level factors — independent of other outcomes — can impact on young people's outcomes, but we know less about the processes through which they do. An emerging evidence base from the US suggests that levels of 'collective efficacy' in an area — the willingness of adults to engage with young people locally and to monitor and control their behaviour[69] — and more positive attitudes towards young people have been linked to more positive outcomes for young people on an area by area basis, including lower levels of violence and disorder, lower levels of teen pregnancy rates and improved health levels among young people.[70] This is probably explained by the fact that when adults care about young people in the local area, they are more likely to act to protect their wellbeing and support local parents in creating a safe environment. But British attitudes towards young people are characterised by fear and negativity, and adults in Britain are much less likely to say they would intervene if local young people were misbehaving than in countries such as Germany and Italy.[71] A further way in which

community level factors are likely to impact on children and young people's outcomes is in the provision of positive activities for them outside school: there is a good deal of research linking participation in out-of-school activities characterised by high-quality adult–child relationships with better outcomes.[72]

Peer group factors — The quality of a child's relationship with their peers grows more important as they become older. Peer norms are important in shaping children's attitudes towards learning: depending on peer cultures within and outside school, learning can become more or less 'cool',[73] and school cultures need to be sensitive to this. Analysis by the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning suggests that three-quarters of children belong to positive, supportive friendship groups but that one in four belong to friendship groups characterised more by victimisation and/ or bullying.[74] These young people suffered from lower levels of wellbeing and were characterised by lower self-esteem and a higher incidence of depression extending from early childhood through to primary school. This suggests that the relationship is cyclical, with a child's wellbeing impact- ing on their ability to form relationships with peers, and poor relationships with peers impacting on wellbeing. Bullying is particularly a problem among pre and early adolescents; surveys show that it is at its highest among those aged 10–13; four in ten of this age group said that they had experienced one or more forms of bullying in the past 12 months.[75] Increased access to interactive media such as mobile phones and the internet has also been associated with increased incidence of 'cyberbullying'.[76]

# 2 what works in tackling educational disengagement?

In the course of the scoping research of this project, we have reviewed evidence on a number of interventions aimed explicitly or implicitly at tackling educational disengagement among children and young people, and improving outcomes more broadly. We have highlighted some examples of these case studies here across a range of domains in the appendix—tackling lack of progress in the core set of academic skills, improving children and young people's emotional and behavioural competencies, and improving parental support and engagement in education. Here we focus on interventions that target school-aged children—although we recognise that interventions targeted at the pre-5 age group, particularly parenting interventions, are hugely significant given the evidence that the earlier the intervention, the better. Before we draw out some commonalities about interventions that work, there are some lessons worth drawing out with regard to where we should be focusing our efforts, and the evidence on what works.

### Fruitful areas for intervention

The work on early intervention by the Every Child a Chance Trust, in association with Graham Allen MP and Iain Duncan Smith MP, has highlighted three key protective factors that interventions to improve outcomes for children should focus on, reflecting the risk factors above:

- *The core academic skills: language, literacy and numeracy.* Research suggests that there is a need to focus on these core skills early on in a child's school life, once they have had a chance to develop these skills through whole-class teaching, but before falling behind in these skills leads to significant disengagement from their whole learning experience.[77] The costs to the public purse of children failing to master basic numeracy skills during primary school have been estimated to be up to £2.4 billion each year in England, and of literacy up to £2.5 billion each year.[78] Reading Recovery, an intensive 20-week one-to-one reading tuition programme for children age 6 who have made no progress

in reading and writing, brings 80 per cent of children who take part up to average levels for their age by the time they finish.[79] The Numbers Count Programme, a 12-week one-to-one numeracy tuition programme for children aged 7, brought 83 per cent of children back to average levels in the deprived areas of London in which it has been piloted.[80] With speech and communication skills, there needs to be a continual focus from the pre-school years with interventions designed to support parents and families in developing these skills in their children, but development can be supported when children start school through evidence-based initiatives to support language development such as Talking Partners and Primary Talk.[81]

- *Social and emotional competences.* Given the importance of social and emotional competences as a foundation for learning, it is crucial that evidence-based interventions to improve these core skills are rolled out. Because parenting and a child's home environment are so important in the development of these competences, particularly in the early years, parents need to be supported in developing these skills in children (see below). However, the evidence above suggests that a supportive school climate and culture is also important in fostering these competences, and can act as a protective factor against a chaotic and difficult home environment, so there is space for interventions that seek to improve these competences from within the school too.

- *Building aspirations.* High aspirations are a foundation for motivation to learn, and research has found that primary school and the first couple years of secondary school are a critical time for building aspirations.[82] Qualitative research with young people also suggests that diverse role models are important in making children and young people aware of their options, and broadening horizons and aspirations.[83]

- *Parenting support.* As outlined above, a child's home environment is key in developing both core academic skills and social and emotional competencies. There are a number of targeted, evidence-based parenting programmes that seek to improve parenting skills and children's behaviour, such as the Incredible Years and Triple P parenting programmes.[84] These need to be supplemented with more universal interventions that seek to build bridges between home and school and signpost parents and families to other interventions.

Because this research is about educational disengagement, there is also a fifth plank that needs adding into the above four, which deal with the 'risk' factors that might be associated with disengagement. But it is perfectly plausible that a child or young person might develop the core academic skills, social and emotional competences that they need to learn, and have a very positive and supportive home environment, yet still disengage from learning at school if they find it insufficiently challenging or exciting. We therefore also need to look not just at the *barriers* to engagement children and young people might face, but also at what is on offer to children and young people for them to engage *with*. Too often, discussions about bringing broader forms of learning into schools—such as more interactive, out-of-classroom and experiential learning experiences—are limited to discussions of 'work-based learning' for 14+ young people who have already disengaged from 'mainstream' or 'academic' education. But there is a good case for making broader experiences of learning available to all children and young people from a much younger age—and there are good examples of initiatives that seek to do this, for example our case studies of IntoUniversity and Open Futures (see appendix). Just as a secure emotional environment at school can be a protective factor against a chaotic home environment, although of course it can never entirely compensate for it, improving the quality of the educational offer for children and young people to engage with could help to build resilience in the face of some of the risk factors discussed above.

## Evaluation of what works

What quickly becomes apparent in reviewing the evidence on interventions is that we have much more rigorous, longitudinal evidence on the long-term impacts of some kinds of interventions than others. The kinds of intervention on which the strongest evidence exists tends to be targeted, one-to-one interventions—for example on programmes focused on one-to-one academic catch-up (such as Reading Recovery), on targeted therapeutic interventions designed to tackle serious behavioural problems (for example multi-systemic therapy), and on some parenting interventions targeted at families who are significantly at risk (for example, nurse–family partnerships, and the Incredible Years and the Triple P parenting programmes).

Much of this data comes from interventions developed and trialled over a number of years in other countries, particularly the US and Australia, where there is a stronger tradition of rigorous longitudinal evaluation of government-funded initiatives and pilots. It is also much easier to demonstrate the effectiveness of programmes that are closely structured and implemented on a prescriptive model than some other kinds of intervention — for example peer mentoring schemes and school–home support schemes — which tend to be more flexible and adapted to local school contexts. But self-evaluation evidence from charities running these more flexible kinds of support schemes suggest that when they are high-quality in terms of the training involved and the staff they use, they can be very effective (although the evidence is not as rigorous as that associated with the interventions above), and that they therefore have an important role to play in tackling disengagement and improving outcomes. Another point to note is that there is a limit to the number of children that targeted one-to-one interventions can reach (and, indeed, for whom they are appropriate) and so there has to be a role for a broader range of interventions.

