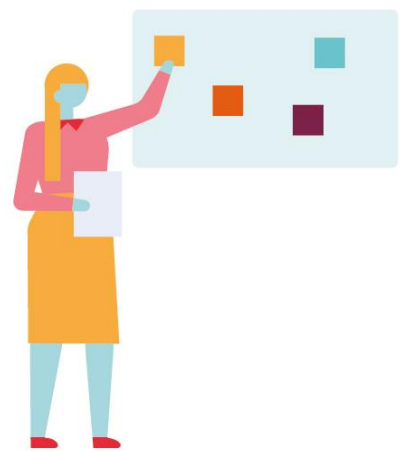


Inspiring Futures evaluation

Impacts of COVID-19

Cordis Bright
August 2023



Inspiring Futures evaluation – Impacts of COVID-19

- Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.
- BBC Children in Need is the BBC's UK charity. Our financial support is committed to funding grassroots organisations and project workers in every corner of the UK, who provide the vital relationships and support to help the children who need us most.
- The COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated multiple challenges for young people looking to access further education, training and work.

As a rapid response to the pandemic, to support young people during that challenging time, Youth Futures delivered a series of grants through the Inspiring Futures programme in partnership with BBC Children in Need.

Through the programme, we provided £7m to 107 frontline charities and social enterprises (85 of which were based in England, which is the focus of this evaluation) to deliver positive activities that support children and young people on their journey towards employment.

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About the research team/evaluator

Youth Futures Foundation commissioned Cordis Bright to evaluate the Inspiring Futures programme. The commissioning and evaluation management was conducted by members of the Impact and Evidence department: Emily Preston-Jones, Catherine Fitzgerald and Shivonne Gates.

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Executive summary

About Inspiring Futures

Towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and BBC Children in Need (BBC CIN) partnered to deliver a £7 million grant funding programme, Inspiring Futures, to deliver positive activities that aimed to support children and young people who face the greatest disadvantage to achieve their potential on their journey towards employment.

The programme aimed to provide capacity in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to adapt and respond to the rising or evolving needs of children and young people in the context of, and the challenges presented by, the COVID-19 pandemic. Inspiring Futures took a broad remit and definition of pathways towards employment with a wide inclusion criteria for project types and target age range (10–24 years old) for young people to be supported. This age range results from the partnership between YFF and BBC CIN, which enabled the programme to focus on future and present employment opportunities by targeting children and young people at different life stages. As such, Inspiring Futures reach across the VCS sector was wide and many types of activities were funded.

Grant funding was provided to 85 VCS organisations in England, with grants ranging between £10,000 and £80,000 in value and 12 to 18 months in length. The programme commenced in October 2020 with most grants coming to an end by January 2023. The programme design focused on responding to the needs and challenges of the sector in the early pandemic by providing longer-term grant funding relative to other funding opportunities available at the time. As the funding was not unrestricted, it could be applied for based on what grantees' needs were in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to empower grantees to use funding in the most effective way for their organisation and the young people they support.

About the evaluation of Inspiring Futures

YFF and BBC CIN funded Cordis Bright to evaluate the Inspiring Futures programme. The evaluation focused on the implementation of Inspiring Futures and how it responded to the needs, challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic; the differences made by Inspiring Futures; and learning for the future.

This report forms part of the evaluation and is focused on the impact of the pandemic on children, young people, families and grantees. It should be read in conjunction with the main evaluation report: **Inspiring Futures evaluation – Final report.**

Inspiring Futures evaluation – Impacts of COVID-19

Launched in December 2020, the evaluation took a co-produced, mixed-methods approach, working collaboratively with young peer researchers and with programme stakeholders throughout.

The peer researchers were formed from YFF's Youth Reference Group, which played an active role in all phases of the evaluation, along with the fund as a whole. Activities they supported ranged from facilitating focus groups through to supporting analysis and co-developing outputs.

The evaluation involved consultation with grantees and children and young people they supported using Inspiring Futures grant funding; consultation with programme stakeholders; analysis of application, mid- and end-point data submitted by grantees; and sense-checking and improving findings and recommendations with young people, grantees, programme stakeholders and policy makers.

The impacts of COVID-19

This standalone report presents findings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children, young people, families and grantees supported by Inspiring Futures funding.

- **The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated challenges for children and young people on their pathways towards employment, at all stages of the journey, and posed new challenges and some opportunities for young people and grantees.** Opportunities mainly related to the use of digital technology in support delivery and in daily life; the challenges were various and wide-ranging including that children and young people's hopes and aspirations were adversely affected by the pandemic.
- **Covid-19 made VCS organisations vulnerable.** Stakeholders described how the disruptive impacts of COVID-19, lockdowns and restrictions, and economic uncertainty threatened the survival of services. They flagged that this was particularly true for community-led or smaller organisations, which they suggested may disproportionately cater to groups who face the poorest employment prospects, for example, ethnic minority-led and/or supporting organisations.
- **Grantees had to adapt their models of support on an ongoing basis** and at times did not adhere to a routine model of support delivery. They agreed that the flexibility of this way of working was a key strength, allowing them to respond to the different needs of children, young people and families, and provide highly personalised support.

