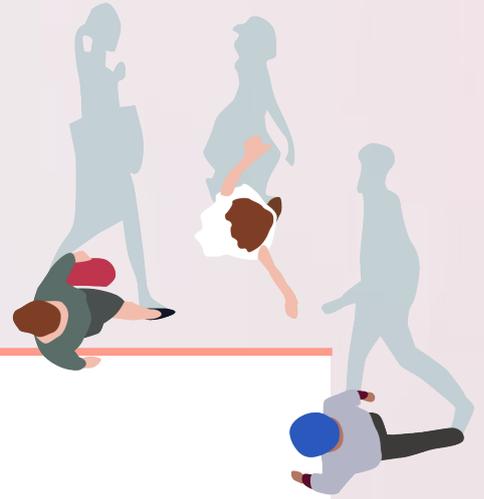




What Works *for*
**Children's
Social Care**



Coming together as What Works
for Early Intervention & Children's Social Care



Future YOU

A pilot evaluation

FEBRUARY 2023





What Works for
Children's
Social Care



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for Early Intervention & Children's Social Care

Acknowledgments

The evaluation team would like to thank the staff and students at Havant and South Downs College (HSDC) for sharing their time, perspectives and experiences.

Authors

Doménica Àvila, Susannah Hume, Gabrielle McGannon, Jack Summers.

Funding and competing interest

What Works for Children's Social Care provided funding to HSDC to deliver the Future YOU mentoring intervention, and to King's College London to carry out an evaluation of the service. What Works for Children's Social Care is funded by the Department for Education, England.

About What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) are merging. The new organisation is operating initially under the working name of What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care.

Our new single What Works centre will cover the full range of support for children and families from preventative approaches, early intervention and targeted support for those at risk of poor outcomes, through to support for children with a social worker, children in care and care leavers.

To find out more visit our website at: www.whatworks-csc.org.uk

About The Policy Institute at King's College London

The Policy Institute at King's College London works to solve society's challenges with evidence and expertise. We combine the rigour of academia with the agility of a consultancy and the connectedness of a think tank. Our research draws on many disciplines and methods, making use of the skills, expertise and resources of not only the institute, but the university and its wider network too.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

CIC	Children in care
CIN	Child in need
CPP	Child protection plan
CSC	Children's social care
HSDC	Havant and South Downs College
SDQ	Strengths and difficulties questionnaire
SWEMWS	Short Warwick–Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale
WWCSC	What Works for Children's Social Care



Executive summary

Introduction

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) funded Havant and South Downs College (HSDC) to implement Future YOU, a mentoring intervention for students with experience of children's social care (CSC) in the 2021/22 academic year. The project was open to all 16- to 19-year-olds enrolled at HSDC with experience of CSC in the past six years. Participants were to receive weekly one-to-one mentoring sessions, structured around four learning modules hosted on a Google Site: social skills, emotional skills, digital skills and career skills. Twenty-one students took part in at least one mentoring session across the academic year, and 13 students completed baseline and endline surveys, while three participated in case studies.

Objectives

The Policy Institute at King's College London was commissioned to conduct a pilot evaluation of the intervention. The pilot evaluation took a mixed-methods approach, including repeated surveys, interviews with staff and participants, and analysis of administrative data. The evaluation sought to answer the following research questions:

Evidence of feasibility

1. To what extent was the intervention delivered as intended and in what ways did implementation vary?
2. What are the primary factors that facilitate and hinder implementation of Future YOU?

Evidence of promise

3. Is there evidence to support the mechanisms of change identified in the logic model?
4. What potential impacts of the intervention do students and staff identify?

Readiness for trial

5. What changes would be required to prepare Future YOU for scaling and further evaluation?

Key findings

Due to lower-than-expected take-up of the intervention, it was not possible to quantitatively assess the project as planned. However, qualitative data suggests that, though there was limited fidelity to the intervention design, staff and participants viewed the project as a helpful addition to HSDC's programme of support.

Mentors' low caseloads (relative to the project as planned) and the narrow eligibility criteria for the intervention were seen as key mechanisms for success, as they allowed mentors to be driven by students' needs. Mentors often crossed into more active roles as well, advocating for students' interests to services within and external to the college. Students who participated in mentoring



appreciated this practical support, with students speaking of receiving help to resolve issues with their benefits, housing, timetabling and coursework. Further, students spoke of less tangible benefits, such as increased confidence, motivation and the importance of having someone at college who they felt cared about them.

Recommendations

As this pilot evaluation faced a range of limitations, this report makes only one recommendation.

1. Based on the findings of this pilot evaluation, Future YOU in its current form is not appropriate for scaling to facilitate further evaluation.