Second, as Jean Gross, Director of the Every Child a Chance Trust, has highlighted several times in her work, not everything that is well intentioned works and giving local areas the flexibility to innovate and design programmes has not, in practice, always led to better outcomes for children and young people. There are several examples of central government funds set up to promote innovation in service delivery for children and young people in local areas — for example, the Children's Fund, the Excellence in Cities Fund and the On Track Programme, and evaluations of these show these programmes did not have unambiguously successful results. For example, On Track was a crime prevention programme initiative based on a successful US programme, Fast Track. A fund was established for 23 deprived areas from 1999 to 2006, and local authorities were given guidance on different interventions in the hope the money would be spent on evidence-based interventions. However, many of the services were locally designed and there was huge variation in what was on offer. The programme had no proven impact on hard outcomes such as anti-social behaviour, truancy, offending and attainment, unlike its more prescriptive and evidence-based US cousin.[85]

The last lesson to draw out regarding evaluation, evidence-based practice and national educational policy from the last decade is that some government-commissioned evaluations tend to be weak, meaning that expensive and valuable opportunities to learn can be lost. For example, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned a large-scale (and thus presumably expensive) evaluation of peer mentoring schemes in 2006. The aim of this evaluation was to evaluate the impact of peer mentoring schemes in 180 schools. The evaluation methodology was fairly weak. It assessed the impact of the scheme on children taking part first by a child questionnaire measuring attitudes towards school, peers, family and self, and second by asking the mentoring coordinator in the school what their impression had been of impact on hard outcomes like attainment, attendance and behaviour (improved, stayed the same, worsened) rather than looking at data on the hard outcomes themselves. The evaluation was thus able to point to little hard evidence about what the impact had been—there was a slight decrease in children's attitudes (to be expected as children grow older)—but there were no controls of children not participating in the scheme so it was not possible to say whether the scheme had an impact in lessening this decline.[86] The evaluation itself concluded that the 'evidence itself is still predominantly anecdotal. There is further guidance needed for impact to be assessed at school level.'

This is by no means the only example. Even the government-commissioned evaluation of the high-profile Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Programme in secondary schools was not particularly well designed in terms of measuring long-term impacts of the programme; although the evaluation found some positive impacts, the evaluation concluded that 'while many schools and LAs [local authorities] felt that the pilot had made a difference they also found it difficult to attribute any outcomes directly to the pilot itself'—partly because of a lack of controls in the evaluation. It should be noted, however, that the design of the SEAL programme itself is based on much more rigorous trials and evaluations.[87] Even if these evaluations contribute to a general sense of a programme working, they do not add to our knowledge in terms of the size of the impact they have, which can mean that the case for a successful programme is weakened in national and local policy debates. It should also be noted that central government has also been a culprit of announcing a scheme's national rollout before an evaluation has finally reported.

There are, however, indications that a stronger commitment to good evaluation may be starting to emerge. Randomised controlled trials are being used to test the Family-Nurse Partnership and Reading Recovery programmes, which will provide more information about the scale of the impact of these programmes.

## General lessons about what works

As stated above, there is very clear evidence about what works around a group of targeted interventions, and this evidence base is well versed, so we will not rehearse it here. However, there is less of an understanding of what makes high-quality and more flexible interventions designed to tackle the drivers of disengagement work, for example those run by charities in schools, which have positive evaluation results. We reviewed a number of case studies in the course of the research for this interim report and a number of commonalities that contribute to their success stand out:

- If charities are working directly with schools, tackling disengagement and improving outcomes needs to *fully engage the school*. The most successful school-based charities are those that work in fully engaging schools in the business of their work — for example, The Place2Be, School-Home Support and Beat Bullying. Several of these charities stressed the importance of getting schools to contribute financially to their services because of the sense of ownership it adds. For example, School-Home Support recruits workers jointly with schools. The Place2Be runs training on wellbeing for school staff in their schools and also run a support service for teachers in many areas.

- Also crucial is the importance of *engaging parents* given that the home environment may be the factor underpinning issues or difficulties for many children and young people. Many of the case study charities we spoke to said it was often difficult to engage some groups of parents, particularly those with negative experiences of education themselves, and that being able to do so was dependent on being able to build up trusting relationships over time — there was no short cut or silver bullet. However, they emphasised the importance of supporting parents and boosting their engagement in learning whenever possible. For example, The Place2Be runs a parenting support service in some of the schools in which it works. Every Child a

Chance Trust programmes (Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts) engage parents in observing their children's literacy and numeracy lessons and encourage them to use simple and accessible games and activities with their child in the home. School-Home Support's liaison workers often organise activities for parents within the school with the objective of engaging parents with negative experiences of education.

- Reflecting the evidence that suggests that it is a positive and trusted relationship between children and adults that are key to tackling educational disengagement,[88] *building positive relationships* between children and between children and adults is fundamental to the most successful initiatives. For example, the independent evaluation of Fairbridge's programme for young people found that a critical factor in promoting good outcomes for the young people who took part was the relationship they formed with the staff involved.[89]

- Returning to the discussion in the introduction, successful interventions engage children and young people by flexibly *using activities or examples they can relate to*. So for example, the charity Beatbullying uses activities that the at-risk children it works with can relate to, such as football, drama or music. Fairbridge in its programmes allows a young person a significant degree of autonomy in choosing activities in which they are interested. But importantly, these are *not activities for activities' sake* — the involve self-evaluation and self-reflection. Both Beatbullying and Fairbridge's programmes use these activities as carefully designed learning activities, in which the activities are used as a lever, for example (in Beatbullying's case) to discuss behaviours and feelings, and how to modify behaviour.

- Many of these initiatives combine *a universal approach with more targeted interventions for children and young people that need them*. For example, The Place2Be takes a whole-school approach to emotional wellbeing, providing training and a service for staff, and runs a self-referral service to which any child in the school can refer themselves. Alongside this, it runs a service to which children with higher levels of need are referred by school staff for ongoing, targeted therapeutic counselling. Beatbullying works intensively with young people at risk through its peer-support training programme, but supports the young people who have been through its programme

in changing school culture and behaviour more widely through peer support. Every Child a Chance Trust programmes are based on a three-wave model, which involves improving everyday classroom teaching, light-touch intervention for those with moderate needs, and one-to-one tuition for those with the greatest difficulties.

• Many of these interventions are *genuinely holistic, targeting support for children and young people across a range of risk factors*. For example, IntoUniversity supports children in their academic learning by providing off-site academic support — but its staff also provide pastoral support for the children and young people it works with.

• *Getting non-teachers — especially people from the local community — into schools* also seems to characterise some successful interventions. For example, Open Futures, a four-strand experiential learning programme for primary schools (see appendix), sends project officers from its partner organisations (the Royal Horticultural Society, the Focus on Food Campaign, SAPERE and filmmakers) into schools to work with children on the various learning strands. These individuals can bring an expertise and passion for an activity they do full-time into the school environment. Giving children and young people the opportunity to form positive relationships with adults other than their teachers and parents also seems to contribute to success. Adults will often bring higher aspirations for the children they work with to the relationship than children might have previously experienced from the adults in their lives. Schemes set up to bring local people from the community into schools (for example, in one Open Futures school, local chefs have cooked Indian food in the school with children, and children have visited local restaurants to see how professional kitchens work) help to legitimise the involvement of local non-parents with schools; these people may not have the time to be involved in more formal ways, for example through being a governor.