The main challenges children and young people experienced in relation to education, employment and training (EET) outcomes were:

- Young people working towards EET outcomes found that EET opportunities became fewer and harder to access. Often, opportunities were postponed, cancelled or shifted online.

Inspiring Futures evaluation – Impacts of COVID-19

- Young people and grantees reported that the picture around EET opportunities remains uncertain, particularly given the current context of the cost-of-living crisis.

Some of the challenges concerning personal and social development outcomes included:

- The pandemic harmed children and young people's motivation, aspirations and confidence, with future prospects seeming uncertain and limited – particularly opportunities for quality employment and experiences that young people find meaningful. This was also evident for those at earlier stages of their employment journey, for example, by impacting young people's engagement and participation with online schooling.
- Across age groups, children and young people's personal and social skills suffered, with anxiety around communication, especially, increasing. Experiencing isolation and poor mental health were key contributing factors that were specifically impacted by gaps in schooling and online teaching for younger children in education.
- There were concerns about the longer-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's wellbeing and mental health.
- The increasing use of digital technology was another theme in children and young people's experiences of the pandemic. This brought both challenges (e.g., ensuring equity of access) and opportunities (e.g., delivering services more cost effectively, and ease of engagement for some).

Looking to the future, grantees agreed that funding will be key to enable them to continue to support children and young people, with longer-term funding a priority where possible.

Recommendations from the evaluation can be seen in [**Inspiring Futures evaluation – Final report.**](#)

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This report is part of the final evaluation of the Inspiring Futures programme ('Inspiring Futures') which was funded by Youth Futures Foundation (YFF) and BBC Children in Need (BBC CIN).

This report focuses on the impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, and Inspiring Futures grantees, a key area of focus for the evaluation. It is designed to be read alongside the **Inspiring Futures evaluation - Final report**, which explores the implementation, impact and learning from Inspiring Futures.

1.2. About Inspiring Futures

Towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, YFF and BBC CIN partnered to deliver a £7 million grant funding programme, Inspiring Futures, to deliver positive activities that aimed to support children and young people who face the greatest disadvantage to achieve their potential on their journey towards employment.

Inspiring Futures aimed to offer grant funding to provide capacity in the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to adapt and respond to the rising or evolving needs of children and young people, and the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Grant funding was provided to 85 VCS organisations in England, with grants ranging between £10,000 and £80,000 in value.

The programme commenced in October 2020 with most grants coming to an end by January 2023. Grants ranged from 12 to 18 months in length.¹ Grant start and end dates varied depending on each grantee's circumstances. However, the majority of grants (56 of 85) began in 2020 and the majority (70 of 85) ended in 2022. The majority of grants (57 of 85) lasted 18 months and of the remainder, the most common grant length was 12 months (23 of 85).

1.3. About the evaluation

YFF and BBC CIN funded Cordis Bright to independently evaluate the Inspiring Futures programme. The evaluation focused on the implementation of Inspiring Futures and how it responded to the needs, challenges and opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic; the differences made by Inspiring Futures; and learning for the future.

¹ This was true of all but one grant, which was eight months in length.

The evaluation was launched in December 2020 and final evaluation outputs were produced by March 2023. The evaluation questions can be accessed in the Appendix of the main evaluation report: **Inspiring Futures evaluation – Final report.**

1.4. Evaluation outputs

This report can be read in conjunction with the following outputs, which provide more detail on the findings included in this report:

- **Inspiring Futures evaluation – Final report** which explores the impact of Inspiring Futures, key lessons and implications, and recommendations from the evaluation.
- **Technical appendix to the final evaluation report.** This technical appendix presents the analysis of secondary monitoring report data collected by BBC CIN and YFF as part of Inspiring Futures.
- **Deep-dive case studies.** Case studies included: (a) review of documentation and data where available; (b) consultation with grantees; and (c) consultation with young people receiving support alongside young peer researchers (YFF's Youth Reference Group).

Alongside these final evaluation outputs, readers may be interested to read:

- Final evaluation summary reports for: (1) practitioners and frontline organisations; (2) strategic stakeholders, funders, commissioners and policy makers; and (3) children and young people. These short summary outputs are geared to different audiences and include relevant evaluation findings and recommendations for each group. These can be accessed **here.**
- Outputs co-produced with young peer researchers about the participation and co-production process:
 - Blog written by two peer researchers partway through the evaluation, which can be accessed here: <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/news/evaluating-inspiring-futures/>
 - Lessons learned and tips for future participation and co-production approaches, which can be accessed here: <https://sway.office.com/N7rAdi9iofNectzY>

2. The Impact of COVID-19

2.1. Overview

The following explores the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people, families, grantees and the wider sector.

