

include YOUTH

Evidence to Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement and Social Disadvantage October 2020

The fantastic work at Include Youth shows me that a young person is valued way beyond the number of qualifications they have. That is not to say that qualifications are not important and young people themselves would be the first to acknowledge that they want qualifications. It is the context in which these qualifications are achieved and the learning environment that caring teaching staff create for the young person (Director, Include Youth).

For further information contact Paula Rodgers
Policy Co-ordinator, Include Youth, 14 College Square North, Belfast, BT1 6AS

028 9031 1007 paula@includeyouth.org
www.includeyouth.org @includeyouth

Include Youth

Include Youth is a regional rights-based charity for young people in or leaving care, from disadvantaged communities, or whose rights are not being met to improve their employability and personal development. We work with over 800 young people a year aged between 14-25. Our main offices are in Belfast, Armagh, Ballymena, Derry, Enniskillen, Newtownards and Omagh.

The young people we work with and for include those from socially disadvantaged areas, those who have had poor educational experiences, those from a care background, newcomer young people, young people with mental health issues, young people who have committed or are at risk of committing crime, misusing drugs and/or alcohol, engaging in unsafe or harmful sexual behaviour, or at risk of being harmed themselves. We provide a range of tailored employability programmes for these young people, including programmes delivered in partnership with community-based organisations.

Our Give & Take Scheme adopts a youth work approach to improving the employability and increasing the self-esteem and confidence of young people aged 16 to 24 who are not yet ready to participate in mainstream training. We work across 9 primary sites and a number of outreach locations. The core components are personal development, mentoring, training, work experience, essential skills and transitional support.

Many of these young people have experienced social exclusion, poverty or have other complex challenges in their lives and therefore need additional support to overcome these barriers and positively progress their education, training or employment needs. Seventy-five per cent of young people on the Scheme are care experienced, while over a third has a background in offending. We offer a range of tailored programmes including:

- Core - for young people aged 16-21 referred to us through the Health Trusts, a 12-24 month intensive employability programme for care experienced young people who are furthest away from mainstream education, training and employment opportunities. In 2019/2020 101 young people participated in Core.
- Start Programme – a collaborative partnership employability programme with community based organisation Northern Ireland Alternatives, targeted at young people in the North Down, Ards and Belfast areas. In 2019/2021 111 young people participated in Start.
- Outreach – for young people requiring additional support to move into employment, education and training and delivered through community groups

and schools throughout Northern Ireland. In 2019/2020 191 young people participated in Outreach.

- One to One – for young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. In 2019/2020 13 young people participated.
- Transitional support – for those moving on from our Scheme and into mainstream education, training or employment or access work related courses. In 2019/2020 60 young people received support.

As part of our programme we offer care experienced and other disadvantaged young people the opportunity to gain essential skills and qualifications. Our Learning for Action programme is delivered by a team of in-house tutors who deliver weekly classes and one to one tuition to enable young people to gain qualifications at entry level, level one and level two in Literacy, Numeracy and ICT. Learning for Action is a core component of Include Youth's Give and Take scheme. Young people are given a second chance at learning and an opportunity to gain essential qualifications in settings that are informal, adaptable, flexible and that cater to their individual needs. In 2019/2020 162 young people, on the Give and Take scheme, received 240 qualifications.

Meant to Work is a one to one mentoring service for young people aged 16-24 which helps young people gain and sustain meaningful employment. Meant to Work Plus is delivered in partnership with Belfast Trust and supports care experienced young people access employment and other vocational opportunities. These programmes have supported 70 young people in 2019/2020.

Include Youth also delivers an Employability Service on behalf of two of the five Health Trusts for young people aged 16 + who have had experience of the care system. This service is designed to offer tangible and concrete opportunities to assist young people leaving care to prepare for and engage in work. 179 young people have received this service in 2019/2020.

Strive is a cross community, cross cultural, and cross border programme that engages young people aged 14-24 in good relations, person development and citizenship. We deliver this with our partners Newstart Educational Centre, Northern Ireland Alternatives, Youth Initiatives and Lifford/Clonleigh Resource Centre. The programme is delivered through local youth groups, schools and Youthreach. In 2019/2020 200 young people participated in Strive.

Include Youth also engages in policy advocacy work in the areas of employability, youth justice and policing. This work is informed by relevant international human rights and children's rights standards, is evidence based, including that provided by young people and practitioners and is based on high quality, critical analysis.

Introduction

Include Youth has extensive experience of delivering support, including education and employability support, to young people from disadvantaged communities. We are also one of the main providers of education and employability support to care experienced young people.

We welcome the fact that Panel members in their communications to date, for example to the NI Assembly Education Committee, have made it clear that they intend to work towards addressing the educational achievement of **all** children and young people and that they are taking a broad definition of the terms 'achievement' and 'underachievement'. While we appreciate the need to address the educational underachievement of protestant working class boys, we would like to impress on the Panel the need to consider the educational outcomes of a wider group of children and young people. One group which we believe have had their educational life chances overlooked are young people with experience of the care system.

Policy Context and Evidence on Educational Experiences and Outcomes of Care Experienced Young People

Evidence indicates the outcomes for care experienced young people fall behind those of their non care experienced counterparts. This is especially true with regard to educational attainment. Children who have been in care for 12 months or longer are more likely to experience Special Education Needs (SEN) (23% vs. NI average 5%), achieve lower grades in school (GCSE grades A*-C 54% vs. NI average 86%¹). It is a similar picture when we look at care leavers outcomes. Of those leaving care aged 16-18 21% are SEN (5% NI average), 37% leave school with no qualifications (NI average 0.6%²), 20% achieve 5 GCSEs grade A* - C (NI average 85%), some 19% were unemployed and 10% were economically inactive because of caring responsibilities or sickness/disabilities. In 2018/19 37% of care leavers aged 19+ were Not in Education Employment or Training (NI average 8% for 16-24 year olds), so more than 4 times higher than the NI average. There is also continuing concern about the criminalisation of care experienced young people, with 28% of young people involved in custody subject to a care order in 2018/2019 which is an increase from 17% in 2015/2016.³ For young people in care aged 10 and over, a higher proportion of boys (7%) than girls (5%) had been cautioned or convicted during 2017/18. Furthermore, cautions and convictions were more prevalent in the older

¹ Children in Care in NI 2017-2018, published 12th September 2019.

² 2017/18 data

³ Youth Justice Agency Annual Workload Statistics 2018/2019, published 14th November 2019

age groups, with one-seventh of children aged 16 and over having been convicted or cautioned (14%).⁴ Substance abuse is most common among older care experienced children, with one sixth (17%) of young people in care aged 16 and over identified as having a problem.

The statistics evidence the consistently lower educational outcomes of care experienced young people and over the years several strategies, from both the voluntary and statutory sector have attempted to address this.⁵ These initiatives have emanated from the Executive's draft Programme for Government 2017-2021 and specific indicators, which commit the Executive to improve support for looked after children and to Improving Educational Outcomes for these children and young people. Despite attempts to improve the educational outcomes of care experienced young people, the statistics reveal how far we still have to come to ensure these young people are given every opportunity to reach their full potential. The Access All Areas report compiled by an alliance of voluntary organisations made several key recommendations. We would like to draw the Panel's attention to the recommendations in relation to education and ask them to take these into consideration when developing proposals to improve the outcomes for care experienced young people. Access All Areas key recommendations include:

- 1. Increase understanding of and respond to educational barriers faced by care experienced young people.** *Significant resources are being provided to improve the educational attainment of care experienced young people. While the picture is improving, a considerable gap still exists when compared to the general population.*
- 2. Recognise and respond to unique needs of care experienced young people within educational, training and employability programmes.** *Many care leavers' educational pathways are seriously disrupted. Employability services and alternative education and training programmes are vital provisions. All relevant government departments and agencies as corporate parents are in a position to ensure there is flexibility within these structures to support care leavers and to provide additional employment and training opportunities.*
- 3. Collaborate to reduce financial barriers and obstacles to engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment.** *Corporate parents need to fully address the financial barriers and obstacles faced by care leavers engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment. Current systems create financial disincentives to young people accessing or changing routes into education, training or employment.*

Include Youth would also like to draw the Panel's attention to the financial inequalities that exist in relation to financial support provided to different groups of