• Last, but certainly not least, there is an emphasis on using *trained and highly skilled practitioners* who can rely on systems of support in the most successful interventions. For example, The Place2Be uses trained counsellor clinicians as project managers in schools, and support is provided from volunteer counsellors who are training towards counselling qualifications and are on clinical placements. There is a carefully developed system of casework

supervision for counsellors. Casework supervision is also key to the School-Home Support model: its school–home support workers have regular casework supervision with a more experienced practitioner every two weeks. Often it is the high skills of the practitioners involved which allow them to work with schools in shaping an intervention designed to meet the specific needs of the school. For example, School-Home Support works with schools in setting up its service, tailoring it to one or more out of the six overall objectives of the scheme. By their very nature, these holistic programmes need to be more flexible than targeted one-to-one interventions that rely on rolling out a prescriptive programme — and it is the skills of the practitioners that allow this to happen. Many successful interventions involve charities running training themselves.

What the above illustrates is that there is a type of intervention that lies between government-funded local in-novation that is often not evidence-based or rigourous, and central funding of very evidence-based but prescriptive tar-geted interventions. Of course, there is a hugely important role for the latter type of intervention — and government funding of programmes such as Reading Recovery, Numbers Count, multi-systemic therapy and parenting programmes like the Nurse-Family Partnership is to be overwhelmingly welcomed. There is a long way to go in constructing an infrastructure to ensure that the children and young people who need access to these targeted interventions with a solid and proven track record do so in every school in every area. While rollout of many of these interventions is only in a pilot phase in this country, the amount being spent is a drop in the ocean compared with the overall education budget (£79 million in 2010–11 for Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts,[90] and £15 million for the Family-Nurse Part-nership91) and if the English pilots prove to be successful government should be prepared to scale up and invest in national infrastructure quickly.

But the kind of good, effective and more holistic and universal interventions of the sort outlined in the appendix also have a role to play. There remains much thinking to be done around what a sustainable model that gets these interventions out to children and young people looks like, and it is to this issue we now turn.

# 3 to what extent is what works happening?

In order to answer this, we need first to consider briefly the extent to which national educational policy is successful in tackling educational disengagement, before moving on to consider what happens in local contexts.

## Disengagement and the national educational policy context

It is the job of the national policy context to set an overall framework in which engaging teaching and learning can flourish and to support interventions that work. How is it doing on this count?

There are two kinds of national policy levers available to government in its mission to do this, and both have been well used in the last decade. First, there are those levers that often first come to mind with respect to education policy—such as curriculum, assessment and accountability, and teacher training. Second, there are national initiatives through which Government seeks to impact on teaching and learning in schools more directly. Although important, we discuss these issues only briefly here because of the extensive evidence, debate and discussion around them to date.

### Curriculum

The National Curriculum is an oft-used tool when a government decides it wants a change to teaching and learning in school. The Government has often been criticised for overloading the curriculum by tacking on 'extras' such as citizenship and personal finance education when it decides it wants schools to cover an issue. However, the curriculum is also an over-rated and fragile tool. It is true that the published National Curriculum sets the tone for learning up and down schools across the country, but it is not the case that tweaking the curriculum automatically leads to change. For example, when the Early Years Foundation Curriculum

was introduced to nursery and reception classes in schools, entitling children to a play-based curriculum, it had a limited impact on teaching and learning in these classrooms because it was not accompanied by a programme of training for teaching staff in how to teach through play.[92]

Recent developments in curriculum reform are overwhelmingly positive: both at the primary and Key Stage 3 level they have moved away from an overly prescriptive focus on content to a more flexible curriculum that also stresses the importance of the social and emotional foundational competencies that are so important in grounding learning. This should help schools and teachers in tailoring learning so that it is relevant to their pupils — so important in maintaining engagement. However, these reforms will need to be accompanied by reforms to teacher training to equip teachers with the curriculum design skills they need to make full use of the new flexibilities, and reforms to assessment and testing, as we discuss below.

The new curricula could also do with a more explicit entitlement to broader forms of learning, including out-of-classroom, experiential and interactive forms of learning, which evidence demonstrates is key to engaging children and young people and improving outcomes over a wide range of measures, not just educational attainment.[93] There is also very good evidence that children and young people need to feel a sense of autonomy and choice over their learning, and the curriculum needs to make space for this.

### The testing and accountability framework

There is a huge debate around testing and accountability, which we cannot do full justice to here.[94] Suffice to say that this is where the national framework is failing. Alongside their less high-profile Ofsted inspections, the way in which English schools are primarily held accountable is through a testing regime that measures a fairly narrow measure of academic progress, and a series of threshold and progress targets based on these tests and negotiated with local authorities that they must meet each year. Following the announcement last year that key stage 3 tests were being scrapped due to the logistical issues around testing that year, this is now primarily of concern to primary schools, although secondary schools are still held accountable for attainment at Key Stage 4 through GCSE qualifications and equivalent. We consider local authority targets later in this paper.

There are a number of issues with this system. First, there are doubts about how accurate a picture it gives of school performance anyway. These tests are often privileged over other forms of accountability (such as Ofsted inspections, which are in theory at least more holistic) yet they do not measure performance on a wider range of skills the new curricula are now explicit about encouraging in young people — including creativity, communication skills and team-working, not to mention the broader range of social and emotional competences. Not only that, but it has been shown that the tests give an inaccurate picture of pupil progress, and probably of school performance too: experts have estimated that at least 32 per cent of Key Stage 2 and 42 per cent of the old Key Stage 3 tests are misclassified by at least one level, and that the only way to make the tests statistically accurate would be to make them over 30 hours long in each subject![95]

Second, there is convincing evidence that testing has had a significant impact on teaching and learning, shifting the focus of schools to that which is measured and away from broader forms of learning, and that it has had a negative impact on children and young people's self-concept as a learner and their attitudes towards learning.[96]

Last, there are concerns that targets, particularly threshold targets, encourage schools to focus on children who are most easily helped over the threshold. The department has argued that the adoption of progress targets alongside threshold targets should alleviate this — although this is partly undermined by the evidence showing that it is children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are least likely to progress, so it may remain easier for schools to target easier-to-reach groups who are not progressing (although this remains to be seen).

The government's announcement that they will be introducing broader measures of school performance — the school report card — may go some way to addressing these concerns. However, there is no information as yet whether a school report card measure might replace Key Stage 2 testing or whether it will be another bolt-on to the system alongside tests and Ofsted inspection — in which case it is by no means certain that it would.

### Teacher training and continuing professional development

Again, there is an extended debate about teacher training that we cannot address here. But if schools are to be properly supported in tackling disengagement there is a good argument that teacher training and continuing professional development—and the training of other school staff—needs to more effectively cover the following:

- Pupil behaviour—and strategies for improving it.

- Special educational needs—nearly half of newly qualified teachers say they do not feel confident in teaching children with SEN and training is often purely theoretical and minimal on some teacher training courses[97].

- Teaching children from different socio-economic, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

- Emotional literacy training on how to create the kinds of emotionally literate classroom and whole-school cultures that the evidence shows is most conducive to learning and the development of social and emotional competences.

- Age-appropriate pedagogies—for example, teaching cognitive and behavioural skills through play to very young children, and teaching early adolescents for Key Stage 3 teachers.