Introduction

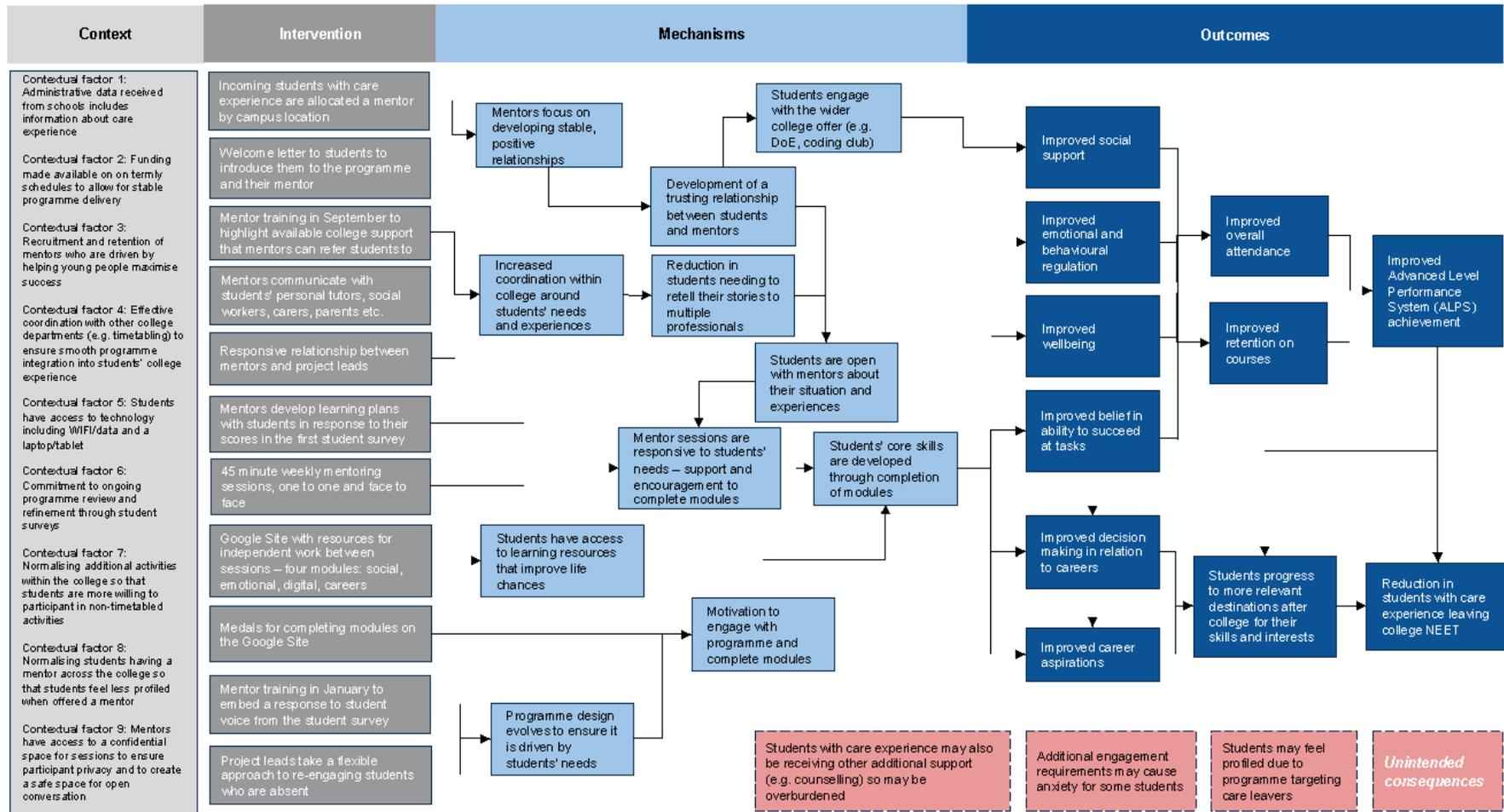
Young people with experience of children’s social care (CSC) have lower educational attainment, on average, than young people who have not had contact with social care (Department for Education, 2019). To address the lack of evidence on what works to raise attainment for this group, What Works for Children’s Social Care (WWCSC) made funding available for further education institutions to test interventions for young people with experience of CSC. As part of this funding, Havant and South Downs College (HSDC), a further education college in the south of England, applied for and received a grant to deliver Future YOU.

Future YOU is a mentoring intervention for students aged 16 to 19 with experience of CSC. All eligible students were allocated a mentor at their campus – Alton, Havant or South Downs – and were to receive weekly, 45-minute, one-to-one sessions with their mentor. Mentor support was to be structured around four modules available through HSDC’s Google Site: social skills, emotional skills, digital skills and career skills. Future YOU ran at all three HSDC campuses in the 2021/22 academic year.

Though the Google Site was a pre-existing resource available to all students at HSDC, the mentoring element was a new intervention. Therefore, this pilot evaluation ran alongside the first implementation of the intervention.

Figure 1 shows a logic model for the intervention.

Figure 1. Future YOU logic model



Methods

This pilot evaluation was a mixed-methods study, aiming to assess feasibility, promise and readiness for trial of Future YOU.

Research questions

Evidence of feasibility

1. To what extent was the intervention delivered as intended and in what ways did implementation vary?
2. What are the primary factors that facilitate and hinder implementation of Future YOU?

Evidence of promise

3. Is there evidence to support the mechanisms of change identified in the logic model?
4. What potential impacts of the intervention do students and staff identify?

Readiness for trial

5. What changes would be required to prepare Future YOU for scaling and further evaluation?

Research design

Sample

HSDC estimated that approximately 75 young people would participate in Future YOU. The eligibility criteria for both the intervention and the evaluation were young people who were:

- Enrolled at HSDC in the 2021/22 academic year
- Aged between 16 and 19
- A child in need (CIN), subject to a child protection plan (CPP) or children in care (CIC) within any local authority in the six years preceding September 2021.

Young people were invited to participate in the project via email in September 2021, at the beginning of the academic year. To streamline the intervention and evaluation processes, information about the evaluation was included in the invitation emails that were sent by HSDC. Consent was on an opt-out basis, so young people were asked to contact the evaluation team if they did not want to participate in the pilot evaluation. No opt-out forms were received.

In practice, 21 students took part in at least one mentoring session across the academic year, while 13 students completed both baseline and endline surveys and three took part in case studies – the reasons for this level of engagement are explored further in the Key findings section below.

Data collection

The pilot evaluation involved four primary strands of data collection:

- Baseline and endline outcome surveys with students
- Interviews with students at the end of the academic year



- Interviews with staff at the end of the academic year
- Analysis of administrative data routinely collected by HSDC.

Repeated outcome surveys

The baseline outcome survey was intended to open at the beginning of September 2021 and close at the end of that month. However, due to low uptake of Future YOU at the beginning of the academic year, the baseline survey was kept open until the end of March 2022.

The baseline surveys included the outcome measures detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Outcome measures

Outcome	Measurement tool
Improved social support	Social support questionnaire (Sarason, Sarason and Shearin, 1987)
Improved emotional and behavioural problems	Strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 2009)
Improved wellbeing	Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWS) (Tennant et al., 2007)
Improved general self-efficacy	General Self-Efficacy Scale (Chen, Gully and Eden, 2001)
Improved career decision making	Career Decision-Making Difficulties Questionnaire (Levin et al., 2020)
Improved career aspirations	Subjective Occupational Aspirations Scale (Han, Rojewski and Kwak, 2019)

The survey was intended to be completed by participants online and without the presence of their mentor due to concerns about mentors biasing participants' responses. However, following project launch HSDC staff reported that students' reading and comprehension levels were lower than initially expected, making it difficult for them to complete the survey alone. It was therefore agreed that mentors could facilitate participants' survey completion by reading out the questions, as long as they were read verbatim.

Around the same time HSDC staff also raised concerns that the concepts in some scales were beyond the comprehension of most eligible students, and that some items had the potential to cause distress. It was therefore agreed between HSDC, WWCS and the evaluation team that the endline survey would be reduced to only the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale and the strengths and difficulties questionnaire.

Endline surveys were conducted from May to June 2022. Participants were offered the option to complete the survey directly online, in person with a researcher at one of HSDC's campuses, or over the phone with a researcher.



Interviews with students

The evaluation plan involved conducting ten journey-mapping interviews with students who participated in Future YOU at the end of the academic year. These interviews were to be purposively sampled by age, gender and level of engagement with Future YOU to allow the creation of typologies of engagement. However, due to low uptake of the intervention it was agreed that these interviews would instead form part of participant case studies, involving semi-structured interviews with participants, review of administrative data and feedback from mentors on participants' engagement. Case study interviews were conducted with three participants who had high engagement with the intervention. Interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted either in person or over the phone. Participants were provided with a £10 voucher in recognition of their time.

