

**An Independent Research Evaluation of ‘Reaching Communities – Positive Futures’
2021-2023: Process Evaluation Final Report**

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Aims of the research

Keele University has been commissioned to undertake a research evaluation of Engage CIC’s ‘Reaching Communities - Positive Futures’ programme between 15th March 2021 – 31st July 2023. This follows an effort across the local community to tackle the serious and escalating issues of youth crime. The community-based programme aims to engage with children across the Stoke-on-Trent area in a range of outreach, mentoring, education and diversionary activities. Running for a period of three years, the project will focus on prevention and early intervention to inspire children aged 10-19 to live positive lives and prevent them from entering the criminal justice system. The purpose of this research evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of ‘Reaching Communities – Positive Futures’ operating across the Stoke-on-Trent area.

The research evaluation will consist of three strands:

- a. The first strand will focus on **research and development**. This strand of work will involve setting the focus and direction of the evaluation by developing a set of evaluation questions that reflect the perspectives, experiences and insights of as many relevant individuals, groups, organisations and communities as possible. In addition, an overview of the ‘Reaching Communities – Positive Futures’ will be established, the design rationale and activities that compose the service.
- b. **An impact evaluation** assessing the outcomes of ‘Reaching Communities – Positive Futures’.
- c. **A process evaluation** identifying how the ‘Reaching Communities – Positive Futures’ programme was delivered, any challenges that were faced and any improvements that can be made. This strand will also provide an opportunity to identify practices of innovation

This report focuses on the third strand, the process evaluation.

Methods of Data Collection

Data collection for the process evaluation consisted of semi-structured interviews with practitioners carried out over two periods.

To understand the various conditions within which the programme was operating, semi structured interviews with five Positive Futures practitioners were carried out during August 2021. These interviews explored a number of different areas including the wider context of the Project; the practitioner’s role and relationship with Positive Futures; the challenges facing children and children in Stoke; the potential impact of Positive Futures; gaps in service provision; relationships with other

statutory and non-statutory agencies and services including the police, youth justice and other local community groups; and the aims, objectives and outcomes of Positive Futures.

Following the publication of the Interim Report in October 2022, follow-up interviews were conducted in early 2023 exploring some of the themes emerging from focus groups and surveys with children. Six interviews with practitioners were conducted in total, including three Positive Futures practitioners, a police officer, a youth justice practitioner and a strategic lead within Staffordshire's Violence Reduction Unit. As with the initial round of interviews, issues explored included the background and context against which Positive Futures was established; general challenges in the local community; specific challenges facing children in Stoke and Staffs; and relationships with community and statutory partners.

All interviews were conducted using Microsoft Teams.

Implementation: Reflections and Challenges

Vague understandings about target demographic and referral mechanisms

Although information included on the Engage website made clear that the 'Positive Futures' programme aims to work with children at risk of anti-social behaviour, during the initial phases of implementation practitioners remained unclear about who they were working with. More specifically, when asked about the programme's aims practitioners spoke in general terms about working with 'disadvantaged' children from 'deprived' areas:

'Yeah mainly young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Not only for them to come in and, uh, for them to do sports and go home, so we just talk to young people and give them that drive and that motivation that they lack. Not saying all kids lack motivation just some. Yeah, that's my current role at engage.' (PF Worker 4)

There was also a lack of clarity from the interviews about the referral pathways and roles of partner agencies. Given that the project aims to prevent anti-social behaviour and crime, during the implementation phase, practitioners did not appear aware of youth justice/diversion/social care pathways. Interviewees outlined that the majority of referrals were 'self-referrals' from children and young people themselves, who observed the activities or heard about them from friends and wished to participate.