### National initiatives

Aside from the above levers, the government over the last decade has made extensive use of national policy initiatives, many of which have been focused specifically on underperforming groups and areas, particularly in disadvantaged and deprived backgrounds. Examples include the Primary and Secondary National Strategies, aimed at improving the quality of teaching and learning; Excellence in Cities, a programme to improve outcomes in underperforming city areas; the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning programme for primary and secondary schools; and a national rollout of parent support advisers, to name but a few.

Many of these programmes have, on an individual assessment, been very successful. However, there are some points worth highlighting:

- National initiatives are not always evidence based. For example, the government has recently announced that it will be funding an expensive programme of one-to-one academic catch-up tuition at Key Stages 2 and 3, initially focused on pupils aged 9–11 in years 5 and 6.[98] But other than as a transitional initiative designed to reach those who have missed the opportunity for earlier support, it would probably do much better to invest this money in earlier, more rigorously evidence-based catch up support, such as the Reading Recovery and Numbers Count programmes it is already investing in but which there is scope to expand much further. When the evidence about the effectiveness (in terms of cost and outcome) of intervening early is so strong,[99] the current approach seems like a missed opportunity.

- Some kinds of initiative lend themselves to scaling up better than others. So for example, Reading Recovery and Numbers Count are examples of programmes that require central investment to ensure that the infrastructure to deliver them in schools exists. However, in scaling up the model of home–school support designed by the charity School-Home Support (see box 2) in the national rollout of parent support advisers, it seems that in some areas the aspects of the model that contribute to its success — high-quality training and ongoing management and supervision — might have been lost, although the final verdict remains to be seen as the final evaluation is yet to report. This example suggests that charities using evidence-based approaches honed over time and using highly skilled staff may be more effective at delivering more flexible interventions in schools than government initiatives.

- The funding associated with targeted initiatives is often short- rather than long-term, meaning that effective interventions are not sustainable in schools as they can be reluctant to pick up the costs of interventions previously paid for through ring-fenced funding from their own budgets. For example, the Excellence in Cities programme provided ring-fenced funding to schools for learning support units and learning mentors between 1999 and 2006 — both widely acknowledged to have been successful interventions. But concerns have been expressed that

when schools are expected to fund them from their own budgets the money might not be there.[100] There have been other examples of this, for example Reading Recovery was funded in the mid-1990s in some schools for three years, but once ring-fenced funding ceased the programme died out.[101] The evaluators of the Parent Support Adviser pilots also highlighted a concern about the sustainability of the initiative when ring-fenced funding ceases — in the national roll-out, funding is not ring-fenced.

Box 2        **The national rollout of the parent support adviser scheme**

School-Home Support is a charity that works with schools to provide school–home support services within schools. It provides practitioners to work in schools whose role is to support parents in engaging with their child's learning. It may work on a number of issues, including attendance and punctuality and managing transitions. The service is designed in conjunction with the schools in which it works. There are some key features of the scheme, which the charity believes help it to maintain quality:

- An audit of school needs is run in conjunction with each school at the start. Staff are recruited jointly with the school to align practioners' skills with the school's needs.

- There is a multi-layered management system for each practitioner. Each practitioner has:

    — A line manager responsible for personal development and targets

    — Casework supervision with an experienced practitioner; they meet approximately every two weeks for advice with particular cases and emotional support

    — Ongoing practical support from a team leader, who will also be an experienced practitioner.

Based on this scheme, the Government decided to pilot a parent support adviser scheme between August 2006 and September 2008. The final evaluation is yet to report — but there have been two interim reports published in 2007 and 2008.[102] A budget of £40 million was allocated to employ parent support advisers in schools in 20 local authorities, chosen primarily on the basis of deprivation. The only third-sector organisation chosen to deliver the pilot was School-Home Support (in Barking and Dagenham).

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The national pilot differs from the model delivered by School-Home Support in some important ways:

- Parent support advisers were only given seven days of training before being expected to start in their roles.

- Line management is performed by head teacher. The evaluation was concerned about lack of supervision by other welfare professionals and lack of formalised line management structures. Many parent support advisers in the national pilot and scheme do not have the casework supervision involved in the School-Home Support model.

- There are also issues about resourcing in local areas: the evaluation was concerned that parent support advisers might be used to 'hold' parents with problems where services they need are unavailable, and that there is not enough parent support adviser time for the families who could most benefit from their services.

The final evaluation is yet to report but the interim evaluations report that there is positive feedback from parents, parent support advisers and teachers. The pilot is now being rolled out nationally.

In the context of concerns about the sheer number of initiatives that have been developed over the last decade, we suggest that national initiatives need to be made more effective by making them more strategic and targeted. They should focus on programmes for which there is a clear and unambiguous evidence base for rolling out a national programme — for example Reading Recovery and SEAL. Otherwise there is the danger of initiative-itis and unsustain-ability even for successful and evidence-based national initiatives.

National policy also has a key role to play in facilitat-ing the sharing of best practice. For example, one area in which there has been considerable innovation at the school level is in structuring secondary schooling differently from the traditional model — for example, by the use of vertical mixed-age tutor groups, and establishing smaller learn-ing communities within larger schools taught by a smaller number of teachers.

Aside from this, national policy needs to be much more clearly focused on supporting local government, schools and communities in tackling disengagement among children and young people. These issues have not been as high profile as some of those outlined above — and yet getting this right could have a significant impact on outcomes.

## Disengagement and the local policy context: towards a more intelligent localism

The amount of freedom that local authorities, local partnerships and schools (and partnerships of schools) have within the national policy context is often underestimated. The result has been that the way things work locally has too often been a missing element from debates about how to improve outcomes for children and young people. For example the Children's Plan had little to say about children's trusts, despite the emerging evidence that these local governance reforms have not had the intended effect (see below).

This is a big mistake. To see why, we need only to look at the debate about the importance of early intervention and prevention in securing better outcomes for children and young people and a more cost-effective approach. There has long been a commitment to more preventative policies, dating back to at least 2000.[103] Early prevention is one of the five key principles underpinning the Children's Plan, but there is strong evidence that this backing in central government policy has yet to filter through to the ground. Several charities that we spoke to in the course of this research felt that there was something being 'lost in translation' in the move from central to local policy. The Audit Commission evaluation of children's trusts revealed that only half of local authority directors of children's services say they are working with children's trust boards to shift resources to early prevention and intervention.[104] Well-respected and high-profile practitioners such as Sir Alan Steer have pointed to the lack of early prevention work going on in schools.[105]

To understand this, we really need to look to what is going on at the local level. Jean Gross has outlined five key barriers that exist to early prevention and intervention approaches becoming more widespread:

- There is a tendency to prioritise fire fighting, not early prevention work, with respect to resources. Resources are therefore channelled towards children with the highest levels of need at the expense of children with lower levels of needs (whose needs might as a result escalate). Of course this is important — but one should not be at the expense of the other as effectively allocating resources to earlier prevention will reduce the resources required for fire fighting work.

- The short-term political pressures including at the local level do not fit the long-term horizons needed to reap success from a preventative approach.

- There are unclear lines of responsibility for many of the outcomes we care about — with multiple agencies (for example, PCTs, local authorities and the police) responsible for achieving outcomes.

- The financial benefits of intervening early are often realised later down the line — meaning that benefits accrue to agencies other than those doing the spending. The classic example is of primary schools investing in initiatives whose benefits are primarily felt later down the line by secondary schools.