2.2. The impact of the pandemic on children, young people and families

The COVID-19 pandemic posed and exacerbated challenges for children and young people on their pathways towards employment, at all stages of the journey. Evidence from stakeholders, grantees, children and young people suggested the following experiences impacted children and young people's needs and outcomes:

- Changes to daily life.
- The role of digital technology.
- Exacerbation of pre-existing needs.
- Disruption and changes to education.
- Changes to pathways to employment.

These had an effect on a range of outcomes, particularly:

- EET outcomes.
- Work readiness.
- Aspirations.
- Personal and social development outcomes including motivation and self-esteem, social and communication skills, and key life skills.
- Mental health and wellbeing.

These are explored in more detail below.

Grantees and stakeholders suggested that some family members of children and young people also experienced some of these impacts themselves during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they also experienced a disruption to daily life, increased isolation and increased use of digital technology.

2.2.1. Experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changes to young people's daily lives

Children and young people's daily routines were disrupted and continued to change in response to lockdowns and social distancing restrictions

associated with the pandemic. This had the following implications in relation to young people's needs during the pandemic:

- **Increase in experiences of isolation and feelings of uncertainty.** Stakeholders, grantees and young people we spoke to suggested that for some young people the pandemic contributed to feelings of uncertainty and to feeling like they had no purpose. Grantees supporting children and young people with a learning disability and additional needs suggested that this experience was particularly unsettling for some of this group, for whom routine and in-person support from professionals outside the family home can be especially important.
- **Worsened mental health, wellbeing and motivation.** Long periods of isolation due to lockdowns and associated restrictions were often damaging for children and young people's mental health and motivation. Social isolation impacted young people's social skills and confidence in interacting with others. The young people we consulted cited lack of social interaction and the desire to meet new people as key reasons for signing-up to receive support from grantees.
- **Worsened relationships with family members.** Staying at home and not being able to leave the house also had an impact on some young people's relationships with family members. Grantees reported that this was a particular challenge for these groups: young people experiencing poverty at home, and LGBT+ young people in cases when relationships with family members were strained.

The role of digital technology

Stakeholders, grantees and young people we spoke to reported that the role of technology in delivering support to young people increased during the pandemic. They reported that this had the following implications in relation to supporting young people's needs during the pandemic:

- **Variations in accessibility.** Young people and families' experience of technology during the pandemic varied depending on their ability to access it. Stakeholders, grantees and young people reported an initial 'teething period' for the use of technology to embed. Some young people struggled to access the technology required to receive support, particularly during the early phases of the pandemic.

There were also issues of 'digital poverty', meaning the disadvantage and exclusion faced by those without access to digital technologies (such as computers or smart phones), internet connection or mobile service, and/or the skills to use these technologies. Digital poverty is often linked to financial poverty or insecurity but could also result from where you live. One grantee commented:

‘One of the biggest things was trying to help young people maintain their education without the technology because of the social demographics of young people we worked with. They didn’t have that technology. It was important to help them engage with education.’

- **Support could be provided in lockdown conditions that would otherwise not have been possible.** Young people who were able to access technology were able to access support, education, training and social activities during periods of lockdown that would otherwise have been challenging or impossible.
- **Digital fatigue.** Stakeholders, grantees and young people reported that some young people became tired of accessing support through digital means. Some young people struggled to remain engaged and motivated, and feelings of isolation and de-motivation increased.
- **The setting for receiving support online.** Grantees explained that young people often struggled to find a private place within the family home to participate in support online without family members getting involved, or their family members being present and changing the dynamic of the relationship with the practitioner.
- **Greater awareness of the benefits and drawbacks of using technology to inform service delivery in the future.** Grantees reported that they gained valuable experience and learning about the benefits and drawbacks of using technology to support young people. Some grantees were keen to return to in-person delivery. However, some support services and EET opportunities remained online or hybrid as we moved into recovery from the pandemic. This has brought benefits for some young people, who can access opportunities further afield from where they live, or who may prefer digital delivery as it may be easier to engage with. For example, if living with someone ‘shielding’ from COVID-19, or if anxieties around in-person activities are a barrier to engagement.

Potential benefits of hybrid support

Stakeholders and grantees agreed that it would be useful to sustain an element of hybrid working. Virtual support enabled people to access services that they might not have been able to access face-to-face due to a variety of reasons including: money, travel, accessibility issues or mental health. Online delivery was important for reaching children and young people who may not have been able to attend sessions in-person. Grantee staff noted that online delivery was particularly useful for engaging children

and young people with low confidence, as it meant they were able to access support on their own terms, for example, by keeping their camera off in live workshops.

Staff members during one 'deep-dive' case study highlighted that a 'hybrid approach' can bring unexpected benefits for non-verbal children and young people. One young person in attendance was non-verbal and, during in-person sessions, wrote on their phone for a staff member to read aloud. Online, they were able to write directly in the chat. Staff suggested this helped create a stronger sense of autonomy.