A much longer way to climb: Raising the aspirations of Stoke-on-Trent

Some practitioners identified the unique challenges presented by a city like Stoke-on-Trent. Unlike other large cities, such as Manchester and Birmingham, Stoke-on-Trent was perceived as a city that has been 'left behind'. This perception, practitioners thought, impacted then upon the children's and

children's own sense of hope for the future as they find themselves 'stuck in a ditch and can't find their way out':

'I think there's little opportunity here, there's not much opportunity, so even if they wanted to do something positive, it's really hard to find your place doing something positive, because in in bigger cities, or more populated cities, I think there's a lot more opportunity and it's easy to get into, whereas here it's a lot easier to fall under the radar and sort of be a bit lost, feel like you've got no place, you don't know what to do.'
(PF Worker 5)

Partnership working

Within the implementation phase, partnership working with the police in particular proved to be difficult. Having worked so closely with children, practitioners became very aware of the broad mistrust they had of the police. Issues and challenges discussed included some examples of children feeling over-policed and monitored, and others of children experiencing 'heavy handed' policing and unnecessary intrusion:

'The kids don't like the Police. They don't. And they've caused a lot called issues in the past where you might have data from the crime book but they've attacked police cars before, they won't acknowledge there's no... Some of the young people know that when they're doing bad, the police are onto them and the irony is the higher some of the young people go up, the police they will speak with the police in the sense of you can search me today or why? Why you stopping me?' (PF Worker 6)

There was a sense of frustration from practitioners that the police could 'humanise' themselves with children and young people if they adopted a different role on the streets, and that Positive Futures offered them the opportunity to do this. Encouraging the police to contribute to sessions while in non-uniform was suggested as a way to overcome the observed divide between children and police officers. Despite these challenges, practitioners perceived their role as one that brings children, young people and the police together through sports-based activities:

'Like, they're against us, they're not for us, they don't like us. And erm I feel like a simple game of football would break that barrier.' (PF Worker 6)

Lessons from implementation

- Before implementation, programs such as 'Positive Futures' need to make clear its aims, target demographic and referral processes to ensure that interventions are being delivered to those that need them most.
- A clear program of work that helps practitioners to focus on improving aspirations and increasing employability skills is required, particularly in the early implementation phase. Although much of the work done by 'Positive Futures' focused on sporting

activities, more clearly identifying the employability skills that arise from such activities would be helpful in the further development of this project.

- If one of the aims of Positive Futures is to improve community relations with the police and other key agencies it is important to actively involve these agencies in the delivery of their program.

Delivery and looking forward

The follow-up interviews revealed a number of themes highlighting further areas of development in key areas, as well as some areas of strength.

Positive Futures as a provider that children and young people trust

There was a consensus from all participants that Positive Futures has a positive impact across a wide range of areas of a young person's life:

'Yeah. Definitely. Mental well-being, physical well-being. I feel like they're improving their employability skills, so whether they get into volunteering or there's a pathway for them to get into a career, their attitudes, behaviour, communication skills, their confidence. And all that type of stuff, yeah.' (PF Worker 1)

The success of the programme was, in large part, down to the skills of the Positive Futures youth workers and ensuring that the 'right people' are on the front-line, working directly with the young people:

'So the people there are the magic, anyone can deliver an activity, but you can make the activity impactful by the right people delivering it.' (Strategic Leader)

Positive Futures, as a community sector provider, did not appear to have the stigma attached to their services that is so often associated with statutory partners such as the police and social care. This, as well as being free from the bureaucracy and 'red tape' associated with statutory agencies, gave Positive Futures more freedom to work with young people in a tailored and creative way:

'Now that I see that third sector youth provision, they are not tied with authoritative red tape and policy and all that type of thing. Yes, they've got to work within safeguarding and child protection. But I think what they do offer is, through lots of the funding streams, is a lot more flexibility sometimes than some of the statutory services.' (PCSO)

There was a consensus that Positive Futures was a well-established community sector provider in Stoke that had become trusted by the local communities it serves:

‘Engage communities who have a high level of trust and credibility within their community. They have a deep understanding of the locality, that context, the nuance, the people.’ (Strategic Leader)

Awareness of purpose and remit of Positive Futures

In contrast to the findings during the implementation phase, follow-up interviews revealed that front line practitioners and strategic partners had a clear sense about the remit of Positive Futures. One member of staff described the project as providing the children with a *‘safe space to come’*. This was certainly evident during the focus groups, where young people felt able to be themselves and enjoy being children while enjoying a range of activities. At a strategic level, it is recognised that sport can be a powerful tool by which to engage with children and young people:

‘We recognized that those young people who live in low-income neighbourhoods generate a number of wider social outcomes or a wider number of personal or societal benefits as a result of their engagement in well-designed sports and physical activity.’ (Strategic Leader)

