

Bridging the Gap: End of year report

The 'Bridging the Gap' pilot project was created to support Year 6 pupils to feel better prepared, both academically and emotionally, to navigate their transition to secondary school. Nine schools across the North of England were invited to take part, three secondary schools and two primary schools each, as set out below:

Secondary schools:

- Southmoor Academy (Sunderland)
- Fir Vale School (Sheffield)
- Moor End Academy (Huddersfield)

Primary schools:

- Barnes Junior School (Sunderland)
- Valley Road Academy (Sunderland)
- Oasis Academy Fir Vale (Sheffield)
- Whiteways Primary School (Sheffield)
- Mount Pleasant Primary (Huddersfield)
- Oak CE Primary School (Huddersfield)

The regions targeted were Sheffield, Sunderland and Huddersfield, due to Future First's pre-existing relationships with secondary schools in these areas. Schools with a high proportion of students accessing free school meals were given priority to participate.

Due to the impact of the pandemic, the cluster of schools in Huddersfield were unfortunately unable to participate. However, we successfully delivered the programme to all of our cluster schools in Sunderland and Sheffield. In total 50 Year 9 mentors took part in the project and 120 Year 6 pupils.

The aim of the project was to recruit secondary school mentors to become near-peer supporters and relatable role models, to a targeted group of Year 6 children who were:

- not on track to meet age related expectation in English
- not on track to meet age related expectation in Maths
- low in emotional-readiness for secondary school.

All secondary school mentors were trained by Future First staff. Matching forms were completed by mentors and mentees to ensure that pairing was the best match for a successful partnership and project outcomes.

Expected Outcomes

The immediate outcomes were as follows:

- increased knowledge of secondary school life
- increased knowledge of English expectations at secondary school
- increased knowledge of Maths expectations at secondary school
- increased knowledge of learning strategies/study skills
- increased optimism for starting secondary school
- improved communication skills and increased confidence in school.

By achieving the above outcomes we hoped that Year 6 pupils would:

- have improved engagement with school and learning
- feel better prepared for the transition to secondary school.

By providing opportunities for secondary school students to participate in meaningful volunteering, we hoped to improve their:

- confidence
- leadership skills
- communication skills
- sense of purpose and responsibility.

Outcomes and impact: Mentee findings

Optimism for starting secondary school

Taking part in 'Bridging the Gap' increased Year 6 students' optimism for starting secondary school. At the start of the programme 86% of students said they were looking forward to starting secondary school. By the end of the project this had increased by 9% to 95%. This is particularly positive when we consider the result in the context of the current uncertainties and challenges.



Increased knowledge of secondary school life

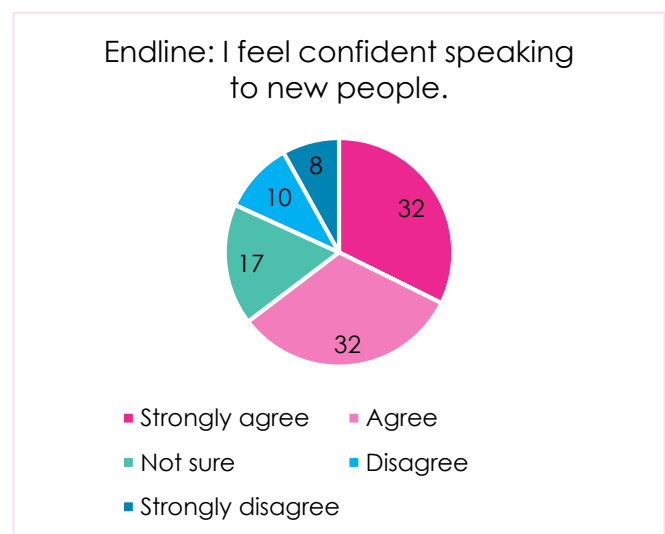
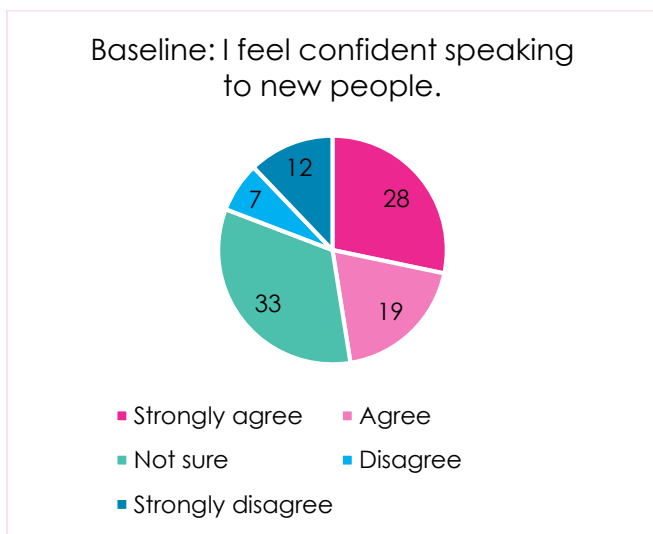
88% of Year 6 students either agreed, or strongly agreed, that they learnt a lot from their mentor about secondary school.