Disruption and changes to education

For some children and young people in education, the experience of online schooling and gaps in schooling harmed their learning progress. It also contributed to social isolation and poor mental health, which were both key factors that damaged children and young people's development of personal and social development outcomes.

School closures resulted in young people missing large periods of school and led to them feeling like they were falling behind and struggling to 'catch up'. It also led to anxieties about examination results, increased levels of stress and concerns about returning to school or college.

There was a consensus amongst young people and grantees that online learning did not alleviate educational disruption for most young people. As discussed above, access to technology was uneven and many young people found online lessons less engaging and interactive, which reduced young people's motivation to take part.

'Learning online was not good. That's why I had to have a tutor. I attended classes less. The lessons were not good or interactive. If you have a bad attention span already you won't want to join because they were boring.'

– A young person supported by Westminster House Youth Club

Changes to pathways to employment

Young people's pathways to employment² were disrupted and complicated by the pandemic.

Stakeholders reported that pathways have become less linear and are less secure than before. Stakeholders and young people reported that many young people lost their jobs at the start of the pandemic and struggled to find suitable employment as the pandemic continued. One young person commented:

'At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of people were losing their jobs. It was important to find a way to have interviews virtually. Lots of people were working from home and the Job Centres were affected.'

Another young person described their experience during the pandemic:

'I had a job interview the week before lockdown. The day before the interview they said we're not hiring anymore. This massive stillness happened, where you looked outside and it was barren. I was in a house of two – it was a nightmare. It's taken until now to try and get a job again.'

Stakeholders agreed that opportunities to progress on the pathway for employment were also fewer and harder to access, with key factors being:

- **Impacts on in-demand industries.** During the earlier stages of the pandemic, grantees and young people agreed that the lockdowns and associated social distancing restrictions had reduced opportunities in hospitality and retail, which strategic stakeholders and grantees highlighted are common 'first steps' on the employment ladder for young people. Young people also highlighted that creative industries including art, music, and film felt even more out of reach for them during the pandemic, due to restrictions and a lack of practical work experience opportunities.

² The evaluation did not conduct systematic mapping of children and young people's pathways to employment, and as such the commentary on pathways to employment provided here is not comprehensive. Rather, it provides an overview of key reflections about pathways to employment relating to the evaluation questions, from the perspectives of those involved in Inspiring Futures.

- **A lack of work experience opportunities and apprenticeships during lockdowns.** Stakeholders, grantees and young people agreed that there were fewer work experience opportunities during the lockdowns as businesses and other organisations were forced to furlough staff, or shut temporarily or permanently. As a result, some grantees who had planned to facilitate external work experience opportunities were unable to do so or experienced significant delays. Grantees flagged that work experience opportunities, where they were still available, were often poorly adapted to online delivery, as providers had not built in additional support that may have been required for online work experience.
- **More competition for fewer vacancies.** There was a sense that a lack of work experience opportunities and jobs for young people created more competition for fewer vacancies.

Over time, young people saw more opportunities for remote training and working, but there was recognition from stakeholders and grantees that this is not well-suited to everyone's needs and digital poverty is a key barrier.

Looking to the future, the picture painted by grantees and stakeholders around EET opportunities is uncertain. Grantees reflected that as we recover from the pandemic there are more opportunities, but quality and sustainable employment openings are still fewer than optimum.

2.2.2. Impacts for children and young people's needs and outcomes

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on needs and outcomes for children and young people are explored below.

Stakeholders, grantees and young people suggested that many of these outcomes interacted and co-occurred for children and young people. For example, they suggested that for many children isolation contributed to worsened mental health and wellbeing, which in turn affected personal and social development outcomes, and EET outcomes

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pre-existing needs

Stakeholders agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic increased the vulnerability of those already facing complex challenges.

Grantees saw this in relation to those experiencing the following in particular:

- Poverty.
- Homelessness.
- Domestic abuse.
- Substance use issues.
- Mental health issues.

- Generational unemployment.
- Social care involvement.
- Involvement with the criminal justice system.

Grantees explained that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing challenges and, in some cases, threatened to tip families into a state of crisis. The most common experiences of this kind were difficulties accessing basic necessities such as food and accommodation, and threats to safety. As a result, some of this cohort of young people experienced trauma and distress, and grantees reported that the impacts lasted well beyond the early months of the pandemic.

For grantees supporting young people and families facing these challenges, their support focused on addressing these needs rather than steps further along the employment pathway.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's personal and social development needs

Young people supported by Inspiring Futures were reported by grantees to be further away from the employment market than anticipated at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was because of an increase in prevalence and severity of need related to personal and social development outcomes and early 'building blocks' on their pathway to employment, such as mental health issues.

'It was a mental health pandemic, and issues that young people were already facing were compounded. It's extremely important to find a job when you are suffering from traumatic experiences.'