- There is tension between the desire to roll out strongly evidence-based initiatives and the need to foster local ownership and innovation, which can lead to the widespread use of well-intentioned but low-impact initiatives — the 'letting a thousand flowers bloom' approach.

Most of these barriers operate predominantly at the local level. It is local authorities, PCTs and schools — not central government — that primarily make decisions about what services children and young people in the local area are able to access through the process of commissioning and providing services. This reflects trends in the last decade or so, in which local authorities and schools have increasingly become commissioners of as well as providers of services. The reality now is that at the local level, services are being provided by a wider range of providers than ever, including the voluntary and community sector and the private sector. Many of the successful interventions described in the appendix are delivered by charities or other organisations working in conjunction with schools.

These developments have been accompanied by an expectation from the government that the voluntary and community sector will increasingly act as a deliverer of public services, citing the advantages that it believes it can bring: 'a strong focus on needs of service users, knowledge and expertise to meet complex personal needs and tackle difficult social issues, an ability to be flexible and offer joined-up service delivery, the capacity to build users' trust and the experience and independence to innovate'.[106] According to a recent Treasury analysis, the voluntary and community sector make up 8 per cent of the paid education workforce and 51 per cent of the paid social work and social care workforce.[107]

However, there are some important blockages in the system:

- There is not enough easily accessible and high-quality information about what works, which is getting in the way of effective outcomes-based commissioning by local authorities and schools.

- There are some broader issues in the commissioning process, which changes to local governance in the delivery of children and young people's services have not fixed.

- There is some evidence that the national accountability framework for local authorities and schools is impacting on the commissioning process.

- There are supply-side issues in services, with significant gaps in provision for certain groups and certain areas.

We consider these below.

### Not enough easily accessible and high-quality information about what works

If the intended shift towards evidence-based policy making at the national level has not always been successful, there is evidence that the situation is worse at the local level. In recent years, there has been an explicit move away from commissioning services based on output or need, to outcomes-based commissioning, which is supposed to be more evidence-based. But a lack of decent evidence at the local level suggests that outcomes-based commissioning is not always the reality.

This is because there the onus is on service providers, such as charities and the private sector, to self-evaluate their services and make this information available to local authority and school commissioners. Commissioners are then supposed to make decisions on the basis of this information that is made available.

There are some very good examples of self-initiated evaluation taking place across the charitable sector, including in some of the case studies we have examined (unsurprisingly, since most of them are funded by charitable trusts and foundations who use rigorous evaluation and success as their key criteria for selection, see box 3).

Box 3    **Evaluation by The Place2Be**

The Place2Be is a charity that, in conjunction with schools, runs a holistic programme of counselling services within schools to improve the emotional wellbeing of children, families and the entire school community.

The charity has a strong approach to monitoring and self-evaluation, with a dedicated research and evaluations team. They use wherever possible externally validated evaluation models to assure reliability and accountability. For example, they use the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire before and after interventions with children to assess the impact of their therapeutic work with children, and the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) before and after interventions to assess the impact of their work with adults. This is supplemented by a range of qualitative data gathered from the schools in which it works.

However, these examples are the exception rather than the norm. Broader mapping studies of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector show that few organisations in this sector have given adequate thought as to how to measure the long-term impact of their work—with methodology often being poorly developed or resourced.[108] There is a good deal of reinventing the wheel going on—with charities replicating efforts both in terms of developing their own evaluation systems and collecting data on the same outcomes in the same locality. However, there is little incentive in the current system for charities to share best practice with each other.

Typically, charities do not shy away from the idea of evaluation. Charities in the mapping study above were themselves concerned by the lack of a standardised quality assurance approach in children and young people's services. Some said they would welcome stronger and more rigorous longitudinal evaluation, but that smaller organisations in particular did not have the resources to carry it out themselves. Some charities we spoke to said they would welcome the chance for evaluation by an external evaluation agency, in the same way that Ofsted evaluates schools.

There is further research that needs to be carried out on how commissioners in local authorities and schools make commissioning decisions and weigh up the evidence. But the evidence above indicates that there is an urgent need to improve the system. We therefore suggest that there needs to be a new approach to evaluation and monitoring at the local level. There is an urgent need for the following functions to be fulfilled:

- Responsibility for building up a national evidence base about what works in improving children and young people's outcomes — not just targeted and one-to-one interventions, but a full range of interventions; this would address some of the issues discussed in the section above on evidence-based policy making at the national level.

- Responsibility for providing support to charities on how to self-evaluate, using established measures of outcomes such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire;[109] there also needs to be greater clarity about the scope of charity self-evaluation and how it fits with a national evidence base about what works: charities are never going to have the resources to carry out extensive randomised control trials themselves on their own work, and to do so would involve a great deal of duplication of learning, but they should be tracking the impact of their interventions on young people using established outcome measures.

- An Ofsted-style function of inspecting and monitoring voluntary and community and private sector organisations and awarding them a single quality kitemark; this kitemark scheme could build on the experiences of the new Learning Outside the Classroom 'Quality Badge' scheme.[110]

- Responsibility for making the evidence available to schools and local authorities in an easily accessible format;

consultation would be needed to determine what would be most helpful, but one possibility would be a 'what works' tool that grades interventions on the strength of the evidence to make it easier for schools and commissioners to decide between them.

Some (but not all) of the above functions overlap with the newly established Centre for Excellence in Children and Young People's Outcomes (C4EO), the Dartington Social Research Unit, Ofsted, the work of New Philanthropy Capital and the Charity Evaluation Service, and it might be that their remits could be expanded. Careful thought needs to be given to how the above functions should be distributed and who is best placed to fulfil them. For example, it might that Ofsted in its contact with schools could play a stronger role in conjunction with School Improvement Partners in spreading best practice.

Another issue is that outcomes-based commissioning has not been universally welcomed by proponents of the sector.[111] Concerns have been raised that commissioning is stifling innovation in the voluntary and community sector.

While there is some evidence that commissioning in some areas has led to contracts that are too prescriptive in their nature,[112] this is not outcomes-based commissioning as it should be working. In fact, these arguments set up an unnecessarily false distinction between commissioning and innovation. Although we do not have a national picture of how much innovation is occurring, it is not the case that the sector unanimously agrees with the above viewpoint. One of the charities we spoke to felt that sometimes innovation is being privileged too much by funders across a range of sectors (local government, central government and charitable trusts and foundations) to the extent that it was getting in the way of evidence-based interventions.

However, we recognise that another purpose of commissioning may be in discovering what works through innovation. One suggestion therefore would be that local authorities and schools should be explicit about the purposes of their commissioning — whether it is primarily evidence- or innovation-based. In particular, local authorities should strategically plan and make clear what proportion of their services they aim to deliver through evidence-based and innovation-based commissioning. One way of doing that might be to have different kinds of commissioning contracts.

## Wider issues in the commissioning process

The problems in the current commissioning system go beyond the lack of easily accessible information, however.

First, commissioning is a highly skilled job, spanning a wide range of diverse skillsets, including needs analysis, strategy design, partnership, procurement, monitoring, and evaluation and project management.[113] Further research needs to be done to investigate the extent to which local authority and school commissioners (who are usually heads, deputies or school business managers) feel equipped to do the job well. There is particularly little research that we have come across about the commissioning function of schools. However, some of the charities we spoke to who work in schools said they found it more effective to sell their services directly to schools rather than local authorities, and that schools have the potential to be more effective com-missioners of services because they are felt to have a better understanding of the community's needs than local authority commissioners, who are seen as too far removed. There is also further research to be done in mapping out *who* is doing the commissioning across different areas. Local au-thorities can delegate budgets down to schools — but this is happening to different extents in different areas, making it more difficult for charities to navigate the system. We need a better understanding of how and why these strategic decisions are taking place — and indeed, whether schools and local authorities have sufficient resources to commission.