⁴ Children in Care Statistics, DoH, 2017/2018, published

⁵ Improving Children's Lives: Draft Strategy for Looked After Children, DoH/DE, 2018; Access All Areas NI: supporting corporate parents to improve young people's journey from care to adulthood, 2017.

young people who are pursuing further education. Young people attending our programme remain ineligible to claim Education Maintenance Allowance despite the fact that their peers attending Further Education courses or mainstream training programmes qualify for this payment. This inequity had previously been addressed with the decision to introduce the Pathways EMA in the Pathways to Success Strategy in 2012. This decision followed a lengthy campaign by young people on Include Youth's Give & Take scheme and their advocates. Our campaign highlighted the inequity of a situation whereby young people continuing on in school post 16, participating in FE or Training for Success all received a financial incentive and support for their efforts, while those young people who faced the most barriers to participation and were the most disadvantaged received no such incentive. On the publication of the Pathways to Success Strategy, Minister Stephen Farry indicated that he had listened to the concerns expressed, including by the Assembly's Employment and Learning Committee, and that the introduction of the Pathways EMA was a response designed to "address the anomaly that exists in the system for those who are participating under the European Social Fund schemes".⁶ Unfortunately, this decision which was based on addressing inequality was short lived and we continue to campaign for our Executive to recognise the financial plight of young people attending Include Youth's Give and Take scheme and similar programmes. Young people participating in such schemes, who are most in need of support to participate in education or training, should be entitled to receive non means tested EMA alongside their peers in mainstream education and training.

Include Youth's Programme Delivery

We know from this evidence that there is clearly a need for dedicated projects to support care experienced young people. Include Youth's programme operate across all IY geographical sites which incorporates our offices in Belfast, Newtownards, Armagh, Ballymena, Omagh, Enniskillen and Derry. While our offices are based in these localities, the young people we work with come from areas beyond these immediate contexts. The young people represent a number of communities and localities but their life experiences and in particular the challenges they face are all too similar. Of the care experienced young people who participated in our Give and Take programme, 75% were from deprived areas, 61% were experiencing mental and emotional health problems, 55% were in unsettled accommodation, 54% had experienced abuse and neglect, 50% had substance misuse issues, 42% had an offending background and 30% were at risk of suicide and self-harm. Similarly, in our Start programme, 95% were from deprived areas, 57% had emotional and mental health problems and 33% had an offending background. Our young people are also at risk of coming into contact with paramilitary organisations. 30% of young people from our Give and Take programme, our Belfast and Western Trust Employability

⁶Official Report (Hansard) Mon 2 July 2012 Vol 76, No 3, page 194

Programmes and our Strive programme have been exposed to paramilitary intimidation and threat.

We know that without the input of holistic, tailored support, the combination of these life experiences presents our young people with enormous barriers to them fulfilling their educational potential and could potentially lead them to being economically inactive.

Our programme addresses each of these challenges outlined above in a holistic way with young people and the individually tailored youth work based approach is particularly effective in making sure young people are fully supported and stay engaged with the programme.

Based on our experience and through the voice of our young people we have developed a Give and Take model of practice comprised of 5 core components: employability, essential skills, personal development, mentoring and transitions support. These are all underpinned by a youth work approach and are delivered by professionally trained staff. We have been delivering essential skills for over 15 years with a high level of success. Initially we accessed essential skills teaching through local colleges, but this resulted in limited success as in 2007 we achieved only 14 qualifications. Include Youth recognised that change was needed and applied for funding to employ its own tutors through the Big Lottery Fund. The success of this was significant as in 2011, 138 young people had achieved an essential skills qualification. Our Essential skills provision has grown from strength to strength through continued support from the Big Lotteries Fund. Over the course of our previous Big Lottery Funded programme we exceeded our targets with 520 young people gaining 853 essential skills qualifications. We are currently in our third and last round of funding from Big Lotteries. Unfortunately this funding is due to finish in December 2021 and without securing a new funding source, this vital work which is increasing the educational achievement and life chances of disadvantaged young people will cease.

We currently have 9 highly experienced tutors that work across 10 sites throughout Northern Ireland offering young people literacy, numeracy and ICT. Working in small groups, our tutors build meaningful relationships with the young people, are compassionate to their needs and understand the importance of working with young people where they are at. Each local team comprises of two youth workers and a tutor/s in literacy, numeracy and ICT who provide the necessary support for young people to address complex issues and barriers in order to achieve qualifications, gain confidence and progress in life. Include Youth provides practical, emotional and financial support as well as a second chance at learning.

When I first came here, I didn't believe I would ever be capable of gaining a qualification. I have come so far. (Give and Take participant)

We know that providing young people with the necessary supports to enable them to sustain education, training and employment opportunities is a critical element in ensuring they reach their potential. The distinctive approach that our Transitions project provides means that help is there for young people to sustain their placement/job. We know from experience that many young people encounter difficulties within the first six months of securing a placement/job and it is at this point that they are particularly vulnerable to falling out of their placement. Include Youth's research report, 'Removing the Cliff Edge', focused on a group of marginalised young people who frequently do not realise their true potential due to the barriers and disadvantages they experience in relation to education, training and employment.⁷ Its aim was to explore what works in enabling care leavers to make successful transitions from supported education and training environments, within which they typically achieve positive outcomes, into mainstream education, training and employment provision, where they tend to face considerable barriers to achievement. The findings of the research informed our current practice with regards to transition support. Our Transitions staff play a critical role to support young people to overcome barriers and ensure they retain their position.

There are many changes and benefits that our programme brings to young people. Primarily it addresses the educational underachievement of care experienced young people and disadvantaged young people and equips them with the qualifications and confidence needed to progress into education, training or employment. A recent evaluation of our Essential Skills programme found that the benefit of providing essential skills to young people was far reaching and included much more than achieving qualifications.⁸ Other benefits included behavioural changes, confidence to speak, changes in beliefs about education and more positive aspirations for the future.

The young people who come without any clear direction travel a longer journey, leaving not just with essential skills but with a desire to be employed and qualified (IY Manager).

The young people that we work with are amongst the most disadvantaged and vulnerable in Northern Ireland and they face a range of complex, personal, social and financial issues and barriers that impact not only on their employability, but on their health and wellbeing. The recent evaluation of our essential skills provision found that 65% of young people on our programmes had no qualification in literacy, numeracy and ICT and 78% of young people joined because they needed essential

⁷ Sara Boyce and Jennie Bronte, Removing the Cliff Edge, An exploration of what enables care leavers to make successful transitions from supported employability programmes into mainstream education, training and employment, 2016.

⁸ David Thompson, Independent Evaluation for Include Youth for Essential Potential (The Essential Skills Component of the Give and Take programme), 2018.

skills. The findings within the evaluation clearly demonstrated that our essential skills programme was meeting a recognised need and that many stakeholders including social workers agree it provides a second chance for marginalised young people to build confidence, gain qualifications and make choices about employment.

How our submission to the panel was informed:

Hearing the views and experiences of the young people we work with is central to everything we do. To inform our evidence to the Panel we consulted with young people across our programmes. Young people were consulted in groups and on a one to one basis. This included young people aged 16- 20 years, who are care experienced and participating in our Give and Take Core project and young people living in socially deprived areas who are participating in our Start programme. We also held focus group discussions with IY staff teams including Senior Staff, Senior Youth Workers and Tutors, as well as with staff from our community partnership programmes, who are involved in alternative education provision. Our staff have years of experience of working with young people who have had negative experiences of the education system. Young people enter Include Youth with very few qualifications, struggling with extremely low self-esteem and still trying to overcome the negativity they felt when they were in mainstream provision. Staff who work in our Give and Take Outreach and Strive programmes are in close contact with a range of mainstream schools and are currently engaged in delivering youth work programmes within schools. Many of the school pupils who Include Youth work with in a school setting are those most at risk of being excluded, dropping out of school and at risk of educational underachievement.

Our evidence will outline the views of the young people and staff in relation to the causes of educational underachievement, the impact of educational underachievement, the possible interventions and what they think works to tackle underachievement. Quotes from staff and young people are in italics.

Young People's Views:

Why do you think young people from disadvantaged areas do less well at school, in relation to exams and qualifications?