– Staff member at the Proud Trust

The main personal and social development challenges that stakeholders, young people and grantees highlighted were:

- **Worsened aspirations, motivation and hope for the future.** Young people reported feeling uncertain and hopeless about the future, and demotivated by the lack of opportunities they felt they could access, not only for EET but also for opportunities which felt meaningful and sustainable. For example, staff at Sport 4 Life reported that many young people felt as though they had missed out on the education they would

have normally received whilst in lockdown and that returning to school after lockdown was a frightening experience for many.

‘Young people were deflated and demotivated. They felt that everything they had been working towards didn’t count now. It made young people feel further away from the job market than ever.’

– Grantee staff member

- **Worsened personal and social development outcomes and skill development.** Across age groups, children and young people’s personal and social development outcomes suffered, especially their communication, social and teamwork skills but also their confidence. Isolation and poor mental health were key contributing factors to this. Due to the scale of need in this area, personal and social development outcomes, as well as mental health and wellbeing, became the primary focus for many of the grantees we spoke to. One young person shared their experience:

‘You could tell some people in the group gained a fair bit of confidence. Before, I couldn’t speak to people. Now, I can.’

- **Worsened mental health and wellbeing.** Grantees, young people and programme stakeholders agreed that across a range of areas, project types and target groups, one of the more prominent impacts of the pandemic for children and young people was worsened wellbeing and mental health. This was evident amongst children and families whether or not they were close to crisis point in terms of their more immediate needs, and across different stages of the pathway to employment. Anxiety and depression became more common and severe, and physical health and wellbeing were affected. Stakeholders generally viewed poor mental health and wellbeing as the primary reason why young people were not work ready or in the right mindset for employment. Stakeholders shared concerns about the longer-term wellbeing and mental health effects of the pandemic and anticipated that this will continue to be evident in support needs. One grantee commented:

‘We are in a bit of a boiling pot at the moment: the cost-of-living crisis alongside the pandemic’s impact on young people’s mental health, self-esteem, and self-worth.’

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment outcomes

Grantees, young people and stakeholders agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted progress towards employment, with young people losing opportunities and struggling with opportunities being delayed, changed or more difficult to access.

2.3. The impact of COVID-19 on grantees

The effects of the pandemic on children and young people’s outcomes and needs, described above, meant that grantees needed to change and adapt in response.

This section describes how grantees achieved this, often at pace and in challenging circumstances. It outlines the impact of the pandemic on the need and demand for support, and how grantees adapted support delivery in response.

2.3.1. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on need and demand for support

The above challenges and impacts for children and young people increased the need and demand for support.

Grantees reported that adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic and addressing children and young people’s needs had impacted grantee capacity in different ways.

Stakeholders agreed that because of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people, the need and demand for support had increased overall, which had an impact on grantee capacity.

While the experiences of grantees varied, **in the early stages of the pandemic** in particular, grantees suggested that:

- **The need for support increased**, with grantees reporting that the needs of children and families were at times greater than they had anticipated.
- **Reaching and engaging those in need of support was at times a challenge.** Grantees faced challenges with adapting their referral routes to reach children and young people early on in the pandemic, when traditional routes, such as schools, were not operating as usual. They also reported that it was challenging to draw young people back into social contact after a period of isolation and spending more time on social

media. Other challenges were poor mental health and wellbeing, which affected the motivation of young people to engage with support. Some young people became so isolated that grantees highlighted it was a challenge to get them to leave their homes or bedrooms.

- **The wider support landscape played** a role in the need and demand for the support and the type of support grantees delivered. This is described in the call-out box below.

The role of the wider support landscape

Stakeholders and young people reported that at times there was not enough support available for young people and demand exceeded supply. Young people commented that this could increase feelings of isolation. One young person said, *'Young people were wondering what is next for them – it was frightening to think about. There weren't many places of support available to get in contact with and those that existed were oversubscribed.'*

The ways in which other organisations adapted to the pandemic impacted grantees' ability to respond to demand. For example, some grantees reported that there was increased demand for support from VCS services because of capacity issues or reduced in-person service delivery at other services supporting young people, including schools, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Jobcentres and social services. Grantees reflected that at times their services were 'filling the gap', which could further reduce their capacity to deliver their core programme of support or reach their target groups.

Schools also played a role in grantees' ability to reach children and young people in need, and 'join-up' support with other professionals. Pre-pandemic, grantees often relied on schools as a source of referrals for young people and worked collaboratively with contacts in schools to understand and address the needs of the young person. However, this partnership working was affected, or in some cases halted, during lockdowns when schools were not operating as usual or only hosted vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Whilst some grantees reported improvements post-lockdown, others found that some barriers remained, such as limited access to schools to deliver outreach.

During the delivery period of Inspiring Futures, grantees reported that:

- **The demand for support remained high**, particularly as grantees improved the mechanisms of reaching children and young people. In some cases, grantees had long waiting lists when demand exceeded their capacity.
- **Meeting high demand over a longer time period began to put a strain on capacity for some grantees.** Increased demand on capacity was

highlighted as a key challenge for grantees during the pandemic, particularly one-to-one support, which requires more capacity to deliver. This was mainly caused by the increased needs of young people and families, and demand for support. However, grantees also faced challenges with staff absence due to COVID-19, and recruitment and retention.