Unfortunately, despite multiple attempts by both the evaluation team and staff at HSDC, it was not possible to speak with any students who were eligible but chose not to engage with Future YOU. Efforts were made towards the end of the 2021/22 summer term (May 2022) and again when HSDC reopened for the new academic year from October to December 2022.

Staff interviews

Interviews with staff were originally planned to take place at the end of the academic year, but due to significant changes in project implementation, mid-point interviews were also conducted. Mid- and end-point interviews were held with a senior staff member responsible for the project and with the project lead, and an end-point interview was also held with a student progress mentor¹ and student social worker² to understand the interlinkage between Future YOU and other college functions. These interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes and were conducted either in person or over the phone.

Administrative data

Routinely collected administrative data was requested from HSDC at mid- and end-point. Data was requested on demographics, engagement with the intervention and academic attainment.

Analysis

As this pilot evaluation was not seeking to establish causal evidence, survey and administrative data was to be used to create an engagement indicator to measure whether higher engagement with the intervention was associated with greater improvements in outcomes. However, due to low uptake of the project it was not possible to conduct this analysis (please see the Limitations section for further details).

Data collected from interviews was analysed using a thematic approach. Researchers first undertook a process of data familiarisation before undertaking data management to sort the data into themes. Themes were then coded using both inductive and deductive codes to allow for a thorough exploration of the research questions, while allowing codes to emerge from the data. Analysis was undertaken by a researcher with familiarity with the project who had conducted several of the

¹ Every student at HSDC has a progress mentor who provides them with academic and pastoral guidance and support. Future YOU participants received support from their Future YOU mentor and progress mentor during the 2021/22 academic year.

² A social work student from a local university completed a placement at HSDC in the 2021/22 academic year and worked as a Future YOU mentor as part of this experience.



interviews. Data from participant interviews was triangulated with outcome data, administrative data and written engagement summaries provided by mentors to create case studies for each participant.

Ethics and pre-registration

The evaluation was approved by the WWCS research ethics committee prior to launch. The pilot protocol was made publicly available on WWCS's website: <https://whatworks-csc.org.uk/research-project/future-you-pilot-evaluation>.



Key findings

Evidence of feasibility

The evaluation found limited evidence of fidelity to the intervention design. Implementation was ad hoc and highly personalised to each individual participant, in many cases moving beyond mentoring into advocacy. Though this was seen by some as a strength of the project (see the Evidence of promise section below), it meant that many aspects of the logic model were not clearly followed. It was also not possible to identify an overarching mentoring intervention design that could be scaled up or translated to different contexts.

Eligibility and recruitment

The eligibility criteria were all enrolled students with CSC experience in the past six years, aged between 16 and 19. However, early in the evaluation it became clear that HSDC did not collect the data required to identify all eligible students. HSDC's data only includes whether a student is currently, or has previously been, CIC. Therefore, young people who have not been a CIC but have been CIN or had a CPP could not be identified and approached for the intervention. This is likely to have significantly reduced the number of students approached for the intervention and evaluation.

There were also problems with the quality of data held by the college. All eligible students were supposed to be approached to participate in Future YOU in September 2021 based on information provided by students in their enrolment paperwork, as well as data provided by schools and local authorities when students progress or transfer to HSDC. However, over the course of the first term some students were identified as CIC who had not previously been identified. Therefore, an additional ten students were approached to participate in the project between November 2021 and March 2022. By the end of the 2021/22 academic year, a total of 56 students remained on-roll who had been identified as eligible and approached for the project.

As shown in the logic model, recruitment was intended to be through welcome letters, and emails to students' college email addresses were also planned. However, due to low initial uptake, HSDC employed a range of other methods to introduce the project to eligible students. This included contact via personal email addresses and text messages. Progress mentors were also asked to speak with eligible students about the project as all HSDC students have an assigned progress mentor whose role is to identify and work with students who are at risk of not meeting their progression targets. Involving progress mentors in recruitment was spoken of by several students and staff as being a key facilitator to onboarding students as progress mentors are often a trusted source. This is considered further in the Key facilitators section below.

Timing was also affected by slow uptake, as well as difficulties with timetabling and mentors moving on for other roles (timetabling and staffing are considered further under Key barriers below). Therefore, mentoring sessions began in October instead of September, and in November it was decided to offer students an incentive of a £3 HSDC catering voucher for attending sessions.

Finally, the age criterion was not implemented by HSDC. Administrative data shows that seven students aged between 20 and 23 were invited to participate in the project, with some of these



students taking up the mentoring offer. It is not clear why HSDC did not implement this eligibility criterion.

Student engagement

The data presented in this section was provided by Future YOU staff at the mid- and end-point of the 2021/22 academic year.

Throughout the 2021/22 academic year, 21 students attended at least one Future YOU session. HSDC originally anticipated that up to 75 students would take part, so the intervention was taken up by less than 30% of the expected cohort. However, as only 56 students were identified as eligible for the project, 21 students attending at least one session represents over one-third of eligible students taking up the offer.

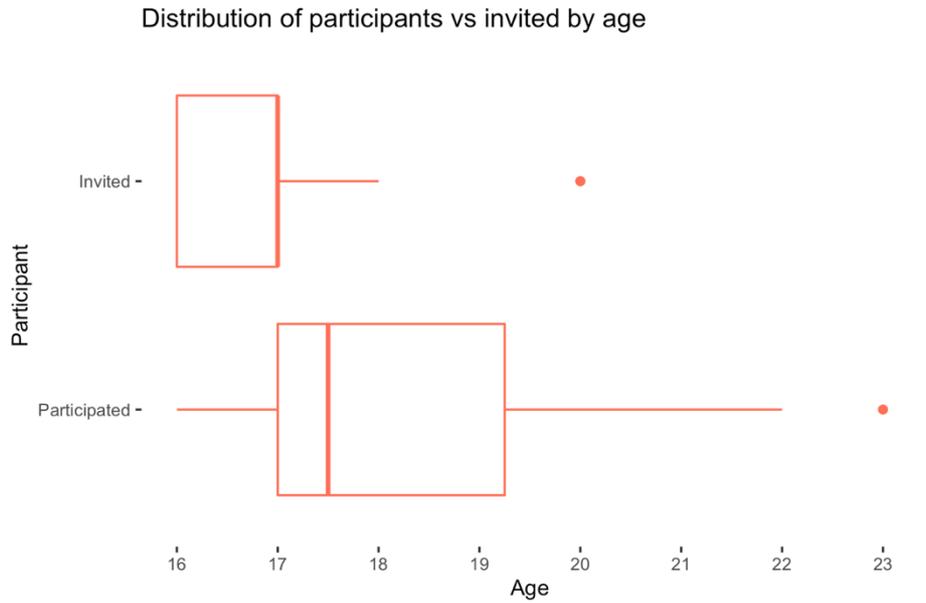
Due to the small number of participants we can only report on average demographics, as splitting the reporting into sub-levels for demographics would risk making participants identifiable. There were no significant differences in the distribution of gender, ethnicity, English GCSE grades or campus of enrolment between those who participated in at least one Future YOU session and the eligible population.