The young people feel that the system is biased towards upper and middle class pupils and that some young people are not given the tools or the support they need to achieve in the school setting.

Young people expressed the view that children and young people living in less advantaged areas are dealing with a plethora of other issues which means education is not a priority in their lives as they seek to navigate other pressing social issues, such as income poverty, caring for other family members, drug misuse, abusive relationships, sexual abuse, poor mental health. Not having positive role models and support at home was cited by a number of young people. The reasons young people gave for children from disadvantaged areas not performing well at school included:

Living in a bad community.

More of the class are messing about.

Because of trauma.

Having a bad family upbringing, no support at home, no one to tell you what time to get up.

No one to show you how to do well.

Didn't get the help they needed. Possibly due to encouragement or support they got or did not get from home. It may be true and for some may not be true.

Family situation – not being able to study at home.

I was hungry.

Why do you think care experienced young people perform less well at school, in relation to qualifications?:

A lot of the young people talked about how their education was impacted negatively as they moved into care. One young woman described how she struggled to adapt when she was transitioning into a children's home and as a result she became angry and aggressive at school, which resulted in her education being cut short before she was able to sit any exams. Care experienced young people also feel like they are labelled by the education system and there is an assumption that they are not going to perform well but rather be a distraction to other class members.

They are treated like they are not good enough, so they start to believe that and don't try at school.

There are stereotypes attached to them, they are seen as messers.

They are not encouraged enough, they are seen as causing mischief.

Care children are put under more pressure by teachers, they are constantly under the microscope and treated differently.

I was kicked out of my foster care home and walked to school at 7.30am, I arrived early and all the teachers wanted to know was WHY I was there when it was not school time yet, they had no understanding of what I had just been through that time before.

For young people in residential care, not having the same support you would have if you were in a family home, is a major barrier.

They don't have the same support as everyone else, like a mum or dad.

It's hard living in a care home.

You have no chance of getting homework done in a children's home.

The impact of trauma and other complex needs means that education does not come high in the priority list for many care experienced young people. Everyday can be a case of survival, and school demands are simply not high on the list.

They have trauma and other issues going on.

Their priorities in life might not be about doing homework but more about keeping safe.

Losing family is really hard.

Trauma creates triggers and they are not supported enough, they are just seen as disruptive.

Young people told us how they were treated differently by other pupils while at school and were at times the subject of bullying because of their care status. Frequent placement moves results in frequent school moves and young people can find it hard to settle and be accepted into a friendship group.

Might not have clean clothes.

I was bullied for being in care.

You find it harder to make friends because you are always moving school.

Stereotyped because of their status.

Everyone knowing you have a social worker.

Impact of moves:

I was in 19 foster placements in 4 years, then moved to Secure, then moved to a children's home, all in a short period of time. I didn't want to go to a children's home but was TOLD I would move there from Lakewood. I would have much preferred to stay at a foster placement, much better.

Not getting support when you need it/ school pressure:

Young people talked about the feeling they had of becoming overwhelmed at school and not being able to keep up with the learning. This left them feeling despondent and unable to cope.

Overwhelmed with multiple classes and no additional support.

How do young people view different types of schools?

The young people were very adamant that not all schools were viewed and respected equally. They talked about schools that they thought were more highly regarded, in the form of grammar schools, and those schools that they feel are looked down upon.

Good schools are grammar school, bad schools are normal schools.

You have to be smart to go to a grammar school.

Grammar schools are for posh people, stuck up people.

You wouldn't fit into a grammar school if you didn't talk or look like them.

There is a hierarchy – people who deserve to be in a good school because of their mum and dads jobs.

How does underperforming at school impact on young people?

While many of the young people we spoke to had had negative experiences in mainstream schooling and may have been regarded or labelled as young people who do not care about education or see the value in it, it was clear from their responses that they are very aware of how much there is to lose if you do not achieve in education.

No job.

Poverty.

End up on benefits.

You need education for a job.

You don't have much options for jobs.

You end up thinking you are not good enough for a job.

You don't have any routine.

You find it hard by not being used to being told what to do so you struggle in a job.

You won't work because of low self esteem so you just don't try.

You just follow the same cycle as your parents and family.

As well as understanding the restricted life choices and financial implications that may come about as a result of not achieving qualifications at school, several of the care experienced young people talked about the additional learning they felt they had missed out on by not attending school. They had dropped out of formal education due to the pressures of being in care and as a result of negative educational experiences, but they felt this absence of formal education had left them without the necessary life skills to live independently and manage everyday tasks like budgeting, living independently, cooking, house management etc.

Young people's views on suggested interventions:

Training for teachers on how to interact with and speak to young people:

Many of the young people expressed the view that teachers did not understand the additional issues that some young people were having to deal with and how these issues impacted on young people's ability to concentrate and perform well at school. Many of the young people were dealing with spiralling personal issues which were going increasingly out of control and they did not feel supported by the school to continue on in education.

Teachers should be trained better. Teachers are trained to deal with mainstream students who can cope with formal education structure.

How teachers speak to you, treat you like a human and not that they are better than you.

My teacher used to always point to the 'good girl' in class and say 'why can you not be more like her', 'I did actually crack up one day, and shouted back 'Because I'M NOT HER'

Teachers should be more calm and understanding.

Teachers with understanding.

Teachers asking discreetly why you haven't homework done instead of shouting in front of the whole class.

Maybe if they could think about how hard it is to even get into school some mornings before they start shouting and stuff about you not having something done.

Teach teachers to support you instead of not being nice to you.

Young people can be made to feel stupid for not being able to keep up.

Teachers are too by the book and rigid.

Smaller group teaching:

Smaller classes would have made me feel more supported.

One to one classes.

Smaller groupwork.

More support when falling behind:

Young people are often left on their own with no support.

You don't get the help when you need it.

Sometimes projects or homework need more explanation and then you fall behind.

Have more support systems in place.

The system keeps struggling students down and lets good students progress.

More support for home life/ family support:

Understand the problems that a young person might be having at home.

Offer a better support system.

More support specifically for care experienced young people:

Education is often cut short for young people transitioning into care. There needs to be increased understanding and some flexibility offered to young people going through this difficult time in their life. The young people were asked to consider the list of 13 possible interventions provided by the Expert Panel and while they did agree that the majority of them would help improve attainment, they also pointed out that not all the interventions were relevant to care experienced young people. For

example, while greater family engagement will work for those young people living in families, it does not apply to those young people who are in state care.

Yes, but this (greater family engagement) only works if you have a family.

More understanding about how difficult it can be to get work done outside of school.

They need to put more support in for people like us.

All forms of education and learning should be respected, and pupils treated equally:

Everyone should be treated the same way or have the same options as everyone else, if all schools worked the same way.

Education should meet the needs of all young people, not just those who thrive in a formal setting.

Understand that not ALL children work the same, not everyone is ACADEMIC, teachers think we need to meet these agreed 'TARGETS' but that just wasn't me.

More effective forms of learning:

More interactive work, instead of just standing in front of the board.

Alternative learning for people with additional needs.

Everybody learns differently.

Increased focus on and support for young people's mental health:

There should be more support and talk about it more in school instead of just seeing it on Facebook.

Bring outside agencies in.

Have mental health classes.

Some young people felt that in-house school counselling had a stigma attached to it and many pupils do not want to be seen to be needing the service.

It should be more discreet about being called to see the counsellor, when you are asked in front of the class to see one this causes lots of questions from peers who are judging you.

Young people are calling for schools to be more flexible with pupils who are experiencing mental health problems.

There should be more options – to take a break when you feel overwhelmed.

Early intervention for SEN:

You need early diagnosis, I knew I had autism but wasn't diagnosed until I left school so wasn't offered any support without the diagnosis.

I had extra needs but never had any help.

Improved career advice/ employment support:

Many of the young people want to see an improved career advice service in schools and a greater emphasis on work experience. They also want support for seeking employment in the form of interview training, CV building etc.

Learning how to get a job in school.

Broadened curriculum/ more subject choices:

Young people are asking for more choices in the subjects they are offered and are keen to be offered vocational subjects as well as academic ones. They also want to learn life skills at school.

More vocational courses, life skills.

Learn life skills – learn about the government.

More practical, real life skills.

More youth work approach/ provision in schools:

There should be more youth workers in schools.