Another issue is that the changes to local governance that were intended to improve the way in which children's services work do not seem to have had the intended effect. The government established children's trusts in 2004 by establishing a legal duty for all children and young people's services[114] to cooperate in partnership (without stipulating what that partnership would look like). Children's trusts were supposed to solve some of the issues experienced in commissioning and encourage more joint (cross-agency) and lead to:

- A child-centred, outcome-led vision

- Integrated frontline delivery

- Integrated processes

- An integrated strategy (joint planning and commissioning)

- Inter-agency governance.

This was an ambitious vision. Unfortunately, an Audit Commission evaluation of children's trusts four years after the original legislation suggests they have not worked in achieving it.[115] It found considerable confusion across different agencies and sectors about the status of children's trusts. Although most areas had a joint commissioning strategy by 2008, these were not having an impact because of the lack of experience or knowledge around joint commissioning. There was little experience or evaluation of effective joint commissioning, and the evaluation concluded that the establishment of children's trusts had not acted to encourage any more joint commissioning than was already going on in the first place.

Part of the problem has been how the budgets work. Trusts have two options open to them—they can formally pool budgets across different agencies and com-mission using the single pooled budgets, or they can 'align' budgets and commission from individual budgets towards the same services. There has been widespread reluctance to pool budgets because of the administrative difficulties involved—but aligned budgets do not seem to be working to support joint commissioning either.

Third, there are more general problems around commissioning. Several charities that we spoke to mentioned problems in the process that have long been a feature of these debates—interestingly, the problems highlighted were with local authorities rather than schools. For example, there were experiences of expectations about monitoring and evaluation changing through the process; many charities still had experiences of projects being funded yearly despite an emphasis in national policy on more sustainable forms of three- to five-year commissioning, and the general feeling was that there is a huge variance in the quality of commissioning across different areas. Different local authorities have different ways of commissioning and tendering is a time-consuming process, which can make it hard for successful charities to scale up, and advantage larger charities over medium- and small-sized ones. A common argument is that decentralised funding is making it more expensive and bureaucratic for third sector organisations to get involved with delivering

services. The kitemarking system proposed above could help in tackling this — if charities are able to apply for and maintain a kitemark quality guarantee with one national organisation this could cut out some of the bureaucracy. Moving towards the use of more standardised contracts across the public sector could also be helpful.

Granted, these wider commissioning issues have been an issue of concern for government. However, they have not been the focus of particularly innovative or effective policy making. A good case study here is that of alternative provision. This has been a high profile area in the last year or so, with the government launching a white paper in May 2008.[116] Voluntary and community sector and private sector provision is significant. The government acknowledged in the white paper that there were issues around the commissioning process that needed to be improved and announced the launch of an alternative provision commissioning toolkit for schools and a national database of providers. However, the toolkit barely goes beyond standard commissioning guidance, and the national database comes with no information about evaluation and quality and the disclaimer:

*Providers should note that inclusion on the register does not constitute a mark of quality assurance or endorsement by DCSF. We do not inspect, audit or appraise the providers who complete the form and appear on the register. Inclusion on the register is not, therefore, an indication that DCSF has 'approved' a provider or the provision it offers.*[117]

### The national accountability framework

There is some evidence that the national accountability framework for local authorities and schools may be impacting on the outcomes used in outcomes-based commissioning, which may not always be in the best interests of children and young people. Local authorities have the same kind of statutory targets as schools, although they also have additional targets around narrowing the gap in educational attainment for certain groups, including underperforming minority ethnic groups, and children eligible for free school meals. They are also able to agree with national government on 35 indicators selected from a list of 198 'national indicators' as part of local area agreements. Some of these relate to broader measures of children's wellbeing, although some of the measures are of

questionable quality (for example, children's substance abuse is to be measured through notoriously unreliable self-report data).

The evidence on the impacts of the accountability regime at the local authority level is quite limited. The mapping study of the children and young people's voluntary and community sector mentioned above highlights that charities in Bristol reported that a move into special measures had increased the local authority's focus on the percentage of young people getting five A*–C grades at the expense of a focus on a broader set out of outcomes. This is an area that needs further investigation.

There are good reasons, however, to think that if children's *educational* attainment is a statutory indicator on which local authorities are measured, there is no reason why this outcome should be privileged over children and young people's emotional wellbeing (one of the voluntary national indicators) if a solid way of measuring this in a local area can be devised — for example, by using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire on a sample of children and young people in the local area.

More thought also needs to be given about how the wider accountability framework –including Ofsted inspections of schools and local children's services — works in holding schools and local authorities for a broader range of children and young people's outcomes. A revised Ofsted framework that would include measures of pupil wellbeing is currently the subject of consultation.

## Supply-side issues

There has not been enough thought given to what the supply side of the commissioning system looks like. Indeed, there has been no comprehensive mapping of what the children and young people's voluntary and community sector looks like. Probably the best mapping exercise there is undertook a detailed mapping of the voluntary and community sector in four areas, and scaled up findings118 — a problematic approach in a sector where there is great amount of variation. However, this mapping revealed a number of gaps:

- Provision for some age groups was much better than in others in the areas in consideration. The strong focus on early years and youth policy in national policy means that — despite the existence of the Children's Fund (which has now ended) — services for 7–13-year-olds remain underdeveloped. This has been supported by other studies.[119]

- The level of provision differs across different areas. For example, the total voluntary and community sector income in the West Midlands was the same as the South West — despite having 23 per cent more children. Charities that we spoke to highlighted that some areas — particularly large, inner city areas such as those in London, Manchester and Birmingham — tend to have a much more active voluntary and community sector than even some other cities, but particularly rural areas, where local authorities and schools may have a very limited — or even no — choice about services.

- Provision for some Black and minority ethnic communities was lacking.

    One way of tackling this issue would be for the government to undertake a regular mapping exercise of the sector and to be much more strategic in channelling funds towards organisations undertaking evidence-based work in areas in which there are gaps.

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# conclusion

As the statistics outlined in this paper show, there is clearly an issue with educational disengagement in England today. Tackling disengagement has to be about a two-pronged approach — both tackling the risks that might lead children and young people to become disengaged with their education, such poor core academic skills, low levels of emotional and behavioural competence and poor parenting, and in giving children and young people access to learning that they find exciting and challenging. In this interim report, we have focused more on the former, although there are very good examples of initiatives such as Open Futures and IntoUniversity in the appendix, which seek to expose children to a broader range of learning in school.

If we are to tackle disengagement successfully, children's services have to be more holistic and geared up around the principles of early intervention and prevention. However, the approach cannot simply be the standard policy approach of tugging on central policy levers. In today's world, this simply will not be effective. Central government needs to focus on doing two things:

- Create the national education policy framework — particularly with respect to an accountability system that captures a richer idea of success in education — that allows schools, and children and young people's services to flourish.

- Focus national initiatives more strategically on evidence-based interventions that lend themselves to scaling up.