There was a wider understanding of the context within which Community Sector Providers had *‘plugged the gap’* left by the austerity cuts to Local Authority Youth Service Provision from 2008 onwards:

‘Initially within the area the youth services cut, there’s a lot of funding cut. And youth clubs shut down. The people who would do youth work from the City Council stopped coming. There was a gap. So there’s a huge gap.’ (PF Worker 2)

Additionally, Positive Futures staff understood and believed passionately that their focus was on the children and young people of Stoke:

‘Make them feel like they’re diamonds. We’re here for them, to tell them that, look, raise your aspiration, you can do it.’ (PF Worker 2)

The discussion of providing a *‘safe space’* for children and young people to take part in sports and be themselves was repeatedly highlighted as one of the main aims of Positive Futures. The sense of providing a *‘safe space’* went beyond simply a physical sense of safety, and included feeling safe for children and young people to let their guard down, make friends, build relationships with staff, and have fun:

‘I think it has a massive impact because, like I say, giving them that safe place session that they can come to every single day in their local community. It’s in their comfort zone, which is the most important thing and our coaches, our staff, have a very good relationship with the kids that we work with...’ (PF Worker 1)

Again, the freedom to work with the children and young people without the stigma and bureaucracy associated with statutory services was highlighted as key to the feeling of safety and building relationships:

'...And so, they can they come to us, they speak to us, they probably open up to us whereas they won't do that with other services like maybe the police or youth planning team, whatever it may be. And our sessions give them that safe space that they can come to' (PF Worker 3)

Awareness of challenges facing children and young people in Stoke-on-Trent

Positive Futures staff appeared to be very aware of the challenges facing children and young people in Stoke, and in particular the complex interplay between a range of external pressures and their impact on children's mental health:

'So if anything, its opened up my eyes as a youth worker as well. It's not just anti-social behaviour. Some of these kids have got needs that we probably didn't face when we were kids. But like you said, the mental health thing is massive. For me, I'm a PE teacher so I always loved sports so I was always going to go down the healthy eating, health lifestyle. Its not just about sport.' (PF Worker 2)

'I think mental health has been, from the last the last couple years, I'd say maybe the last two years since COVID, I've seen a real decline in mental health before. I don't think it was as big of an issue. It was more like the violence, antisocial behaviour. But now when I speak to kids, I do see and hear a lot of them talking about mental health and sometimes they don't want to come out. They struggle to get out of bed in the morning. Things like that, even like not eating properly, these skip meals.' (PF Worker 3)

This extended to a knowledge of some of the more serious challenges facing the local community, and linking this to the aims of the Positive Futures programme, which are to tackle the serious problems faced by communities:

'So, we're sort of trying to tackle serious problems in these communities that we know exists because we work in these communities for a long time so much, like knife crime, gangs, antisocial behaviour, things like that. So yeah, like I say, we use what we were already doing, but now it's just a bit more focused with the Positive Futures project.' (PF Worker 3)

There was a commonly held view amongst practitioners (that was also shared by the children and young people themselves during focus groups) that punitive approaches within mainstream education led to unnecessary exclusion, often meaning that children and young people's underlying needs were overlooked:

'So education wise in schools, I feel students were getting kicked out quite easily. Staff sometimes didn't have the patient to build the relationships. It was easier to reprimand than to find out what the underlying issue is. So, if someone's dyslexic for arguments sake, they haven't been tested, they're trying to get the best to avoid work and avoid embarrassment. So, they might misbehave, but why has nobody picked that up.' (PF Worker 2)

The increased risk of school-excluded children being criminally and sexually exploited was discussed by several participants:

'So, I think educationally it's if somebody's behaviour in school is poor, we've got to understand, in the problem-solving approach, as to what's triggering that poor behaviour rather than just take a punitive approach. What happens to those young people who get suspended, excluded? Where do they go? Because if nobody picks him up outside of the school, they carry the biggest risk of getting involved in exploitation and issues, don't they?' (PCSO)

Again, sharing a strongly held view with the children and young people in the focus groups, there was a consensus that that there was a lack of provision for children and young people in the local communities:

'There's not really anything to do in the areas that they live in. They live in communities where there's not much for them to do.' (PF Worker 3)

The responsabilisation of children and young people looms large...