They should run youth programmes.

What works for young people at Include Youth?

The young people were asked what they liked about participating in Include Youth programmes, especially in relation to the essential skills provision.

It's interactive.

Learning through doing rather than being spoken to at the front of the class.

They get to know you individually.

Staff are really helpful and you know they care about you.

Understanding staff and teachers who are patient.

Staff don't shout or embarrass you in front of everyone.

They are more approachable.

They are more flexible.

Smaller groups.

Being in smaller groups helps.

The topics we do are relevant.

You get more encouragement – you believe in yourself more.

They helped me recognise my strengths.

You are treated like an adult.

You are helped to make the right choice, not told what is the best choice.

Include Youth don't expect more than the young people can give.

Staff Views

What are the main causes of educational underachievement for care experienced young people?

Educational underachievement is resulting in too many care experienced young people not being able to pursue pathways into training and employment. Our staff team are hopeful that the work of the Panel will serve to refocus the need for government to address the gaps and barriers that exist for care experienced young people and to improve support and capacity to ensure that none of these young people are further disadvantaged.

For care experienced young people, why are the results so bad, why do we have young people coming to us with no inkling of GCSEs or essential skills, they are bright as buttons but the focus on education hasn't been on them, what is going on

with support structures? This is a huge opportunity for us to highlight our young people and the inequalities that exist, the forgotten minority of care experienced young people.

As a large proportion of our work involves improving the life chances of young people with experience of the care system, we would like to draw the Panel's attention to the educational barriers these young people face, which we believe has contributed to lower educational attainment:

- **placement moves and school moves result in school disruption**

Young people often experience multiple moves within their journey through care. This means young people are having to deal with new surroundings, new professionals entering their lives and trying to adapt to these changes can take all the energy of the young person, leaving little capacity to cope with school life. Home moves can also mean a change in school.

They are constantly moving placements or moving from residential to foster and that means they are constantly moving education setting, so there is an inability to settle, they get used to one establishment and then they are moved to another, and then another and then maybe another.

Young people in stable foster care do so much better than those in residential and the number of changes in residential care dramatically impacts on their achievement, if achievement is all about qualifications and really at the end of the day it's not.

For our young people there is a lot of moving around location wise, in terms of different foster placements, they get moved around quite a lot, so they settle into school and then they are moved and have to settle into another school. We had a wee girl who came through to us a few weeks ago, and she was at grammar school and she had significant learning needs. She had been in a school with a special unit and then she was moved to a grammar school and they didn't understand her needs, how to work with her, her behaviour, her social and emotional difficulties and her learning disabilities, so she really failed then because she just acted out the whole time. So that wasn't right for her, she should never have been in that school. So, she was coming to us and she was very far behind and she had the really negative view of education. Moving around is a big issue for our young people.

There are numerous interruptions to a child's/young person's formal education. We know of many examples of young people in care moving from children's homes maybe more than a dozen times in their school life which means more than a dozen different schools to attend. This has to have a major impact on their ability to settle.

- **young people are dealing with trauma and the circumstances that are associated with their entry into the care system and this impacts on their ability to concentrate and perform in school**

There are so many adults in their lives and yet none of them would be what you would call as significant as a mother or father from a normal household. There are too many adults but no one is actually singing the song for them, no one is putting them forward, and being there all the time, the disruption in placements is also harmful.

Achievement in terms of exam results is well down the priority list for our young people because they are struggling to try and get on with just living and life.

- **lack of support specific to care experienced young people within schools**

I think with the group we work there is a massive correlation with this in terms of residential settings, and the fact that young people are dropping out of school as soon as they go into residential care and it's not really getting picked up, and then they turn 16 and there is that massive gap and then if they are only getting tutors one or two hours a week that's just not filling the gap.

I think when you look at Give and Take care experienced young people they aren't just one group, a lot of care experienced young people are doing well, but if we look at the young people coming through Give and Take over the last 5 years you could count on one hand the number that come to us with 5 GCSEs. So, I think we get the same profile of young people coming through, young people with very little if any qualifications and they definitely haven't reached that benchmark of 5 GCSEs.

- **stigma attached to being in the care system/ bullying**

I think it is how they are treated too. I've had young people say to me, my whole class knew that I was in care and it could've come from a comment from a teacher. I think how some of them have been treated, then they don't want to be in that environment where everyone knows what their situation is.

It explains why they are rebellious, even when they are showing the self harm scars, our young people would show those to other young people in care but then when they go into school they hide them, they are buying into this whole thing, that they are labelled.

Another reason why care experienced young people do not do as well as their peers is one of stigma. Unfortunately, this can come from other young people in the form of bullying or from teachers from their perspective of young people who are care experienced.

- **teachers lack understanding about the complex issues young person brings to the classroom**

Not all teachers take the time to recognise why young people behave in certain ways and when they do, find a way to support their needs.

- **lack of support within schools to address mental health issues – many of the young people IY works with are struggling with poor mental health and this undoubtedly impacts on a young person’s ability to learn.**
- **lack of teacher training on how to deal with challenging presenting behaviours, behaviours which at the heart are symptoms of the child's emotional and often fragile state.**
- **young people report feeling worthless and that they see themselves as having no value/ low self-esteem which results in low confidence in their own academic ability.**

The young people in care that I've worked with over a long period, almost all of them have had a tremendous sense of personal failure, they don't feel they are valued. They don't value themselves very often, they don't think they can succeed. And it takes a lot of work setting up things where they can succeed before they can start to see that there is a possibility of them succeeding. I had one girl say to me yesterday, I have one brain cell and it isn't working properly. Things like that are heart-breaking to hear. And they have loads of potential – all of our kids have loads of potential – they just don't realise it – and there is a self-fulfilling prophecy going on there.

Care experienced young people are not one homogenous group and some perform well at school but IY consistently sees young people who feel let down by the education system and branded as failures. This is especially true for those young people with experience of residential care. The education system has at times not responded to their complex needs and provided the support they need, support which is so vital before they can even be in a place where learning can take place.

Essentially nothing has been done about it, for a long time we have been talking about underachievement of children in residential care and really nothing has been done to tackle that, that I have been able to see.

I've spoken to young people who say they felt held down by the system. The ones who were struggling were pushed down and the ones who could thrive thrived, but they felt put to the side, care experienced young people were treated completely different to young people who thrive.

Care experienced young people face more barriers to education than other young people.

It's their whole self-worth that is getting attacked, so you don't believe you are able to achieve, it's beat into you from your peers, from teachers, from everybody, so you believe that you can't achieve, so you want to be good at something so you might be the biggest clown in the class or the one who does the most messing or is disruptive.

Causes of educational underachievement for general population:

Poverty and the corresponding impact of economic deprivation on home life, the personal development of all family members and ultimately children's ability to learn was cited as a major cause of underachievement. The corresponding factors included:

- Poor health within family members, both mental and physical, impacts on children's education. Poor health can result in parents not being able to ensure school attendance and there is school absence as a result.

if parents are drinking or there is drug abuse or they have mental health issues, then they are not putting pressure on the kids to go to school, they don't know where they are and truancy happens... there is parental absence.

- Food poverty

The impact of poverty is horrendous and has a ripple effect across all aspects of people's lives. Some kids simply don't have enough food to eat, or decent clothes to wear. How society expects these young people to engage and succeed in school is beyond me.

- Debt

Debt and financial poverty put a lot of pressure and stress on families and this has a detrimental impact on the child's learning and school life. Poor children can be affected cognitively, behaviourally and mentally and may do less well than their peers.

- Low paid jobs/zero hours contracts/insecure employment/having to juggle multiple jobs leaves families exhausted and unable to contribute to learning in the home.

In terms of austerity, huge impact on family life. Families have multiple jobs so how much time do people have for home schooling or home support, by the end of the day people are exhausted and that transfers onto the children.

- High levels of stress within homes which results in parents unable to offer support for education, as their efforts are solely on survival and getting through each week

Poverty affects the quality of home life.

- Digital poverty – families are unable to afford internet connection and devices, leaving children at a disadvantage in terms of home learning.

It also affects – if a child comes from a family where there are no books, no Wi-Fi, no equipment, nobody there who can help them because school depends a lot on work being done outside of school in order to get the grades that they want.