Beyond this, there is a major role for central government to play in improving how things work at the local level. The emphasis needs to be on making quality control and evaluation quicker, easier and more consistent, for example through a national kitemarking system; on more effectively spreading best practice and knowledge of what works; on skilling up commissioners in schools and local authorities; and on mapping what is on offer with respect to the supply

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side of children and young people's services across the range of private, voluntary and public sectors. These issues have not been as high profile as others in debates about tackling disengagement and improving outcomes for children and young people. But if we can get them right, the impact could be very significant indeed.

# appendix: case studies

As part of the scoping research for this project, we spoke to a number of charities that run interventions for children and young people both within and outside schools with the aim of improving outcomes for the groups they work with. We identified most of the charities through their links with the Private Equity Foundation — this was a very good way of identifying and investigating good practice because of the quality and evaluation assessment it undertakes before providing funding.

## The Place2Be: Improving emotional wellbeing in schools

The Place2Be is a charity that, in conjunction with schools, runs a holistic programme of counselling services within schools to improve the emotional wellbeing of children, families and the entire school community. It works in 146 schools across the UK, reaching around 46,000 children in those schools. They are mostly based in primary schools, although the charity is starting to pilot the approach in a few secondaries.

The approach is a universal one, with more targeted support available for children with the most serious difficulties:

- The Place2Talk is a self-referral drop in service available at lunchtimes in Place2Be schools. Children self-refer to a counsellor for a 10–15 minute time slot.

- There is a more targeted service for children, which children are referred to by their teachers. This might take the form of individual counselling or group work.

- There are sessions for teachers (The Place2Think) to give them the opportunity to reflect on practice. They run training for school staff on emotional wellbeing.

- In some areas, there is a counselling service for parents, the Place for Parents, with a dedicated parent support worker.

  Staff are highly trained. In each school where the service is offered, there is a project manager who is a qualified counsellor. Additional services will be provided by volunteer counsellors under the supervision of the project manager.

### Evaluation

The charity has a strong approach to monitoring and evaluation, with a dedicated research and evaluations team. It uses a range of qualitative data to measure the impact of their activities, and when possible, externally validated evaluation models in order to assure reliability and accountability, for example, the Goodman Strengths and Difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) for therapeutic work with children, and the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation Outcome Measure (CORE-OM) for therapeutic work with parents.

  The 2006–07 evaluations found:

- 62 per cent of children had improved outcomes on a teacher-rated SDQ following a Place2Be intervention; 68 per cent on parent-rated SDQ scores and 65 per cent on child-rated SDQ scores (there were a different number of children with pre- and post-data available for these three groups).

- There was a significant reduction in children classified as 'abnormal' — from 50 per cent pre-intervention to 34 per cent post-intervention.

- The evaluation of The Place2Talk services showed:

  — Out of children accessing The Place2Talk, 68 per cent found the advice 'very helpful' and 22 per cent found it 'a bit helpful'.

  — 67 per cent of parents said that they were aware of noticeable benefits within individual children and/or their whole class.

  — 75 per cent of school staff said that they were aware of noticeable benefits of The Place2Talk on the whole-school environment.

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- The evaluation of The Place for Parents in 2006–07 showed:

  — 71 per cent of the 180 parents (many of them 'hard-to-reach') who were referred took up an offer of intervention.

  — 89 per cent of parents for whom pre- and post-intervention data was available improved in 'global distress' scores on the CORE-OM scale.

## School-Home Support: improving school–home links and boosting parental engagement

The charity School-Home Support places school–home support workers and learning mentors into schools to build bridges between the school and home for disaffected pupils and families, with the aim of supporting learning in schools.

It set up the service in conjunction with schools. Before the service is set up, staff run an audit of school needs. The service has six key objectives, and schools select which ones they want to focus on:

- Developing parental participation in the school and community

- Providing emotional and practical support for vulnerable families

- Providing emotional and practical support for vulnerable children and young people

- Pupporting children, young people and families through transition

- Supporting families to improve attendance and punctuality

- Providing curriculum support to children and young people.

The school–home support workers provide a combination of one-to-one casework and universal access work, which consists of informal drop-ins for parents. Their role is to identify difficulties before they reach crisis point, support struggling pupils, and help families in trouble to access the services they need through signposting.

Staff are recruited jointly with the school to ensure there is a match between the needs of the school and staff skills. There is a carefully designed system of management and support for staff:

- Each practitioner has a line manager responsible for personal development.

- Each practitioner has casework supervision with an experienced practitioner on average every two weeks to provide emotional support and advice with particular cases.

- There is practical support from a coordinator, who will also be a more experienced practitioner.

### Evaluation
An evaluation by the the National Children's Bureau of a School-Home Support project in the Isle of Dogs, Tower Hamlets, in 2005 found:[120]

- Attendance increased in all but one of the project schools in the Isle of Dogs, and four out of five of the increases were above average for Tower Hamlets schools. The evaluation concluded school–home support workers were likely to have contributed to these improvements.

- Interviews with heads, school–home support workers and parents suggested that school–home support workers had widened parents' access to schools, and increased parental attendance and involvement in school-based activities.

- The evaluation found school–home support workers improved the coherence of support services to families and children during the primary to secondary school transition.

- Qualitative interviews with children who used the service suggested they felt that the work they had done with the school–home support worker had benefited them.

A research study by the research consultancy Matrix suggests (based on evaluation evidence from similar schemes) that every pound spent on school–home support saves the Treasury £3.35, and wider society £17.79, in the long term.[121]

## IntoUniversity: Raising young people's aspirations

The charity IntoUniversity sets up local learning centres in and around London with the aim of increasing young people's aspirations and creating a culture of aspiration for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programme is aimed at those most at risk of not going to university due to economic, social, cultural or linguistic disadvantage. The programme consists of three strands:

- *Academic support.* This is an academic support session run after school in each of the centres. There are classroom-style sessions for primary- and secondary-aged pupils. There is a strong emphasis on pastoral care, with staff ratios of 1:8 to 1:10. The charity works closely with local schools. There is an emphasis on positive behaviour management and the development of social and behavioural competencies, with each session running as a 'put down free' zone. These sessions are advertised in schools, but some children and young people are referred from other services. Children are encouraged to attend for one or two sessions a week.

- *The Focus Programme.* This is run for primary (years 5 and 6) and secondary aged children and young people. The structure for the primary programme is a workshop in year 5 on university; a focus day in year 5 planned in conjunction with the school, consisting of experiential and hands-on learning at the centre with high staff to child ratios (1:5 to 1:8); a focus week in year 6 again planned in conjunction with the school and based on experiential learning and culminating in a 'graduation' ceremony at a London university; and a secondary transition workshop at school in the summer term of year 6. The centres also run Focus weekends for year 6 pupils.

- *Mentoring.* The centres run a mentoring scheme with trained university students — this is used as a reward, for example for attendance.

The core idea is to encourage young people to aspire and progress to university by implicitly and explicitly introducing the idea of university through the three different strands. In conjunction with this it aims to foster self-belief and a 'can do' mentality. It specifically aims to address certain issues: the fact that there may not be a supportive learning environment at home for some children and young people, and that parental aspirations for some may be low.

The academic support programmes are provided free at the point of delivery; schools are asked to make a contribution towards the Focus programmes.

### Evaluation

A qualitative evaluation commissioned by the Sutton Trust of the programme was carried out by the National Foundation for Education Research in 2007. The evaluation consisted of eight case studies, observation of five elements of the programme and analysis of 278 evaluation forms. The evaluation found that the programme had a positive impact on the young people who took part. This positive impact took three main forms: it provided academic support, developed positive attitudes to learning, and developed young people's social competence in a variety of social contexts.