However, there was a significant difference between the average age of eligible students, and the average age of students who participated in at least one mentoring session, as shown in Figure 2 below. Students who participated in at least one mentoring session were 1.4 years older, on average, than the eligible population ($p < 0.01$).

There were also small but significant differences in average number of GCSEs held, GCSE maths grades and enrolment level at HSDC. Participants were more likely to hold fewer GCSEs ($p < 0.001$) and have lower GCSE maths grades ($p < 0.01$), and were less likely to be enrolled on a Level 3 course at HSDC ($p < 0.05$). This may suggest that students with a greater need for support were more likely to take up the mentoring offer; however, due to the small sample size it is not possible to make generalisations.



Figure 2. Distribution of participants vs invited by age



The intervention design involved weekly, one-to-one sessions between participants and mentors. As shown in Table 2 below, across each term engaged students attended an average of ten or 11 sessions each. HSDC terms last for around 12 weeks (excluding the half term break) so the number of sessions attended is largely consistent with attending one session each week, in line with the original plans for the project.

Table 2. Number of mentoring sessions per term

Term			
Autumn	16	161	10
Spring	16	183	11
Summer	15	171	11

However, interviews with staff and students suggest that some students had additional ad hoc sessions between their regular weekly sessions and mentors adopted an “open door” policy (students who participated in interviews saw this as a strength of the project; please see case studies for further details). From the data provided it is not clear whether the total number of sessions includes these additional meetings, or only counts attendance at regularly scheduled sessions.

Content of sessions

As shown in the logic model for Future YOU (Figure 1), mentoring sessions were intended to be designed around students’ learning plans and the modules on the Google Site. However, interviews



with staff and students suggest that this format was not closely followed. Rather, mentors focused on participants' immediate needs.

"They would say, 'I am struggling with this thing or that thing,' so whatever the student wanted help with I would step in and help with. I don't really know much about benefits, but I still helped them fill in some various forms and things and did some research and researched for them and sent them off to their PAs [personal advisers] and things like that, so it was really whatever they wanted." (Staff member)

Though this was a change from the original plans for the project, students spoke highly of the responsiveness of their mentors:

"It really just varies each week, which is quite nice. It doesn't feel like I'm pressured into it. It's, like, completely up to me what we talk about, which I love." (Student)

Students and staff talked about the mentoring sessions as being an opportunity for a listening ear, with students opening up about their stresses or problems and getting support and advice from their mentor. For some students this transitioned into their mentor acting as an advocate, facilitating conversations with social workers or helping students manage college bureaucracy.

"The last couple of weeks have just, generally, been trying to get a lot of issues with social services sorted, that's what my mentoring sessions end up turning into. Nothing about college, just getting social services [sorted]." (Student)

Though this was outside the project plan, when asked about the intention to design the sessions around the Google Site, one mentor discussed how this responsiveness had been necessary to direct conversations back to the learning modules:

"Yes, we did the badges ... but what I found was, initially, they didn't come with anything to talk about, because I was new. They didn't know me and so it takes time to build trust. So, what I began to do was ask them to come with something that they wanted to talk about. That worked successfully. With the majority of students, that worked." (Staff member)

When prompted, some students did recall doing some work on the Google Site, but mostly reported that the sessions were responsive to their needs and focused on providing practical support. Further, several participants spoke about using a different learning resource that their mentor had created:

"It was developing main, key, skills, so like life skills, budgeting, IT skills and just general stuff you need to have in day-to-day life." (Student)

This was a package of additional learning content created by the project lead as the project progressed. In interviews, students did not speak in detail about the Google Site, but did speak highly of this additional learning content designed by the project lead: "It was pretty good because it actually did really help."

Coordination across HSDC

Staff and students both spoke about how the project had allowed for coordination across different functions at HSDC. Notes provided by mentors show the extent to which mentors referred



participants to services available within HSDC. Mentors supported students to access services such as careers advisers, health and wellbeing, additional learning support, financial support, safeguarding and counselling. Having a single point of contact to help students access the diverse services offered at HSDC was seen as a strength of the project:

“So I think to have that for support at college is a good thing because if they don’t get on with their carers, if they can’t get hold of their PA, at least they’ve got that point of call with a member of staff here.” (Staff member)

The ability for Future YOU mentors to have a more specialised focus was also seen as a benefit of the project. This was something that couldn’t be offered by other staff members as their roles spanned a much wider range of students. Therefore, the Future YOU mentor was able to provide more tailored support to young people with care experience than other staff members that CIC students had contact with:

“So it’s nice to see [CIC students] accessing that support because the information that that mentor should have on ... all the external support and information, it’s more specialist.” (Staff member)

Also, because the Future YOU mentors have a much lower caseload than progress mentors, they were able to advocate for students in a way that other staff members struggle to due to the high number of students they are required to support (Future YOU mentors worked with between one and 17 students, whereas progress mentors are responsible for supporting students across several faculties). For example, one progress mentor spoke of having responsibility for around 700 students. This allowed Future YOU mentors to advocate for students more actively:

“So [mentor] has liaised with me and said, ‘We need to get this sorted.’ We’ve worked together, we’ve spoken to the head of faculty ... because it’s more involved and more focused on the looked-after children, things like that wouldn’t get missed. So, yeah, I just think it’s a good opportunity for them to make sure everything’s secure, stable and in place.” (Staff member)

There was a perception that Future YOU had not only increased collaboration between staff on an individual level, but also contributed to a wider cultural change. One staff member spoke of how the project had increased awareness across the college of HSDC’s commitment to inclusivity.

“It’s not just words ... about our inclusive culture; it’s an entire project with a whole workforce behind it and lots of time and energy. So for tutors, every member of teaching staff is a tutor, for them to all see this huge shift forward in our inclusive culture has been really great.” (Staff member)

Key facilitators

Interviews with staff and students identified several themes that were seen as key facilitators for the project, including accessing students through progress mentors or other staff with whom they already have a positive relationship, allowing participants to open up at their own pace and ensuring stability and consistency.