- Insecure housing and threat of homelessness.
- Private space within the home can be limited resulting in children not having a quiet and dedicated place to study
- Stigma of poverty – some young people come to school hungry and without decent clothing, resulting in the child feeling alienated and embarrassed and they may become victims of bullying as a result.
- Children are unable to avail of out of school experiences that would broaden their educational opportunities such as recreational activities/school trips etc and may not be able to partake in after school activities.

Intergenerational impact of the low value placed on education – children have parents and grandparents who have not achieved educationally and have had negative experiences within formal education. As a result, there is a low value and low priority placed on education and some families are reluctant to engage with school staff due to their own past experiences or feelings of being intimidated or judged by educational professionals.

There can be a low value on education by parents.

That has come up with meetings I have had with young people – generational barriers, grandad didn't go to school, dad didn't go to school, children don't go to school.

There is also that thing about inviting parents in and some parents feeling so intimidated because of their own poor school experience, and in terms of the exclusion stuff, a lot of the problems are around a parent feeling strong enough to go in and challenge the school, some talk about having been to the same school themselves and how it brings back such bad memories for them and that transfers onto the child and they maybe have to face the same principal that they had and the feeling that they are being judged.

Too many of our young people's families don't engage at all with the school because of their own negative experiences.

Impact of the exam culture and emphasis placed on academic achievement – the narrow focus on educational achievement being seen predominantly as securing exam grades and the resulting pressure on schools to push out high grades has

meant that children who are struggling or are less academic are left to feel like failures. This leads to an unhealthy learning environment where the holistic needs of young people are not being met.

Because the focus in education has been on us getting the best exam results. Because of the exam system a lot of the things that are important in education have been missed out and the children who are seen as the ones who are going to fail, much less emphasis is put on them, ... teachers are put under pressure to focus on the ones that could get the exam, to push them. The ones who are not going to get the exams, they can be more or less ignored.

From a teacher's point of view, in England, one quarter of all young teachers leave within the first 5 years, because they are not doing what they expected to be doing, which is teaching. Instead they are administering test after test, test after test, leading towards exams, and not being able to deal with the children who need the most help, it's a real crisis in England.... Teachers here are equally frustrated and the ones who decide to stay become cynical about it – well if that's what we are supposed to do, to get them through exams, then that's what we'll do.

If you have a class of 30 and you are trying to get through a curriculum and somebody is struggling, it's hard, some teachers don't want to know.

I know that in the mainstream schools the focus is probably put on those kids who are more astute and can perform and can do the test ... this pressure they put on teachers to ensure young people attain and the young people who aren't of academic quality, are suited to a more vocational route or can't deal with those sort of pressures, they are forgotten about.

Achievement/underachievement in education is unfortunately defined in very narrow terms. Our view of satisfactory progress is 5 or more GCSEs at grades A to C. Success is probably seen as A levels and entry into University. The problem here is that all the energy of the school staff and all of its resources are geared towards achieving these end results. Young people who fall behind are left behind. In some schools young people who are deemed not able to achieve the standard level of qualifications are not counted in statistics so as to ensure the best possible outcome for the school.*

Transfer test – the continued existence of the transfer test has resulted in schools being seen as either a 'good' or 'bad' school and children being labelled as failures at 11 years old. Young people absorb this narrative, and this impedes their educational journey and how they see themselves.

Big one for me around post primary is the grammar school situation and the whole inequality that exists must be touched on.

The selective system does a lot of damage. Whatever way they dress it up, if you haven't got your 11 plus, you've failed. And a lot of adults that I have spoken to have felt a failure from the point of taking their 11 plus.

We still have a selective system and if you want that to remain then you have no consideration for young people suffering from that and the young people even below that, who we deal with here at include Youth, well they just don't feature at all.

Lack of flexibility within the system – young people who struggle at school and who may need alternative learning arrangements or have different learning styles are not having their needs met. Young people feel they are being left behind and the lack of availability of effective interventions can mean they are at risk of totally disengaging from education.

There is a scenario where trauma has happened in a young person's life and then they are off school for a while and then they go back, the school have to follow the curriculum so there is no leeway for anyone who has missed schooling. There are classroom assistants who try to pull them back but if you have missed 3 months of school you are not going to catch up, especially Y11 and Y12, how can you get back on track again – and then that is when a lot of disengagement happens. Schools don't offer anything else. Some schools might offer essential skills but again it is all target driven for Level 1 and Level 2, when some of these kids need to go in at entry level, to start at bottom and work their way up. I think schools need to offer an alternative programme for those young people who have got left behind or who are struggling to meet the curriculum of GCSEs.

Lack of mental health support – young people are increasingly presenting with mental health issues, which if not addressed and adequately supported, impact massively on their ability to learn.

Now more than ever this is so important. We don't know what the long term/lasting effects of Covid will be, from not seeing friends, not sitting exams, families affected by loss/money issues/isolation etc. I think this has been an issue but will definitely be more prevalent in the future.

Lack of support and training for teachers to deal with challenging behaviours or to engage with young people experiencing difficulties.

Others would have talked about teachers just totally ruling them out, they didn't care or they weren't interested, they were maybe too results driven or maybe just didn't understand the behaviours, just seeing the bad behaviour and not understanding the underlying causes, but that goes back to teacher training as well. Teachers aren't actually trained how to communicate with children and young people, especially those who have been through trauma, how much child protection training is done, or trauma informed practice, because you are going to have all sorts of kids in your

classroom, and I think that can depend on the leadership of the school and what emphasis is put on it.

Unidentified special needs – too many young people are going through formal education and not having special needs identified from an early stage. When needs are identified it can take too long to secure the necessary support and the young person's education has already been impacted on negatively.

One of the things I have experienced is early identification of SEN, for child in primary school, a lot of the kids just fall under the radar, go throughout their school life and it's not identified or if it is identified the lack of resources or support that is available for those children, whether they are care experienced or not, I think it is across the board, this lack of early identification definitely leads to educational underachievement.

Legacy of the conflict – some staff talked about the fact that some young people are indirectly affected by the lasting impact the conflict has had on their families and parents. Unmet mental health needs exist within some families. Young people living in particular areas are also still very much under threat of intimidation or involvement with paramilitary groups, which will undoubtedly impact on young people's engagement levels at school.

I live in working class areas of north Belfast and there is still people who won't go to different parts of the city or even into the city centre because they are afraid and this is coming from their parents because they haven't experienced the troubles, maybe the odd fight, but it is there and there is a fatalistic feeling about it – that there is nothing that can be done about it. Leads to a lot of mental health issues because if your closest family is struggling from mental health issues then there is a high likelihood that you are going to suffer yourself, from anxiety and depression.

And there is still a lot of paramilitary activity in working class areas and it does impact on young people.

A lot of problems in families are to do with drugs but it may be addiction to prescription drugs that are highly addictive and they are being given out like sweeties, especially at the height of the troubles and people became addicted.

Staff views on suggested interventions

Some staff felt strongly that the list of 13 interventions proposed by the Panel would not necessarily work for the young people that Include Youth works with, and suggested that a different list should be developed which would be more relevant for young people who are experiencing particular challenges.

That list doesn't work for our young people.

I think the interventions are great and you wouldn't criticise them, but they are very mainstream and a lot of them are not relevant for the young people we work on Give and Take.

Regarding family engagement, what happens if there is no family – there is nothing in that list for that cohort.

A lot of those interventions are not for our cohort.

Looking at that list I can see it is very targeted at mainstream provision. A lot of the young people sit outside mainstream. This is all about improving education in schools which is brilliant but we know the ones mostly likely to underachieve are the ones most likely not to go to school, so I think there has to be targeted approach that brings in different interventions for care experienced young people, especially for those ones residing in children's homes.

Although staff felt that some of the suggested interventions would not work for our young people, they were on the whole positive about the interventions. They did rate the 13 interventions and individual staff each selected the top 5 that they believed could be the most effective. While there was some variation of opinion, there were several interventions which were consistently rated highly. These included:

- Greater focus on children and young people's mental health, well-being and resilience
- Addressing income poverty
- Effective intervention for special educational needs
- Raising aspirations
- Greater family engagement
- Effective classroom teaching
- Stronger links between school and the community
- Effective school leadership

Staff provided some insight into their reaction to a number of the interventions. What follows is a snapshot of opinions on why staff regard various interventions to be important.