Challenges faced by frontline staff supporting children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

Grantees reported some concerns for staff wellbeing and burnout as a result of meeting high levels of demand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grantees suggested that exposure to high levels of mental health and wellbeing issues meant some staff were taking on more 'emotional baggage' than previously. Grantees supporting young people with higher levels of needs reported feeling limited in what they could do to help, which could lead to feelings of overwhelm or helplessness. For example, one grantee commented, *'The staff were burning out quicker than before. We didn't come back from Christmas feeling refreshed.'*

In response, some suggested that there may be a need to provide wellbeing support for staff. However, these stakeholders did not identify the type of support necessary.

- **Keeping children and young people engaged.** While referral pathways and support adapted to the conditions of the pandemic, it became challenging at times to keep children and young people engaged. One factor was isolation and worsened motivation to engage in support. Another factor grantees reported was 'digital fatigue' as the pandemic went on, particularly when delivering support virtually.

Looking to the future, grantees reported:

- **Need and demand for support will remain high,** as the impacts of the pandemic continue to play out. This was particularly true of the impacts on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- **Some grantees are concerned about their capacity to respond to high demand.** Looking forward into recovery from the pandemic, grantees agreed that their main concern was accessing funding to enable them to continue delivering support, and where needed, adapt and increase this support in response to young people's changing needs and the long-term impacts of the pandemic. Towards the end of the programme, the cost of living became a key area of concern for the future.

2.3.2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on service delivery

A core experience for grantees was adapting support, both in terms of the delivery format, for example, in response to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and focus, for example, in response to children and young people's needs and opportunities/challenges.

Grantees agreed that learning about adapting their support offer in response to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, and children and young people's needs, was one of the main areas of learning for their organisations and practitioners. The main lessons grantees shared were:

- 1. Grantees feel more confident and capable of adapting support.** Grantees reported that, while challenging, the process of adapting their support offer had at times been rewarding and helped to improve their support offer and strengthen their skillset. For example, delivering support virtually, building young people's motivation and aspirations, and addressing mental health and wellbeing needs. Some grantees suggested that they may explore making changes to their support offer more readily in future, and are more confident about doing so than before.
- 2. Funding that can be used to adapt support is useful.** Grantees reported that the remit of Inspiring Futures funding was useful as it could be used to cover organisational costs and to make adaptations where needed, rather than purely for delivery. Some grantees suggested that more funding opportunities of this kind would be beneficial.
- 3. Adaptations made during the pandemic will be retained.** Grantees agreed that some key adaptations made during the pandemic will be retained. This varied by grantee, but some areas included: using new referral pathways to reach children and young people, including social media and community groups; incorporating more mental health and wellbeing support into their support offer; extending the timeframe of support for some children and young people where needed; and delivering support online, in a hybrid way with (rather than instead of) in-person support.

Adapting support on an ongoing basis

Grantees and stakeholders agreed that as the context continued to change – including COVID-19 restrictions, EET opportunities, the availability and suitability of other services and support, and children and young people's needs – they needed to continue to adapt their approach again and again. This process brought both challenges and opportunities.

One challenge was that adapting in response to changes in the wider context could create a 'stop/start' in the momentum of their support with children and young people. The process of adapting also drew on capacity, and some grantees reported that at times they were balancing:

on the one hand, avoiding a drop-off in contact with children and families who they were supporting and meeting their immediate needs; and on the other hand, stepping back to think and plan for the adaptations needed to their approach.

At the same time, adapting their support offer and ways of working meant grantees were able to respond quickly to children and young people's needs, and to think creatively, develop their skills, expand their reach, and address new and old problems.

The focus of support

Grantees adapted the focus of their support in response to young people's needs, often shifting to focus on earlier stages in the pathway to employment. They also reported adapting outcomes measures to align with the shifting priorities and aims of support.

Addressing immediate needs: Grantees adapted their support offers to focus more on the immediate needs of the young people they were supporting.

For those young people whose pre-pandemic needs were compounded by the pandemic and were closest to crisis, this involved crisis support to meet basic needs, such as access to food, accommodation and safety. One grantee staff member from Trelya commented:

'One-to-ones became more about: what's your situation, your money, food and living situation, rather than employability.'

Another staff member from a different grantee explained:

'There is a real base layer of "things being OK": having a uniform that fits, gas, electricity and food, feeling safe and secure. It is a challenge to meet this every week.'

For those without access to digital technology, some grantees provided access to this via schemes or direct financial support to young people and their families to buy technology and equipment.

For example, staff at Babbasa reported that many of the young people they support live in highly occupied housing with poor internet connection, and often had to share devices. In response, Babbasa started an equipment lending scheme to help young people access their services, as well as online learning at their school and/or college.