Despite practitioners acknowledging the unmet need present among the children and young people of Stoke-on-Trent, practitioners' recourse to responsabilising children and young people loomed large. There appeared to be an assumption by practitioners that children and young people are 'not engaging' with provision rather than perhaps more accurately considering they are 'not being engaged':

'The young people weren't interested, despite the fact they were engaged with Engage, they weren't bothered in extra activity. They had the provision they wanted.' (Strategic Leader)

'So, boredom can increase rowdy behaviour. Again, because they'll stay within their age group, they'll do stuff that they find, that's important to them. A lot of them go to the same school, if they get kicked out then I find that's their boredom, if they can't get an education.' (Engage Worker 2)

It is important to acknowledge that we all have unconscious bias – however, as practitioners, it is important to be aware of our own potential for how this may impact on practise and then put

measures in place to guard against it. Assuming that children are misbehaving as a result of their own non-engagement or boredom places responsibility on the child for their behaviour, when the reason may be linked to not meeting a child's needs or presuming that the provision on offer is what the children want.

Practitioners also appeared to label 'children and young people' as carriers of weapons:

'Carrying weapons for some of these people is not very strange.' (PF Worker 2)

Although there might be some truth in this statement – some of the children and young people we spoke to in focus groups revealed that they would consider carrying a weapon for their own safety because they did not feel protected by those in authority – there is nevertheless an assumption that carrying weapons has become normalised among this particular demographic. These types of assumptions are then likely to lead to what the literature has termed adultification bias, which disproportionately impacts children and young people from minoritized communities who are often denied the status of innocence and vulnerability afforded to their white counterparts.

'Council House and Violence': Associating socially deprivation with 'unsafety'

Participants repeatedly described particularly deprived areas of Stoke-on-Trent as 'vulnerable' and associated this vulnerability with unsafety. For example, when asked to describe what they mean by a 'vulnerable' area, one participant responded:

'Deprived areas where it's not a safe environment. And there's a lot of health inequalities, I'm sure that like the parents would struggle, providing and giving their children sort of the best upbringing. And there's a lot of broken families. There's not a lot of opportunities, there's gangs. And yeah, that's a few of the challenges within their areas.' (PF Worker 1)

Despite the many problems associated with the term 'gang', 'gang violence' was repeatedly referred to by practitioners:

'In the areas that we work in, definitely there's a problem with gangs, walking the street. A lot of it kind of like I say, boredom and broken homes and we have a lot of those kids come to us.' (PF Worker 3)

It is important to reflect here on the impact of terms such as 'gang' on the children and young people associated with it. The term 'gang', for example, has a number of racialised connotations and meanings often resulting again in adultification bias that justifies the use of harmful and punitive responses to young people. Children and young people rarely, if ever, refer to themselves as a 'gang'. Often, they view themselves as a group of friends hanging out on the street often as resulting from a lack of safe and suitable youth provision within their communities.

Relations between the police and young people remain challenging

Aligning with findings from earlier interviews, there was a perception amongst practitioners that the police could do more to get to know and build relationships with the children and young people of Stoke-on-Trent:

'I wish the police would do more. Yeah, the young people have got a negative view of the police. They don't like the police. That's just passed on. And sometimes the police don't like the young people. They tell you some horror stories of the interactions they have. So, the suspicions and how they sometimes are approached by the police and vice versa, they say look, we don't give the respect that they don't give to us, we don't give them and the police might say the same. The police also say to the police got a job to do and they aren't community officers. They are supposed to build their links but they've never turned up to the youth club.' (PF Worker 2)

'I think what I've noticed is a massive gap between young people and the police. Especially the police, is probably where the lack of trust really shows, you know. If they see police, they might run even if they've done nothing wrong, even if they've got nothing to hide, they see the police and they'll still run just because of the lack of trust and maybe fear even. And in my job, I've not really interacted with the police as much as we probably should, I don't think they make too much of an effort, if I'm honest. And from my experience, when the police have come to our sessions, they sort of come take a picture and then leave sort of thing.' (PF Worker 3)