Greater focus on children and young people's mental health, wellbeing and resilience:

We chat informally to the young people at breaktime, in the corridors, but it needs to be formalised and they can't expect it to be part of the entitlement framework or various money pots, it needs dedicated funding that is protected and is around improving the well-being and resilience of our young people, because young people

have resilience, just a lot of them have very negative resilience, to be able to cope in a setting where they are failing, so be able to sit stubborn and refuse to put pen to paper for 5 hrs is resilient – but it is their defence mechanism, how they cope with it and what they are dealing with in their own minds.

If not effective intervention for this (mental health), achieving within education will be a huge challenge.

There is a stigma attached to in house counselling.

Raising aspirations:

Raising aspirations is very important to break the cycle of underachievement linked to socio-economic background.

I truly believe this is the most important intervention. Many children feel worthless, stupid, from a young age if they don't know how to spell a word other children in the class know, or if they are in the lowest reading group. I really feel as educators we need to help children understand that anything is possible. We need to teach them about people who have come from nothing but worked hard and achieved their goals. We need to help them form a positive attitude and help young people form resilience.

There is something about direction and having a goal, they (the Panel) do mention aspiration but career advice in school is woeful, young people have no idea what jobs exist out there, so that focus on the range of jobs that you can do and really looking to see what people's strengths are like we do in Include Youth – a model of getting to know the young people, and their personality and what they enjoy and do that in a more meaningful way.

Several members of staff referred to the transition year which is available in the Republic of Ireland and recommended this approach as being a good way for giving young people the space they need to think about their future career. This transition year dedicated to both opening up opportunities and increasing pupil's awareness and experience of different employment pathways, while at the same time lifting the academic burden of assessment and exams for a period of time, seems to be a possible model which could give young people the chance to think about their aspirations.

In the South they have an option to have a transition year, so the young people can almost take a year out of school , but they are not out of school, they are still attending school but they have a chance to explore their options and what their next

step might be rather than just rush through the school process. Good concentrated time to think about what they want to do.

Effective school leadership:

I have seen this first hand with my own children's school. Leadership starts from the top, if teachers feel appreciated etc. they will do their best for the children, they will work hard. If the right leadership is in place the knock-on effect this has for everyone (staff and pupils) is amazing.

I think that effective school leadership has a trickle effect and if you have a principal with a strong leaning towards good and effective pastoral care, who values staff and pupils and family/community interaction then that will encourage teachers and other staff to also value this. Good leadership I think would help teachers feel less intimidated dealing with difficult/sensitive/child protection issues as they would feel more supported by their school to tackle these issues. Also means they'll be more likely to encourage community support/ partnership working.

I think that without this everything else falls down. The tone set by leadership dictates everything else at the school.

Effective classroom teaching:

If a lesson is boring or a teacher is unapproachable very little learning will take place. It is really important for children to try to get excited to learn and for it to be fun for them. It is so important that they feel safe to ask questions.

Catering to all abilities and various learning styles and not giving up on challenging children and young people.

A positive relationship is the cornerstone of effective teaching. A child will not learn from someone they don't like.

Effective intervention for special educational needs:

It is essential that those most in need of support have a good provision and that intervention is provided in a timely manner.

This is really important as some children can slip through the net without ever having support with special educational needs, or never being assessed, it's not until they are much older that difficulties come to light. It's also important that any assessment

or outcomes are shared with FE after school, so that the young person continues to get the supports and interventions recommended during school.

Greater family engagement:

I know they say about greater family engagement, but there is a need to upskill the parents so that they can provide that support at home, especially when there isn't money for tutors. It has been a long held ambition of ours to provide for parents as well. And support around behaviours for parents too. But what do they mean about family engagement, because those parent teacher meetings are one thing but actually involving them in school life, letting them know what it is like for children in the classroom and how they can best support them is what is needed.

Greater family engagement – yes, we have great family engagement. We ring every day and they know we are here for them, all through lockdown we checked in with them to see they were ok. Family relationship goes both ways, relationships break down if the child is failing under the umbrella that school has set, if the education system is excepting stuff from them, then parents feel they are failing in their parenting, under the current education system.

In mainstream school they only contact home if the child has done something wrong, here we contact them when the child has done something good.

Sharing what is happening with the children and young people in the classroom on a regular basis – both positive and challenges. Making parents and family members part of the school community and comfortable in the surroundings. Greater opportunity to receive feedback and updates throughout the years and attend school events at various times of the day to suit working patterns. Creative use of technology to provide regular updates.

Stronger links between school and community:

Stronger links between school and community – schools are an integral part of the community, and I am aware of a number of schools that are very active in this respect, and this has many benefits. It would be great so see more schools across NI following suit.

Greater focus on early years development:

Early intervention is key, so that children can transition through school more smoothly, develop positive experiences to learning and barriers are addressed at early age.

Greater support for early years development would help children who have experienced trauma to 'catch up' and would even the playing field to an extent. It would also be beneficial to help young people learn about identity, resilience and relationships at this stage with a greater focus on how they relate to the world around them. This would be particularly beneficial for children who have experienced a lot of instability or uncertainty early in life to adjust to a new educational setting.

Lifelong learning:

Educational underachievement is often generational, with many parents and grandparents leaving school early with very little or no qualifications. Many didn't need formal qualifications as they left school on a Friday and started work on the Monday. Those days are gone. Many parents and carers are not equipped with the necessary skills to support their children with homework and other life skills... this is where schools could play an integral role – offering programmes to adults, and thereby creating a greater sense of community.

There should be a focus on community education as well as school as this works well and doesn't have to be age limited. Resources need to be invested if the government is serious about life- long learning.

Engaging curriculum:

When they (young people attending alternative education centre) do vocational training they do well, and then all of a sudden they want to do well, they see how well they can do, they have aspirations, whereas when they were in school all they were learning was maths, english, science, history, religion – stuff they didn't want to do.

If someone could just be innovative and think how do you divide the curriculum where you are giving young people the opportunity to excel at what they do best, and to achieve the minimum of what the government wants them to achieve, so english, maths, ICT, absolutely, we need all of those – to a level. But even the maths curriculum needs revisited. So if you revised it and had academic and vocational mixed from 1st form.

It's not fair that you have kids with potential and it is not until 15 and 16 when they go to a training organisation that they realise they are good at something.

More focus should be given to the individual, their skills, interests and aspirations.

What is missing from the list of suggested interventions?

Staff were asked to suggest what interventions were missing from the list. What follows is a number of interventions that staff would like to see included.

Training for teachers:

There was a strong level of support for more training to be provided for teachers on how to interact more effectively with young people who were experiencing difficulties; how to become better informed about the complexities of some young people's lives; how to deliver trauma informed practice.

I thought when I started teaching, coming from a working class background, I thought I would be clued in but I wasn't, I thought I had a sense of young people who had had a hard deal but then I started working at IY and I realised that there was a group out there who are even suffering more.

Teachers maybe come from very restricted post codes, there are very few from working class backgrounds or care backgrounds so there is a very limited understanding to start with. Unreal expectations and very low expectations whenever they (pupils) don't pass the test.

How many teachers do you have that were trained 20 plus years ago. St Marys very recently would have brought us (alternative education provider) in to do behaviour management and run programmes with teachers telling them about the types of young people they will meet. The very fact that teacher training colleges are bringing our field of work in, to explain what we do and why we do it, is giving an understanding to teachers of the type of complex needs that exist in mainstream school before they enter into centres like ours. But that didn't happen years ago so there are many teachers out there who don't have the training to deal with the children coming through and presenting with issues and behaviours in today's age.

Skilled staff who can build effective and positive relationship with young people, this will support young people to learn and to unlock potential. Trauma informed practice should be at the root of all educational underachievement.

Promote participation and listen to young people:

Include Youth believes that listening to children and having participation at the heart of everything we do, results in young people feeling respected and subsequently improves the service we deliver and ultimately better outcomes for young people.

We need to really listen to what young people are saying and build work around their interests.

Change the focus of education from a drive to achieve grades to a more holistic approach which values all children, all abilities and all avenues of learning:

Focus less on academic achievement and more on the holistic development of children and young people.