Addressing mental health and wellbeing: Support also focused more on mental health and wellbeing in response to a much higher level and prevalence of need than previously anticipated. Grantees expected to retain this as part of their support for the foreseeable future as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic remain evident. For example:

- Mentors at Sport 4 Life UK accessed additional training on how to provide wellbeing support for young people as well as providing employability support.
- Circle Collective, who typically provided employability support pre-pandemic, expanded this to include wellbeing workshops, using their Inspiring Futures grant. The workshops topics included yoga and meditation, managing anxiety, managing sleep patterns, and confident communication.

Refocusing support to earlier 'building blocks' on the employment pathway: Grantees reported focusing increasingly on aspirations, motivations, and personal and social development outcomes, and less so on EET outcomes, in response to the needs that young people presented with and a sense that there were fewer EET opportunities available in the early stages of the pandemic. One grantee staff member at Autism Bedfordshire stated:

'It was about upskilling someone to leave their house for the first time, not getting employment straight away. If you got them a job without doing this, they would leave within a day.'

A common element of this support was providing a space for socialising and informal networking and peer support amongst children and young people. This was often prioritised as a response to the isolation experienced by many children and young people during the pandemic. Other approaches used by grantees included offering more practical activities such as cooking classes, sports and quizzes, and using children and young people's interests as a springboard for designing activities to increase engagement and confidence.

In some instances, grantees focusing more explicitly on EET shifted their focus to personal and social development outcomes, such as building young people's confidence for job interviews, developing goals and plans for the future with them, and helping them to identify and access education and training opportunities as stepping-stones towards future employment.

Support to sustain employment: Some grantees reported providing more support to young people to sustain employment, which sometimes extended the timeframe of their support slightly. This was in response to the young people's needs, but also a recognition that employers were struggling to

effectively adapt to remote working and onboarding people in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adapting target cohorts: There were some examples of grantees working with partners in different ways in the pandemic to meet the needs of young people, particularly joining up support. For example, one grantee adapted their target cohort and referral criteria based on ongoing dialogue with local police, who told them that younger children in the area did not have a safe space to socialise.

The format of support

Grantees adapted how they delivered support in response to young people's needs but also COVID-19 restrictions.

Referral pathways: The typical referral routes used by many grantees collapsed during the pandemic due to restrictions, particularly face-to-face outreach in the community and referrals from schools and colleges (which were not operating as usual, particularly early in the pandemic). In response, grantees adapted referral pathways to try to reach young people in need.

This included advertising and virtual outreach on social media, such as Instagram and TikTok, word of mouth, referrals through community partners and peer referral by those who were already being supported. Grantees have continued to use these new referral pathways into recovery from the pandemic.

Grantee spotlight: Adapting referral pathways

During the pandemic, staff at one grantee could not use outreach or usual methods of recruitment to reach young people, due to social distancing restrictions. Staff adapted their approach in creative ways. They used social media, for example, posting on TikTok, which became popular during the pandemic, and paying a social media influencer to advertise their support. They highlighted social media as a 'key ingredient' in reaching young people.

Staff also introduced a new peer recruitment process in which young people they were already supporting were offered paid incentives to recruit other young people who they knew needed support. A staff member highlighted that this was particularly effective at reaching those young people without technology or social media, who may have been affected by digital poverty.

Grantees also found that closer collaboration with community partners enabled them to open new referral pathways and reach and engage more young people commonly referred to as 'hard to reach' in support. Here,

‘community partners’ refers to other organisations in the local community, including schools, colleges, charities and other informal groups, such as Facebook groups.

For example, staff members at Westminster House Youth Club³ formed a partnership at the beginning of the pandemic with a community group. They worked together to identify people in need in the local community in order to get help to where it was needed.

Grantee spotlight: Community partners to engage young people in support

One grantee reported supporting girls and young women from many different cultural backgrounds. In consultation, a staff member highlighted that their area had recently seen an increase in the number of Syrian girls and young women in need of support. To reach and engage these young women, this grantee collaborated with a community partner with strong connections to the local Syrian community. In addition to improving engagement, working with a community partner that the Syrian young women already knew and trusted helped to establish positive relationships between staff and the young women.

COVID-19 safe delivery: Grantees adapted the delivery of their support to fit within COVID-19 restrictions. Often, this involved shifting to online delivery, for example, mentoring via digital platforms or phone calls, and online sessions, workshops and support groups. The flexibility of the Inspiring Futures grant also enabled grantees to stop delivery if virtual delivery was not suitable for their organisation or the young people they were supporting. In other cases, this involved sending materials and activities to families via post, and delivering in-person support either outside or in settings compliant with restrictions (e.g. limited group size, wearing face masks, and more frequent cleaning).

Whilst grantees were pleased to be able to use remote methods to continue support, they were still keen to find ways to ‘have eyes on’ children and families, particularly those with more complex needs, for example, for welfare and safeguarding checks.