The main facilitator that recurred in interviews with staff and students was the importance of building a trusting relationship. This was seen to start before the introduction to the Future YOU mentor even



occurred. In two of the interviews with students, the student only started engaging with Future YOU when a staff member they already had a positive relationship with took them to meet their mentor:

“For the first session I had my progress mentor introduce me. It was like, ‘Oh ok, now I know who I’ve got to talk to. It’s not like I’ve got to find the person around my college.’ My relationship with my progress mentor is really good.” (Student)

A staff member who participated in an interview also spoke of facilitating introductions in this way, and highlighted how it can also help reduce some of the practical barriers such as students not knowing which room to go to:

“So I’ve had quite a good relationship with the looked-after children, so I’ve recommended that they go and speak to obviously in this case, [mentor]. It’s been really informal, [mentor’s] come down, I’ve obviously arranged to meet at my desk and then I say to the students that there’s no pressure; if you want, this is the extra support.” (Staff member)

Once students had started engaging with their Future YOU mentor, allowing students to set the pace also arose as an important point to establish trust and willingness to open up:

“The relationship between me and my mentor went really well because it was slightly easier because it was one-to-ones, so it developed around me – it was my pace so I was able to open up in my own time.” (Student)

Students also spoke about the importance of their mentor being consistent and reliable. This was evident in the recruitment and retention piece, as some students stopped engaging after their mentor left the role, despite being offered a new mentor. Practical things like ensuring appointments were at the same place and time each week were raised, as well as mentors allowing students to contact them outside those regular times if they needed additional support or just wanted to check in. Mentors were also seen as being dependable, which built trust:

“And I know that I can trust [my mentor] to stick to his word, type of thing. It’s hard to find people like that nowadays.” (Student)

Flexibility to students’ needs was also a project element that staff associated with success. One staff member gave the example of a student whose mentor moved to a different role within HSDC, meaning that she had to end her mentoring commitments. However, when the student made clear that she had a strong connection with that mentor and wanted to continue with her, HSDC worked with the mentor to amend her contract to allow her to keep working with that student.

Overall, the most important facilitators came down to trust. Though this operated differently from how HSDC had expected it to in the logic model, in some ways, it was a major feature of the original design of the project that was carried through.



Key barriers

Several barriers were also evident, primarily regarding college processes. Some of these were minor and easily rectified; for example, students being asked to attend mentoring sessions in parts of the campus they weren't familiar with. However, some were part of wider issues faced by the further education sector at the time the intervention was occurring.

Stability of staffing was clearly a key barrier for HSDC, in both delivering the project and participating in the evaluation. Of the three mentors in place at the beginning of the academic year, two had left the role by November 2021. Wider staff vacancies caused by national staff shortages led to frequent changes in timetables, which students found disruptive:

“There’s a national shortage [of learning support assistants]. And the cost of living crisis means that nobody wants to do a job on a minimum wage and that’s what learning support assistants are paid. We lost a lot and they were better off working in a supermarket or in cleaning roles ... we had the same issue unfortunately for maths teachers, so again national shortage ... so there were maths classes changing about ... the students were saying, ‘How can I come to mentoring in that gap when that gap might not be available next week?’ ... So they felt really frustrated by the timetable changes.” (Staff member)

Some students who engaged at the very beginning of the project also ceased engaging when their mentor changed, emphasising the importance of consistency. Further, though new mentors were brought on board, both were already teachers at HSDC. Most of the mentors also had teaching roles and trying to balance both commitments was difficult for many people.

“I think a mentor being a teacher is something to be avoided. The workload of a teacher means that the follow-up and chasing [required of a mentor] is really difficult.” (Staff member)

In the end, the new mentors contributed around one hour per week to the project, meaning they could only support one student each. This meant that the project lead had to cover the rest of the project, meaning that the project was being managed and delivered almost solely by one person:

“[Project lead] has given up other roles to accommodate, so he’s been the person who has picked up any shortage ... so he’s been really positive in that he’s really believed in the project and he’s made it work.” (Staff member)

Several staff members also spoke of female students being reluctant to engage with a male mentor, and due to staffing female mentors weren't always available. This again highlights the value of having a range of staff members in this kind of project, as students may feel more comfortable with someone they feel is more like them.

Stigma is also a potential barrier, with students who have CSC experience conscious of being singled out. Two students who participated in interviews spoke about being bullied due to their care status, leading to them trying to keep their CSC experience private. One of these students found that the



Future YOU mentoring sessions appearing in their timetable made their CSC experience more visible to other students:

“People were seeing my timetable, people then started bullying me for having the maths tutor, the English tutor ... Once they had noticed that, they looked on my timetable and saw my mentoring sessions. I started getting questioned about that ... It was basically just being singled out.” (Student)

Although this didn't put the student off engaging with the project, the stigma associated with care experience is clearly an ongoing worry for some students at the college. In interviews, one staff member gave an example of a student who declined to participate because of this:

“We had one student who we sent out information to about the mentoring scheme right at the beginning. The social worker came back and said, ‘This student doesn't want anyone knowing about the fact that they're a looked after child student.’” (Staff member)

Simultaneously, another staff member felt that reduced stigma around counselling may have meant that some students who needed additional support may have sought counselling rather than engaging with Future YOU:

“Counselling has become more normalised in society in general, I think; it's more socially acceptable, ‘I'm just going to see the college counsellor,’ whereas the mentoring is bespoke and it's for a particular cohort. So students have seen it as less the norm.” (Staff member)

Evidence of promise

Due to the small number of participants, it was not possible to conduct the engagement indicator analysis as planned. Therefore, we are unable to quantitatively comment on the evidence of promise using the dosage response model specified in the trial protocol. The following section provides descriptive statistics only.

Similarly, interviews with students are presented as case studies because, due to low uptake, it was not possible to create typologies of student journeys through the project as originally planned.