## Beatbullying

Beatbullying runs peer support programmes in schools designed to reduce bullying, and improve school culture, relationships and emotional wellbeing in schools. It works mainly in secondary schools (for ages 11–16), but also in some primary schools. The programme contains the following elements:

- Creation of partnerships across the community of different agencies working with young people, including schools, community groups, local businesses and other children's services.

- Working closely in partnership with schools to assess their needs.

- A peer support programme for at-risk young people — for example, those at risk of offending, exclusion, going on to become NEET or being bullies; this programme runs for six to nine months, and trains young people in peer support and peer mentoring; it is delivered by trained development officers, who use a variety of activities that young people can relate to (for example, football, music and drama) as levers to discuss feelings and ways to modify behaviour

- After their training programme, the peer 'ambassadors' are supported in supporting other young people in their school, working with groups of up to 25 young people.

### Evaluation

Beatbullying's own evaluations suggest that Beatbullying's programmes:[122]

- Reduce incidents of bullying by an average 39 per cent in schools; in some instances, bullying was reduced by up to 80 per cent.

- Encourage the reporting of bullying incidents to increase, by up to 60 per cent in some schools.

## Open Futures

Open Futures is a skills and enquiry curriculum-based education initiative for primary schools funded and directed by the Helen Hamlyn Trust. It aims to help improve children's engagement in their learning by helping them discover and develop practical skills, personal interests and values that contribute to their education and enhance their adult lives.

The aims are as follows:[123]

- To broaden children's interests and experience of the world around them through practical experiences

- To explore culture in its broadest sense

- To develop children's practical life skills, and through this help to develop their self-esteem and confidence

- To develop children's ability to care and show concern

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- To help children to become informed proactive citizens as they develop, contributing to the community and showing respect for themselves, others, other cultures and the environment

- To help schools to develop strong links with the community and with each other.

    It seeks to develop:[124]

- Practical, creative, life-enhancing, healthy skills useful to children immediately and later in their adult lives.

- Thinking, enquiry and communication skills, which help pupils to be more in charge of their own learning and aim to increase their interest, confidence and motivation.

- Increased community involvement in school activities, particularly to encourage adults other than teachers to work alongside teachers providing and delivering the curriculum.

    The programme consists of four strands:

- Growit: delivered in schools in conjunction with the Royal Horticultural Society.

- Cookit: together with growit, this is designed to give children the skills they need to establish a productive kitchen garden and to prepare and cook the produce they have grown; cookit is delivered in conjunction with the RSA-founded Focus on Food Campaign.

- Filmit: develops learning opportunities through children making their own films documenting and sharing what they are learning with other schools through an internet video system.

- Askit: an enquiry-based pedagogy that is introduced to teachers and children, based on the 'Philosophy 4 Children' course developed by SAPERE and designed to develop creative, caring, critical and collaborative skills.

Open Futures coordinators and development teams have been established in each of the pilot schools taking part to assist the head and other teachers with development of the Open Futures curriculum strands and coordinating them into a coherent learning programme. Development teams include parents and members of the local community as well as the head, teachers and teaching assistants.

### Evaluation

The programme is currently being evaluated by Dr David Leat, Head of Learning at the University of Newcastle. The evaluation will compare improvements in academic performance in Open Futures and non Open Futures schools, but it is too early to draw conclusions from this yet. However, qualitative evidence from the evaluation so far is very positive. All adults involved (headteachers, teachers, teaching assistants and governors) have been positive in their evaluation, reporting improvements in pupils' confidence, enjoyment, motivation and self-concept; improvements over a broad range of skills spanning literacy, motor skills and collaboration; and improvements in pupils' relationships with adults. Pupils have also been positive. Older pupils report that the curriculum strands have given them opportunities to learn practical skills, to learn form mistakes and to express individuality and creativity.

### Fairbridge

Fairbridge runs programmes for young people focusing on strengthening disaffected young people's soft skills and emotional resilience. Their programmes are targeted at the 13—25 age group, and the under-16 programme is part of a negotiated timetable with schools.

There are two key methods that underpin Fairbridge's programmes: the self-referral process and voluntary participation. Young people, in other words, refer themselves to the centre and are free to go when they wish. This type of flexible programming proves very successful for their work.

The Fairbridge plan consists of passing through various stages before moving on from the programme. Initially, young people are put through an induction, which lays out the overarching mandate and general structure of the organisation. This is followed by an access week. During the week, young people are taken out of their traditional

environment and placed in a completely different setting where they undertake physical activities, coupled with continuous conversations about their learning, barriers to learning and how to improve their attitude towards it. Following access week, the bulk of Fairbridge's work is focused on a range of modules decided by young people themselves with advice from staff. All the courses (for example, music, climbing, gorge walking, fishing) are tailored to individual interests and linked to an explicit personal development agenda. Young people can stay in the programme as long as they want, followed by a gradual tapering off — negotiated with a development worker on what this move looks like (and where the young person goes next).

Personal support, challenging activities, structured courses and an emphasis on soft skills are the ingredients of the Fairbridge model. The centres are based in 16 of the most disadvantaged areas of Britain.

### Evaluation

A longitudinal evaluation carried out from 2002 to 2004 by the Charities Evaluation Service looked at a sample of 318 passing through the programme and found:[125]

- Personal and social skills had improved immediately after the programme. The average improvement was 13 per cent in the short term.

- 70 per cent of participants showed an improvement: for 30 per cent, there was a marked positive effect, for 40 per cent some improvement, but for 30 per cent, no change or a decline.

Long-term effects investigated a year later showed that a sample of 30 young people still experienced benefits:

- Young people had improved confidence and were in a stronger position as regards education, training and jobs.

- Young people were also in a better position in avoiding trouble with the law.

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- Although short-term gains in personal and social skills were not maintained long-term, the Fairbridge influence leads to improvements in subjective feelings, such as self-esteem and confidence, which lead to behavioural change, such as their ability to get a job.

    Fairbridge has just developed a new evaluation model that is being rolled out:

- A baseline of every young person's needs is taken when they enter the centre, including a history of their health and educational achievements.

- Young people self-assess on ten social and emotional skills using a 1–5 grading system: when they join Fairbridge, after 100 hours, and when they leave.

- Positive hard outcomes achieved are kept track of — for example, qualifications gained, stopping smoking.

- There is a follow-up assessment of positive outcomes three months after young people have left Fairbridge, which records whether outcomes have been sustained, achieved or regressed.

- They will be trackling a 10 per cent sample of participants in their access course over two years using the status updates above.

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5   Brooks and Tough, *Assessment and Testing.*

6   Skidmore, Cuff and Leslie, *Invisible Children.*

7   Gross, 'The need for a focus on literacy and numeracy'.

8   Gutman and Feinstein, *Children's Wellbeing in Primary School.*

9   Mullis et al, *IEA's Progress in International Reading Literary Study in Primary School in 40 Countries.*

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| 41 | Weare, 'Developing social and emotional skills in school to help combat disadvantage'. |
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including via text or email, being excluded from a group of friends or
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kicking or violence, or being actually kicked, hit or experiencing other
forms of physical violence from other students (Gilby et al, *The National
Survey of Parents and Children*).

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96      Again, see Sodha and Margo, *Thursday's Child for a fuller account of this evidence.*

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107     Craig et al, *Every Organisation Matters.*

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Connexions partnerships, the Learning and Skills Council for England,
district councils and—from this year if proposed legislation
is passed—schools, further education colleges and JobCentre Plus.

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