Teachers are now driven by results and there is a relationship part of education that just seems to be missing and that is key to how we (IY) are successful in terms of connecting with young and going at their pace and that doesn't happen in schools, if young people fall behind the chances are that they are going to be left behind and that's symptomatic of all schools because of the rat race they seem to be in in terms of competition.

Schools are very well placed to know their kids and I'm not saying every school is brilliant at it but lots of schools are good at identifying early on that mainstream is not the place for certain young people and they need to be educated in a different environment and in a different way and they can't do that in 28 30 pupil classrooms. , teaching to the middle, if you have to have flexible timetable that is identified to meet the needs of a certain child with a variety of issues going on in their life, how do you do that with 28 other kids in the room. You can't place the blame in the mainstream provision, the whole of the education system needs rewritten.

If pressure was removed and it became a more enjoyable experience they would get more out of young people.

Flexible and alternative learning styles and environment:

I think our young people are not suited to that type of learning (mainstream education), set learning, they need more attention, they need different styles of learning, the ones that come to us who don't have learning disability ... the reason they are having problems at school is down mostly to the school environment, if you are sitting in a class of 30 people and they are all supposed to go along at the same pace, with one teacher, it's nearly impossible. Some people learn by listening, others like to be doing things or using their hands, having a conversation, loads of different ways of learning.

Ensure cross-departmental buy in:

Our staff and partners talked about the need for any approach which is developed to tackle underachievement to be cross departmental in nature. Such are the complex issues that many of the young people present with, it is clear that unless other

government departments are also contributing to the overall action plan, the success will be limited. As one of our partners explained, buy in from the Department of Health is critical:

Our kids come here attending CAMHS, some of them experience multiple suicide attempts from themselves and from members of their families, there is addiction, gambling, drug misuse, anxiety depression – all of those are health matters so why isn't health feeding into education. The education sector is struggling massively because it is not just an educator, it is a physician, a mental health expert.

What has worked to address educational underachievement?

Include Youth model of learning:

We are confident that what we provide at Include Youth in terms of direct service provision to some of our most disadvantaged young people is directly addressing educational underachievement. The young people in our programmes benefit from our model of working and succeed in achieving the necessary qualifications for them to proceed to mainstream education, training and employment. Evaluations of our essential skills provision demonstrate that there is a continued need for essential skills to be delivered as part of small group youth work setting, linked to personal development and employability. As our independent evaluator says:

The young people who join the Give & Take Scheme carry varying levels of trauma both from their childhood, and that are ongoing, resulting in barriers to education. A mainstream further education setting, while suitable for some children and young people from a care background, is not suitable for many at this stage. If mainstream was an option, it would have worked before now; something different is needed. The Give & Take Scheme provides space for nurture in the form of belonging to a group (for Start and Core), and relationship with youth workers and tutors helps change attitudes to education. In time this changes attitudes to and choices in employment, and ultimately leads to greater choices in life.⁹

The strengths of Give & Take's Essential Skills provision are the warm relationships the young people have with the tutors, which are different to previous relationships with teachers, and that Essential Skills are taught in small groups making the learning relaxed, informal and appropriately paced. Coupled with this specialised teaching is the support that the young people receive from trained youth workers who are on hand to help young people deal with everyday challenges. This circle of support build's young people's confidence and helps them see that they can achieve.

⁹ David Thompson, Independent Evaluation for Include Youth for Essential Potential (The Essential Skills Component of the Give and Take programme), 2018.

We hear testimonies from young people who confide in us that some of them have been told in the past by teachers that they are 'useless' and 'are not capable of learning'. Our staff have a different approach and start with the importance of the relationship where trust is built, and a mutual respect gained. Encouragement, starting at where the young person is at and going at an appropriate pace are all factors in what enables our young people to grow. Young people achieve qualifications with us for all these reasons. The greatest achievement our staff can boast is not that they have helped young people to achieve qualifications but they have shown the young person that they are able to learn and to achieve and this is the beginning of a journey not the end.

Specific interventions for care experienced young people and disadvantaged young people such as that delivered by Include Youth are reversing educational underachievement. We know from our experience that young people who previously were 'failing' within educational mainstream settings have excelled within the holistic, youth work and strength-based approach that Include Youth offers.

A lot of them have fallen behind and are embarrassed, if they have disengaged from schools from whatever trauma, some off school 3 - 4 months or longer and really hard to go into classroom and expect them to catch up, they feel will never feel good enough.

Our young people need one to one support because they come in and they have themselves written off as thick, they have really low self-esteem, really low opinion of themselves.

It's a strength based approach, rather than seeing all the barriers, and what they don't have in their lives, and all the risks and what they're presenting with, it's seeing the positive things that the young people are bringing, focus on those and building up their self-confidence and self-esteem, because they don't have it when we meet them. It's massive for them.

We cater to not only the educational needs of the young people but also the personal, social, and emotional needs. Relationships are at the core of our work and young people are supported by staff, both youth workers and tutors, who are intent on building up self-esteem and confidence.

Relationship too is critical – any teacher who is effective must have developed a relationship with the person they are teaching and the young people that we are dealing with are crying out for relationships and if that isn't happening whether that be at tutor level, key worker level, social worker, youth worker level, then those individuals that are interacting with them are totally meaningless to them, because its mind boggling how many professionals they have to deal with and they need one or two meaningful ones.

Relationship is key to it and if that get relationships right at mainstream and EOTAS, our young people will succeed at greater levels.

Offering individual educational support within a relationship-based environment. The relationship must come first, the educational improvement will follow if the relationship is maintained

Learning takes place in a flexible environment and is both interactive and participative and delivered at a pace which suits the young person. Teaching takes place in small groups or a one to one basis.

Flexibility – we have flexibility to do one to one – if they need extra tuition, work with what they have and respond to it.

Communication is maintained with all adults and professionals involved in the young person's life. We value the views of our young people and we listen to them and seek to adapt our service as required.

We offer a person-centred approach.

We look at the individual as a whole.

We are non-judgemental.

We work at their pace, it maybe takes one person 6 months to get their level 2s and it might take another 2 years.

We celebrate success.

We continue to provide support for our young people as they move beyond the Include Youth programme and venture into mainstream education, employment and training.

If their only experience is of education has been bad then they drop out – they come to us and usually they haven't come straight from school, they have been out for a while, and when they come to us the first thing I say is this is not school, you have to want to be here, you have to want to come in, if you need to take a break, take a break...we are going to treat you like adults, because the experience of school has been so hard and all our tutors are brilliant, they work at their level and go at their pace. School would have been traumatic for some of them.

What young people say about Include Youth programmes?

My time in Give and Take was a wonderful experience. I started off with no education whatsoever, having failed multiple GCSEs at school I felt like an

absolute failure. Give and Take taught me that learning can also be a wonderful experience, in my two years in the programme I started my music career, got my Maths and English and started a full time employment. With the help of Give and Take I have been working there over 8 months. I also met three wonderful woman that educated me, but most importantly showed that they cared for me Julie, Sheila and Linda, there's no Give and Take without them, they really show their passion for work, even when it gets hard, they always do their best to the ability and I can really appreciate that. I wish everyone I worked with lots of happiness and I want to thank Give and Take for giving me a second chance at life.

Young people frequently talk about how the good relationship with the tutor helps them learn.

The tutors make you feel better... when I first came here I couldn't talk to anybody. But when I got talking to the tutors, that changed.

It's not just a job to them, they do genuinely care... when you achieve something, people actually notice it.

They're all dead on to talk to.

I didn't go to school very often, it's a lot easier doing Essential Skills because the tutors are very friendly.

I left school before I was sixteen with no qualifications. I didn't get on with the teachers, they were too strict, there was no freedom... In Start, the tutors would have sat beside you and helped you through it.

In school, you're a number, but in here the tutors talk to you like you're a person.

Young people appreciate the flexibility the programme offers and the opportunity to have a say.

Tutors know we're not on all the same level, so they try their very best to make it multichoice.

We do have votes on what we'd like to do... we always get a couple of options... we get to put our own ideas into things.

A survey conducted as part of a recent evaluation of our essential skills programme, found that of the young people participating in the Give & Take Scheme, 78% said their primary reason for joining was to get Essential Skills qualifications.