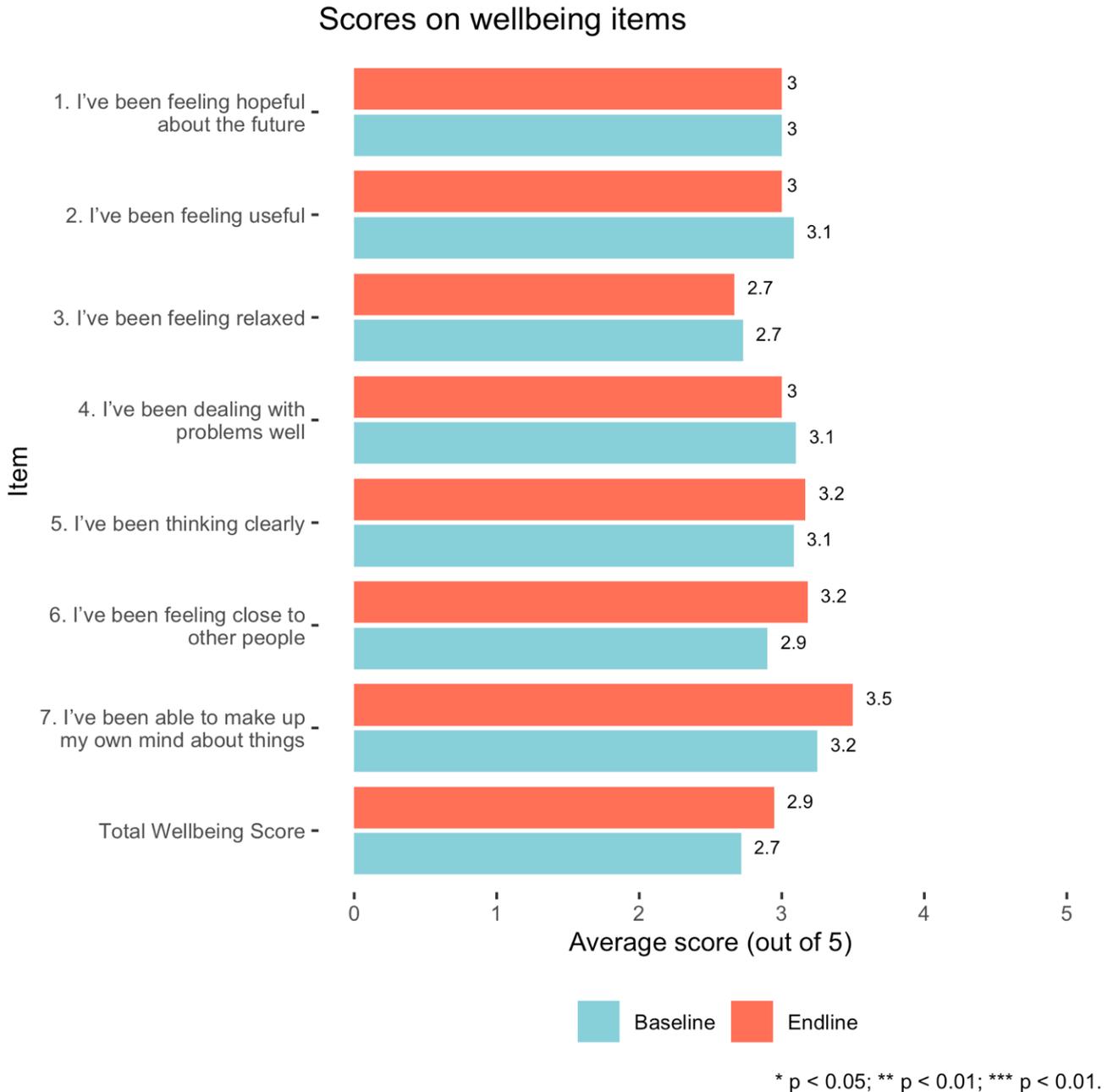
Improved wellbeing

There were 13 students who participated in at least one Future YOU session and answered both the baseline and endline survey. Due to the low number of responses, to prevent making individuals identifiable through small numbers, Figure 3 below presents the results of the average score for each item of the SWEMWS at baseline and endline across the 13 participants who completed both surveys. There are no significant differences in scores from baseline to endline.



Figure 3. Average scores on items of Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale at baseline and endline

It is not possible to present the results for the SDQ due to a copyright issue.





Improved attendance

Students who participated in at least one Future YOU session had significantly higher average attendance than the eligible cohort overall. Participants recorded an average attendance rate of 93%, 11 percentage points higher than other eligible students at an average of 82% ($p < 0.01$). However, note that due to the small sample size this finding is presented with low confidence.

Improved retention

There were no significant differences in the rates of course completion between the eligible student cohort as a whole and those who participated in at least one session of Future YOU.

Progression to more relevant destinations

The data provided by HSDC on destinations was incomplete, and therefore it was not possible to perform any analysis for this outcome.

Improved Advanced Level Performance System (ALPS) achievement

HSDC was unable to provide ALPS scores for participants as originally planned. However, course achievement data was provided, so this is presented as an alternative measure of academic achievement. There was no significant difference between the pass and fail rates of students who attended at least one Future YOU session and the rest of the eligible cohort.

Case study 1

In September 2021 Alex (not her real name) was 17 years old and in her second year of studying at HSDC. She was living in foster care and enrolled in a Level 1 course, as well as studying maths and English functional skills.

At the beginning of the academic year Alex was feeling confident and excited about her new course. She had made friends the previous year, so settling in was easier with a pre-existing friendship group. Early in the year Alex received an email stating that she'd been put forward for the Future YOU project, though she wasn't entirely sure what it was:

"I didn't realise the mentoring was what it was; I thought I was going to get extra help for maths and English."

When Alex realised that she was being offered mentoring she wasn't sure if it was a good fit:

"I'm someone who doesn't really talk about myself. I'm at college for the lessons; I'm not here for myself."

However, after the first few sessions Alex started to come around to it. Her mentor explained all of the different things they could do together, and Alex liked that her mentor followed her lead in the sessions. Despite some timetabling issues in the first few weeks, Alex started catching up with her mentor each week.

Alex appreciated having the extra support, particularly when she started having some problems with her maths teacher. When she raised this problem with her mentor, he went with her to speak to different members of staff at the college to figure out how to get it resolved. In the end, Alex was able



to change maths classes, which made a big difference. Alex's mentor also encouraged her to sign up for some extracurricular activities to help with her stress levels, and helped her to move some classes around so that she was able to attend the activities she was interested in.

As time went on, Alex started speaking with her mentor outside their scheduled sessions as well. Her mentor had an "open door policy" so when they were both on campus Alex would pop in to see him. Speaking with her mentor became an important part of Alex's college experience:

"The relationship between me and my mentor went really well because it was slightly easier because it was one-to-ones, so it developed around me; it was my pace, so I was able to open up in my own time."

As the year progressed Alex turned 18 and had to start thinking about moving on from her foster care arrangement. This was a complicated process and Alex found dealing with social services stressful. The pressures in Alex's home life started having an impact on her education:

"Knowing that, at some point, everything will change at home started stressing me out at college. It was really hard to deal with when home is getting complicated, college was getting complicated because we were getting into the middle of the year where either you're falling behind or you're staying ahead."

Though Alex was putting in extra hours, she started falling behind in her course, and also started having some friendship difficulties. During this time Alex "opened up massively" to her mentor:

"The 30 minutes I had with him ... it was really helping because it was just a way of me destressing. I was able to open up with him more than what I do with anyone else."

When Alex told her mentor about what was happening at home, he referred her to HSDC's counselling services so she could get extra support. Alex's mentor also organised to speak with her progress mentor when he noticed that she was falling behind on her coursework, and eventually Alex was able to receive extra one-to-one support for some of her classes.

Through this time, Alex's mentor was also supporting her to deal with the difficulties she was having with social services. However, eventually the college had to step in and ask Alex's mentor to stop actively advocating with social services. Though Alex continued to receive advice from her mentor, she found the loss of the additional support difficult:

"It was like, 'Okay, so all the help I've been getting from my mentor, I can't have.' It was like a massive barrier."

However, despite the challenges she faced, Alex completed her courses with near-perfect attendance and was planning to return to college the following year. Overall, Alex found working with her mentor a significant help through a difficult year.