One-on-one support: Some grantees found that more young people required one-on-one support than pre-pandemic, often in response to mental health needs or isolation, which made group work off-putting for the young person. Some grantees also incorporated one-to-one peer mentoring to provide this outlet to young people.

³ [Westminster House Youth Club](#) is a charity based in Peckham, South East London, providing purposeful activities, both recreational and educational, for young people. They used the Inspiring Futures grant to fund tuition sessions, training and qualifications for young people affected by local deprivation who had been isolated due to COVID-19.

Timeframe of support: Grantees shared that they often delivered more intensive or longer-term support to children and young people than pre-pandemic. This is because grantees found it was important to assess needs, build relationships and keep young people engaged with working remotely, and that young people's needs often required more support than pre-pandemic.

Young person spotlight

Rob⁴ valued the relationship he had with his mentor at Sport for Life UK, a sport for employment charity that works with 11-24 year olds to help them prepare for and move into sustained EET. In particular, Rob appreciated that he could receive support from a mentor for as long he needed, saying *'I can keep contacting them when I do have a job, for mental health support or if the job falls through. They will always be there when needed. The door is never closed if I need it.'*

Grantees reported that the main skill they developed was creatively adapting their support offer in response to the changing context and children and young people's needs. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic was a highly challenging time for grantees, grantees and other stakeholders recognised that the pandemic presented an opportunity for grantees to 'think outside the box' about how children and young people could be supported on their pathways to employment, and to consider creative solutions to new and older problems. Grantees reflected that the flexibility of the Inspiring Futures programme was a key enabler in allowing them to take this opportunity.

Grantees' reflections on reaching 'hidden' children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic

Grantees shared similar reflections to the young people we consulted. The challenges of reaching and engaging children and young people sometimes described as 'hard to reach' may be reflective of the wider sector, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and were identified in a literature review of what works to support employment pathways for children and young people, carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies.⁵

Grantees' experiences varied in terms of whether they were able to support as many 'hidden' children and young people as they had hoped.

⁴ The names of children and young people have been changed throughout this report.

⁵ Source: IES (2020). Supporting disadvantaged young people into meaningful work. An initial evidence review to identify what works and inform good practice among practitioners and employers.

Whilst some found that digital poverty and 'collapsed' referral pathways made it more difficult to engage children and young people in support, others highlighted that key adaptations funded through the Inspiring Futures programme had enabled them to reach these children and young people. In particular, this was via using social media to advertise support more broadly and developing new referral pathways, including from community groups.

3. Lessons and implications

- Stakeholders and grantees agreed that due to its flexibility, the Inspiring Futures programme provided a helpful learning opportunity with regards to 'what works' in the delivery of support for children and young people and the implementation of grant funding in the context of a global pandemic. This was particularly true of flexible grant management, which stakeholders and grantees agreed was a key strength of the programme, enabling grantees to respond to children and young people's needs and trial different approaches, which was essential for success during the pandemic.
- Grantees and young people identified that coming out from the pandemic a huge benefit of grantees was that they were able to provide a (safe) space for socialising, informal networking and peer support amongst children and young people. This was often prioritised as a response to the isolation experienced by many children and young people during the pandemic.
- Stakeholders and grantees reported that support with mental health and wellbeing remains an ongoing need for some children and young people. It was reported that mental health and wellbeing support is becoming incorporated in many grantees' programmes of support after Inspiring Futures and the pandemic.
- Reaching and engaging young people in need of support can be a challenge and will remain a strong focus for grantees. More must be done to understand the best ways to achieve this to prevent young people furthest from the labour market from slipping through the gaps in available support. The use of technology can greatly support this.
- Moving into recovery from the pandemic, the funding landscape has changed with fewer opportunities available than in the early pandemic, and some pre-pandemic funding streams paused or no-longer available. Funders and policymakers must support the sector in this regard, to prevent key frontline organisations closing.
- Grantees expressed that non-financial support for capacity building would be beneficial to service providers, specifically regarding training opportunities for staff in two main areas:
 - **Supporting children and young people's mental health.** Grantees agreed that these needs worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some practitioners identified a need for training and wellbeing support for staff delivering in this area, particularly where this was not previously a focus of the grantee's support offer.

- **Applying for funding and exploring new funding routes.** The cost-of-living crisis exacerbated grantees' concerns about accessing adequate funding, and some grantees suggested that support to help identify, explore and access alternative funding streams would be useful, for example, by developing application-writing skills or being linked into available funding.

Recommendations from the evaluation can be seen in **Inspiring Futures evaluation – Final report.**

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Inspiring Futures grantees

Inspiring Futures grantees	
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AutismAble CIC	Pedestrian Ltd
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Beap Community Partnership	Redcar & Cleveland Mind
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Carers Trust Heart of England	Soft Touch Arts Ltd
Centre of Wellbeing, Training & Culture	Sound Connections
Circle Community	Sport 4 Life UK
Company Three	Step by Step
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BBC CIN staff

- The Inspiring Futures project was an effort across multiple teams at BBC Children in Need.

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