[What attracted me was] The qualifications, because I left school with none.

I joined because I wanted Maths and English essential skills, and then I progressed. If it hadn't been for Start, I wouldn't have qualifications.

The pride that young people feel when they do achieve is immense.

[The certificate] Makes you feel good about yourself and proud of yourself that you actually achieved something that you tried to get so many times before.

It was brilliant. Because I've never got anything like that before.

When I first came here, I didn't believe I would ever be capable of gaining a qualification. I have come so far.

Strive participants talk about how involvement in the programme has increased their self confidence and encouraged them to try new things.

Strive has made a huge difference in my life, especially during lockdown. I feel more positive about staying in contact now, even if there is another lockdown. It has given me the motivation to try new things in the future.

I'm more willing to call on zoom now, which I would never have had the confidence to do before. I'll help out with projects that my dad and granddad are doing now, where I wouldn't have had the motivation to do so before. Strive has helped me become more confident when meeting people for the first time.

Being on the program helped me so much; it has made me become more confident. All of the activities and games we done outside of the classroom challenged me to step outside my comfort zone and talk to people I wouldn't normally talk to. At the start I was very shy which at times probably got in the way sometimes but eventually I got use to the idea of working with other young people, getting to know them and doing everything as a team, it helped with my confidence.

Upon leaving school I didn't really know what direction I wanted to go in, but the Strive project give me the inspiration I needed and helped me realise the skills I have. As a result I decided to apply for Belfast Met and would also now consider a career in working with young people.

While it is clear that the Include Youth model offers so much to address educational underachievement for a particular group of young people, it's very future is under threat due to lack of sustained funding. As an organisation we have sought in recent years to impress on government the need for projects like ours to be financially supported, as we consistently are delivering on PfG outcomes.

Youth work model and values adopted within education settings:

We know from our work with our school partners that young people are recognising the value and benefitting from a youth work approach within the mainstream school setting. Our staff are adding value to the school experience for young people who are at risk of disengaging. Mainstream schools have much to learn from youth work based approaches and values and we believe that young people would benefit from such an approach.

Some people in the past have said that there should be a youth work module in teacher training, because their training is all focussed on the work, and not how to deal with a young person and what works best with those young people.

There is also something about highlighting some of the schools that are doing quite well. They are working hard, employing youth workers in their schools to try and provide additional support and redirecting behaviours and not going down the option of exclusion and ultimately kicking them out of the school.

*Sometimes how a teacher talks to a pupil is literally a deal breaker. Even being up in ***** school and talking to the youth workers up there, they'll say teachers come up to them in the staff room and say, how do you deal with that young person, and the youth worker is thinking that kids easy, and it is literally just the approach, that youth work approach and I know there has to be that authority when the teacher is teaching but sometimes it can literally come down to how you speak to someone and the words that you use.*

*But in school I think in some cases it has changed. When I was in school there were no youth workers in your school or anything like that and now we are up in ***** school and they seem to have a brilliant set up, there are youth workers in the school, there are social workers on site every day, and they are very much about those young people, the ones who need extra support. You can see how passionate they are that those young people get that support, so that young people don't feel left out or feel that they are being labelled. That's only my experience with one school and I know all schools are not taking that approach, they certainly are not.*

Include Youth would welcome increased opportunity for youth work provision within mainstream education settings and for schools to adapt youth work values to address underachievement.

Alternative education provision:

We know from our work with partners in the alternative education sector that for some young people mainstream school is not the right fit and only when they can avail of specialised support within an alternative centre do they begin to re-engage with education and start to achieve. It is critical that centres like these are supported

and are seen as equal partners within the education community. One of our partners described to us the level of specialised service that they provide to young people who have not been able to maintain their place within mainstream education. The centre is able to offer the time and dedicated support that some young people need, ensuring that young people are given every opportunity to learn. Central to this is a strength based, youth work approach where participation is promoted. Staff are skilled at building the confidence of the young people and being able to adapt to different learning styles. No young person is given up on and staff can see behind what can sometimes be disruptive and challenging behaviour, to deal with the underlying issues which explain those behaviours.

Some of them don't expect to succeed. It may not be GCSE, but they can do well, like in level 2 – they can do well and that's achievement. They didn't believe they could achieve because they've failed at everything else, they've tried, they have been exhausted in mainstream under the Every School a Good School policy. If you continue to work to Every School a Good School and kids continue to fail, if you exhaust everything on the list, and they fail, then they feel like a failure. I understand the concept of Every School a Good School but if it doesn't work, they see that they have failed, not that the school or the system has failed, but they have failed. And then they are exhausted, and it takes us so much longer to build them back up, to tell them they are not a failure.

Given with what they are also living with at home, coupled with all the issues, the complex needs they have in their lives, they see they have failed at one of the biggest events in their adolescent life, which is school. And they are only 14 – some of the adults couldn't deal with what they are dealing with.

Not all young people were built to cope with formal education and there needs to be a culture of understanding and empathy before school can be an opportunity for all young people.

How has the Covid-19 lockdown impacted on educational underachievement?

We have been concerned about the detrimental impact that the lockdown has had on young people's educational experience. As schools moved to online learning, we raised concerns about the impact of digital poverty and the likelihood that educational inequalities would be exacerbated. Support to learn at home has become even more important in these days and those children and young people who do not benefit from family engagement in education will only fall further behind. Online teaching cannot replace face to face teaching and pupils will undoubtedly be at a disadvantage due to loss of face to face teaching time. Missed days of schooling

due to self-isolation will have an impact. Children and young people are feeling increasing levels of stress with uncertainty about exam provision and assessment in the coming year.

Getting information out about alternative assessment arrangements for young people in vocational learning seemed to take less priority for education authorities than the information that went out about GCSE and A level pupils.

Existing pressures at home (poverty, poor mental health, addiction, domestic abuse, child abuse) have been exacerbated by the lockdown and are negatively impacting on children's and young people's education. We are concerned that these pressures will result in more children and young people disengaging from education.

We are concerned that the wider structural issues that impact on educational achievement, will only be heightened as a result of lockdown as more families experience job losses and income poverty.

Securing employment for our young people has always been a challenge, but the economic downturn as a result of the pandemic will only serve to push our young people further down the opportunity ladder.

Despite the challenges of the current climate, Include Youth has continued to provide support to our young people throughout lockdown. This has included practical support in the form of food deliveries, financial assistance and delivery of IT equipment to ensure young people sustain their learning. We have also continued to provide personal development support at a time when young people have struggled with loneliness and isolation. Our tutors have maintained contact throughout and young people have continued to achieve educationally, as the following quotes from young people illustrate.

I have been so grateful for the support from Give and Take. Just being able to have someone to talk to and have a laugh on my doorstep.

In a time of need Include Youth have supported me with electric, oil heating and shopping vouchers.

The laptop has made a big difference for me, it's so easy to set up and I can use google classroom and the internet to talk with my tutor.

Getting the laptop has been a great help to me, I can do my essential skills and OCN courses more easily because of google classroom, I can e mail my tutors and do research.

Give and Take has been very helpful for young people throughout lockdown, doing online classes for young people and staying in contact with us to see if we are coping alright which I appreciated a lot.

Closing remarks

We welcome the opportunity to provide the Panel with evidence and wish to offer our continued support as the Panel seek to develop a plan to address educational underachievement. The issues are complex and there is a wide body of evidence looking at various aspects of underachievement. We do not underestimate the scale of the task in hand. But we hope that this paper will increase the Panel's awareness about the experiences of the young people that Include Youth works with and what they regard to have been the barriers in their educational journeys, as well as what has worked to support them to reach their potential. Our staff have also been enthusiastic about providing the Panel with their views and sharing what they have learnt over their many years in delivering services to disadvantaged young people. They have considerable experience in identifying what works to unlock the potential of young people and in providing a supportive environment to ensure all young people achieve, in the very widest sense of the word. As one staff member commented:

I think we have an opportunity here to talk about the young people we work with and to bring them on to policy makers agenda, that they are not ignored and they are not forgotten about, we need to draw their attention to these young people, young people who do underachieve, and it's not because of the young people themselves, it is because we have let them down, society has let them down, education has let them down and we can change that going forward.

Include Youth is keen to engage further with the Panel and expand on any of the issues contained within this paper.