"The things that have probably gone really well for me [this year] are how much [my Future YOU mentor] has actually helped me develop as a person ... My confidence and my ability to ask for help, because I used to be that person who, if I couldn't do it, gave up. I now start asking for help."



Case study 2

Paul (not his real name) started his fourth and final year at HSDC in September 2021. He had completed his Level 1 to 3 qualifications, as well as maths and English functional skills, in the previous three years and was enrolled in an A-level programme for 2021/22. Paul was keen to start his final year. He'd enjoyed his experience at HSDC so far and was excited to complete his qualification and move on to the next stage of his life.

In around November he received an email inviting him to participate in Future YOU; however, he didn't engage with the project during the autumn term. It wasn't until one of his teachers recommended it to him in the spring term that he decided to give it a try:

"I know that I was having a bit of a rough week, and I think one of my teachers recommended that I come down to ... one of the mentors down here, and to have a chat. And I think from then, yes, I've just done a weekly session."

During that first introduction, the mentor introduced himself and took some time to get to know Paul. Paul appreciated that the mentor didn't jump straight into asking personal questions, and instead waited for them to know each other a bit better. Paul also appreciated that there was a male mentor available, as he was more comfortable speaking about some of his personal issues with another man.

It didn't take long for Paul to develop a relationship with his mentor, and Paul started to open up after "two or three sessions":

"He wasn't judgemental about anything, he accepted me for me, didn't pick at anything that I was saying, or anything that I'd done; it was just like yes, accepting everything that I was."

During the year Paul moved to live on his own for the first time. He enjoyed the freedom that came with living by himself but also found that living alone made him more grateful for the support he was offered at college:

"I'd probably say [my Future YOU mentor has been] a lot more helpful than I expected ... to know that I can come in and speak with people, or like I said, have the support that is there, then I'm glad, and I'm grateful for it."

Though he was excited to complete his course, Paul also had some concerns about leaving HSDC after four years. When he brought this up with his mentor, he appreciated that his mentor offered support but also let him deal with it on his own:

"[My Future YOU mentor] said, 'Well you've always got my support, if you need anything then I can help you with it.' It's always been, the support's there if you need it, but I said, 'I don't need the full support, because I know it's something that I need to do.'"

One thing Paul did ask his mentor for support on was finding a job. In the summer term Paul worked on developing a CV with his mentor. Paul appreciated that his mentor took a direct approach; if Paul



asked him about something, his mentor would give his opinion. Paul felt that other services he'd worked with before had been less practical, which didn't work as well for him.

At the end of the year, Paul completed his course with a distinction, and over 90% attendance. Though Paul is an independent person, he appreciated the support that his mentor was able to offer him, particularly as he adjusted to independent living:

"I wouldn't say there's been a massive impact; I'd say it's just nice to know that the support's there ... to know that it's there and I can always go back if need be, then it's always reliable and helpful."

Case study 3

Sophie (not her real name) was 19 and starting the second year of her course at HSDC in September 2021, having moved from a nearby college so she could progress to Level 2. She had English functional skills from previous studies but was also enrolled for her final year of maths. Sophie was excited to start the year after a long summer break and get her Level 2 qualification. She'd always known she wanted to study at university, so there was a clear path for her to follow with her qualifications.

Before classes started, Sophie received an email inviting her to be part of Future YOU. She thought she should take advantage of the opportunity to have "someone who's on my side if I find something hard" so she attended an initial session with one of the mentors. He explained what the project was about and they organised a regular date and time to meet each week.

Sophie and her mentor kept up their regular sessions despite a very busy schedule with Sophie working full-time on top of her college workload. She got a job through the Kickstart scheme, but found trying to manage both work and college difficult:

"I'd finish college at, like, 3pm. I'd maybe start work at 5pm and when it finished at 11pm, I wouldn't get home until half 11. By the time I'd got all my stuff ready, it'd be going on 1am and I'd be back up at half six or seven the next morning to do a full day at college and do it again."

Sophie was aware that, because of her care background, she had additional responsibilities that a lot of her peers didn't, and this added pressures on top of work and college:

"People can go home and do their college work while their mum and dad's putting their dinner on and doing their washing, while I've got to go home and do all of that plus college coursework."

Despite the demanding workload, Sophie continued attending college and meeting her mentor most weeks. She was driven by enjoyment of her course, as well as awareness that maintaining a routine was good for her mental health. However, when she was let go from her job with no notice, she struggled to get her benefits back to their full amount, and was living off a £69 payment for an entire month. When she spoke about this with her mentor, he raised a safeguarding concern with the college and referred her to receive counselling. Though there wasn't much that her mentor or HSDC could do to change Sophie's situation, his support made a huge difference to her during this time:



“Coming into [my Future YOU mentor], having that momentum, like, seeing him [helped me keep up with college] ... Knowing that he believed in me, knowing that he promised this would be sorted and it’s not my fault was quite a nice thing to hear.”

As their relationship developed, Sophie’s mentor helped her manage her stresses and worked with her to develop strategies to cope with some of the difficulties she faced due to her ADHD. She found having a regular, early morning session with him helped her have a positive start to her week at college:

“I get up. I see [my Future YOU mentor], get everything off my chest, we leave it on a positive note and I’m ready to go into lessons in a good mood. So, I think it works out well for me.”

At the end of the year, Sophie completed her Level 2 qualification with over 95% attendance. Though she attributes much of her success to her self-determination, she believes that working with her mentor made a large difference to her outlook and behaviours:

“I definitely look at situations a lot differently now. I usually go in guns blazing but now I actually respect what someone else has got to say and understand it. Compromise, as well, is a big one. Mostly just to open up more and not be afraid, and to see things in a better light, really.”

Readiness for trial

Based on the findings outlined in the previous sections, we do not see a feasible option for scaling Future YOU to allow further evaluation. The lack of fidelity to an intervention design means there is no clear intervention to scale up. Further, the low uptake of the intervention meant it was not possible to identify clear evidence of promise.

The qualitative research suggests that the intervention was a meaningful experience for the students involved. However, this appears to be largely due to the willingness of mentors – the project lead in particular – to go above and beyond in advocating for participants. This advocacy model was a significant deviation from the intervention intended in the logic model and therefore may be better measured by outcomes not captured in this evaluation, such as access to benefits and stability of placements.



Limitations and lessons learned

This evaluation faced a number of challenges that limit the findings presented in this report. However, we believe there are valuable lessons to be learned from this project and evaluation.

Sample size

The initial research design was based on a project sample size of 75 participants. However, only 56 students were identified as eligible, with 21 students participating in at least one mentoring session.