The 'massive gap' between young people and the police appears to be, in part, as a result of a perceived failure of the police to build relationships with children and young people in the local area. This gap may have also resulted from the negative labels and assumptions made about the communities in which the young people live:

'What I find with the communities is that, and it's a bit of an anomaly really, some of the communities are very insular, quite parochial, territorial and with that brings about certainly the youth related issue, some of the gang culture. Then we do have some communities and pockets of communities that are quite transient and multi international if you like.' (PCSO)

The perception from youth workers and young people themselves, however, appears to be at odds with the view of strategic leaders and front-line police staff. This suggests a potential disconnect between Staffordshire Police and the communities it seeks to serve:

'In Stoke on Trent there is a very a proactive approach to community policing, community policing and the third sector interact very well and Engage are probably front and centre of that.' (Strategic Leader)

'I think that Staffordshire has a generally good, positive track record of being an interactive, forward-thinking force that works and engages well with its community.'
(PCSO)

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this report we have set out the findings of the process evaluation, of which there is much to be positive about. Actions from our earlier interim reports, to clarify the remit of the Positive Futures programme and to set out clearer pathways for referral appear to have been addressed. Positive Futures help to provide a safe place for children and young people and appear to be regarded as a service that is 'trusted'. On the other hand, relations between young people and statutory services remain challenging and negative assumptions about children and young people loom large. To this end, we outline below several recommendations to be considered:

Engage should diversify their offer to young people, with a particular focus on girls

Although many young people enjoy playing sports, there are equally as many that might not. Supporting the findings from earlier focus groups, practitioners felt that a wider variety of activities could be offered to all young people. However, a specific focus on developing girls-only sports sessions, and other activities could vastly improve attendance and engagement with girls in Stoke.

'I don't really tend to work with females, but we have got a female coach, (redacted), who does work for Engage and she started to doing a lot of work with females. I think tapping into females as well, because I think there's a big need for that area as well, because a lot of ours is dominantly male, so yeah.' (PF Worker 1)

'The 14 to 19 lads get a provision largely, that those young females are often so far from intervention and that there's a number of reasons behind that. One is because there's just less female only sport physical activity.' (Strategic Leader)

Capitalising also on the improvements made to mental health (see outcomes report) and unmet need in this area, Positive Futures should consider introducing mindfulness, breath work and yoga activities as part of their programme.

Consider offering unconscious bias/ adultification bias training to all staff on a rolling basis

Supporting the findings above, Positive Futures should consider offering a rolling training programme, perhaps as part of their safeguarding training, on unconscious and adultification bias.

LA investment needed to improve outside spaces, including parks, for young people

It is evident that significant investment is needed by the LA to improve the outside spaces for young people in Stoke. It is noted that Positive Futures do not view the parks as suitable for running sessions with young people, and opt to hire private facilities, often at significant expense. This also means that the young people cannot access these facilities in their own time:

'Also looking at improving facilities and areas. A lot of the parks are not great around this area, so that's why we do a lot of work at leisure centres, where it might be quite expensive to pay each month and obviously the kids can't afford this, so that's why you've got all this, to put these sessions on here. But if the kids had better play zones, where they can go to for free.' (PF Worker 1)

Meet with Police Leaders to discuss how to improve relationships with young people

As stated, one of the strongest findings from the interviews, surveys and focus groups is that there is a mistrust of the police and wider statutory agencies from young people working with Positive Futures. However, there was also a suggestion that the police may be unaware of the extent and nature of this challenge. It would benefit all concerned if Positive Futures leadership team, the VRU and police could meet together with young people to discuss this challenge and consider ways to resolve it.

Positive Futures should have longer term funding

Finally, and this speaks to the success of Positive Futures, is that it would benefit from longer term funding. This would ensure sustainability, job security for front line staff, and a continued offer to the young people of Stoke. It would also allow for strategic planning, including how to broaden and diversify the offer to young people:

'I think for the program I want it to be sustainable, where we're getting more of our own volunteers through and it's a cycle. I don't three years is not enough personally because if we leave, like when the youth service left, everything increases: number of kids messing about, antisocial behaviour, recreational drug use because they're bored, there's nothing.' (PF Worker 2)