Though administrative data was obtained for all 56 eligible students, it proved extremely difficult to get students who had not engaged to complete the baseline and endline outcome surveys. Despite receiving at least four reminders about each survey through a mix of emails and text messages, 24 responses were received for the baseline survey, with only five of these coming from students who had not engaged with a Future YOU mentor.

At endline, all students were sent emails and text messages offering various means of completing the survey, including over the phone or in person at pre-arranged dates on which a researcher was on campus. However, participation among non-engagers was even lower for the endline survey. Of 19 responses, 18 were from students who had attended at least one mentoring session.

The low take-up of the project, and low response rate among non-engagers, meant it was not possible to go ahead with the dosage response indicator analysis, and also means the comparisons between averages for the total cohort against those who engaged presented in this report are underpowered. It has therefore not been possible to quantitatively assess evidence of promise for Future YOU.

Lack of access to non-engagers has also been a problem for the qualitative approach. Despite repeated efforts by both King's and HSDC, no students who were eligible but did not engage with Future YOU were willing to speak to the evaluation team. Therefore, this report is not able to present findings about why the project was only taken up by around one-third of the eligible cohort. This is a significant gap as it means we are not able to comment on what may help make similar projects more relevant or attractive in the future.

Lessons learned: Around 25% fewer students were eligible for the project than anticipated, and take-up was significantly lower than expected. It may have been helpful to have a review point at the end of the autumn term as, once it was clear that so few students would participate in the project, the pilot evaluation may not have gone ahead, or could have gone ahead with a much stronger emphasis on qualitative work with participants over surveying.

Lessons learned: The strategies for accessing non-engagers that were used for this evaluation were not effective. In this evaluation, all communications were sent by HSDC rather than the evaluation team to reduce duplication of communications. We do not know whether the novelty of receiving an email or text message from the evaluation team would have been more effective than communications sent by the college.



Data quality

Routine administrative data

During the set-up phase of the evaluation, the fields required for administrative data analysis were discussed with HSDC and refined in line with what HSDC was able to provide. However, when demographic data of eligible students was requested in March 2021 it was clear that some data was not available as expected. In particular, when asked to provide the type of CSC experience each eligible student had all fields were returned as CIC. The evaluation team then held conversations with staff at HSDC and found that the college does not collect information on students who have been CIN or had a CPP, and therefore this data did not exist. Similarly, at endline data collection, destination data was only available for two students, with all other students returned as unknown.

These limitations in data mean that HSDC was not able to identify all students who could have benefited from the project, and may mean students with CSC experience other than having been a CIC are missing out on other forms of support offered within the college. As support is only offered to CIC students, it also limits our ability to evaluate interventions for students with CSC experience, which may have varying take-up and efficacy among students with CIN or CPP experience.

Lessons learned: It is important for further education institutions to understand that there are different kinds of CSC experience, and how limitations in their data collection limit the support they can offer to students with experience of social care. Where colleges identify that students with a social worker may benefit from support, staff should consider ways of identifying eligible students other than central databases, which may only identify students who are CIC.

Lessons learned: It would have been beneficial for the evaluation team to spend more time in the set-up phase working with HSDC to understand the data they collect and store; however, this was not possible within the timelines and resourcing of the evaluation. As the evaluation proceeded it was clear that some data that we had been told was available either was incomplete or did not exist. Though a thorough data quality assessment is time-consuming during the set-up phase, it could have helped avoid issues that arose around data quality.

Additional administrative data

At the beginning of the evaluation the Future YOU team were asked to track data on attendance at mentoring sessions; non-confidential notes from sessions; data on completion of Google Site modules (awarded as Bronze, Silver and Gold); and training sessions held for mentors.

However, it is not clear that processes were established at the beginning of the project to allow for data collection and, when staffing changed early in the project, these requests were not passed on to the new project lead. This led to confusion when the first data request was made, and the project lead needing to retrospectively collect some data. This created additional administrative work for the project lead as well as sharing of incomplete datasets that needed to be rectified, and delays in data collection.

Lessons learned: As well as a data quality assessment, greater resourcing at project set-up would have allowed the evaluation team to support the project team to design simple data collection processes for the additional data required.



Lessons learned: The further education sector experienced significant staff shortages this year, and Future YOU was impacted by staff turnover and recruitment challenges. When the project lead changed it would have been beneficial to have a review meeting to ensure the new project lead was aware of all of the expectations of the evaluation and agree any changes that needed to be made.

Repeated surveys

Finally, likely variation in the delivery of the outcomes survey raises concerns about the quality of the outcomes data collected. The survey was designed in collaboration with HSDC staff to ensure that the language and concepts included were at a level that was in line with the students who were likely to be eligible for the project. The survey was intended to be completed by students alone to avoid their mentor's presence biasing their responses. However, after a few months of project delivery Future YOU staff raised concerns that some students' reading levels were below the level anticipated by the survey. To address this, it was agreed that mentors could read out the survey to students to help with their comprehension.

This change in format means that responses may vary between young people who completed the survey by themselves, and those who completed it together with their mentor. Further, although mentors were asked to read the survey questions verbatim, feedback suggests that mentors were probably altering the wording where they were concerned that a student would not understand the question as written. This raises significant questions about the validity of the results, particularly as the outcomes survey comprised pre-validated scales.

Lessons learned: Although written guidance was provided to mentors for delivering the survey, it is not clear that this guidance was used. Instead, a brief online meeting to explain the purpose of the survey and why certain elements were particularly important (e.g. sticking to the wording as written) may have been more effective in conveying key concepts.

Lessons learned: When new staff were brought on to the project it is not clear that information about the survey was shared with them. A quick evaluation introduction email to each new staff member from the evaluation team may have helped with consistency of expectations and delivery of evaluation requirements.



Recommendations

Due to the limitations presented in the previous section, we are only able to make the following recommendation for this project:

1. Based on the findings of this pilot evaluation, Future YOU in its current form is not appropriate for scaling to facilitate further evaluation.



Conclusion

Though lower-than-expected take-up of the project meant that it has not been possible to quantitatively assess the project, interviews with students and staff suggest that Future YOU mentors provided highly personalised support that was widely seen as beneficial.

Due to staffing difficulties across the further education sector, the project ended up being largely managed and delivered by a single individual – the project lead. Though this means that there was little in the way of fidelity of implementation, the project lead's dedication to their students was commented on by both staff and participants as being one of the key reasons for the success of the project. Overall, the main facilitator of the project was seen to be the active role that mentors could take due to their low caseloads and specialist focus on CIC students.

Students who engaged with the project spoke of their mentors as trustworthy, reliable and proactive. It was clear that this support had been meaningful to them, with students speaking about how their mentor helped them gain confidence, develop life skills and maintain motivation at college through difficulties in their personal lives.



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CONTACT

info@wweicsc.org.uk

[@whatworksCSC](https://twitter.com/whatworksCSC)

whatworks-csc.org.uk