Comments included:

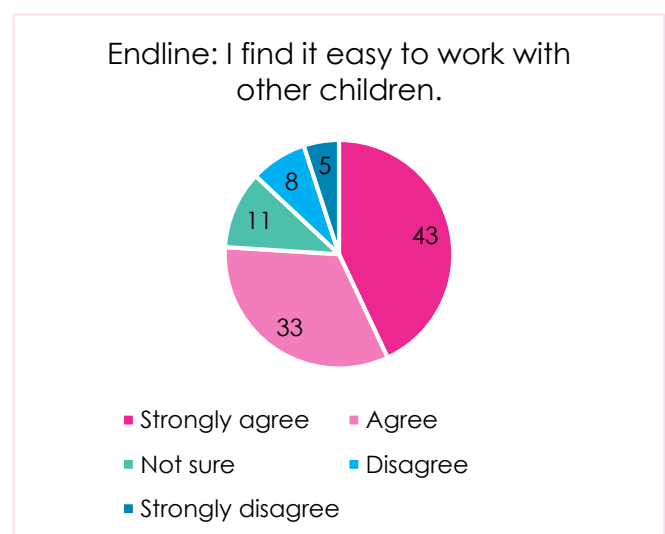
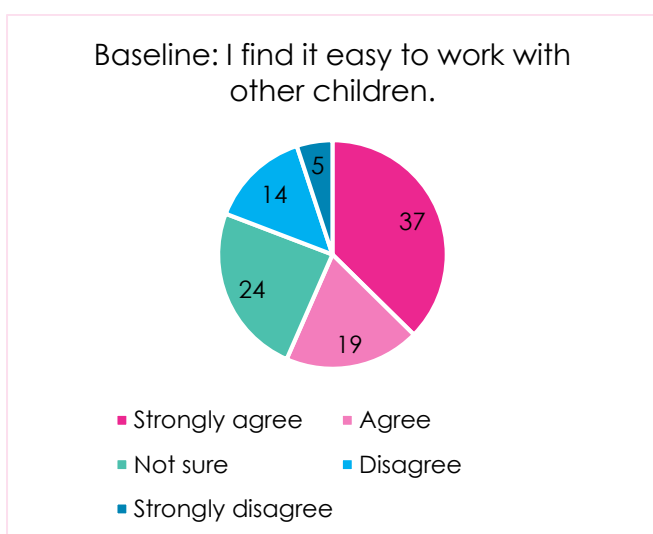
- "My mentor told me what to expect in lessons and told me people are nice at Southmoor."
- "My mentor told me things about secondary school I didn't know before."
- "I now know many new things about Fir Vale School and where and when to go for help, lessons, lunch and much more."
- "I feel more brave about secondary school. I feel good because my mentor helped me."

Improved communication skills and increased confidence in school

There was a real improvement in terms of how students felt about their own communication skills, as well as their confidence in school. At the start of the programme only 47% of students said that they felt confident speaking to new people. By the end this had increased to just over 64%.



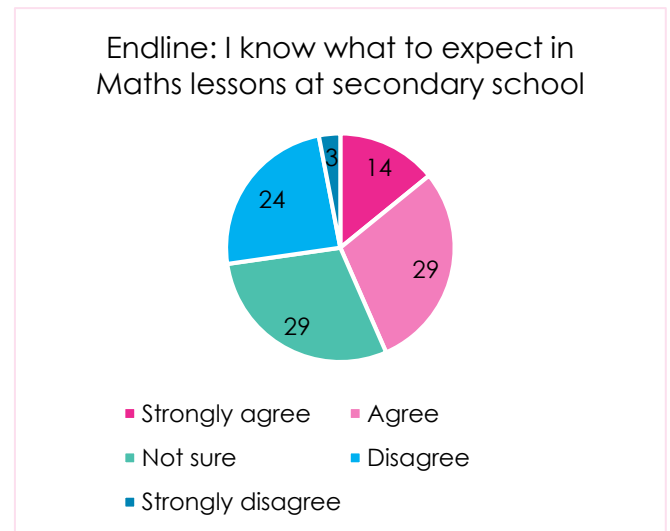
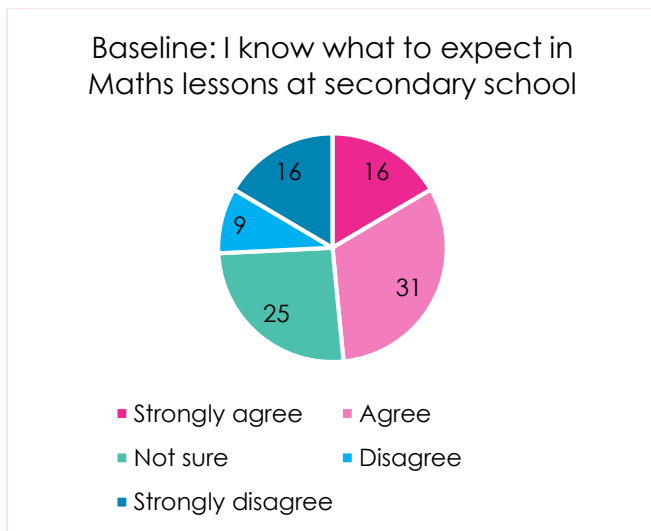
There was also a significant improvement in the way that students viewed their teamwork skills. At the start of the programme only 56% of students found it easy to work with others. By the end, this had increased to over 75%.



The project has also shown an improvement in students' willingness to ask for help in school. Over 83% of Year 6 students agreed that they would be happy to communicate that they needed help after taking part in the sessions, compared to just 71% before the project started. This is a vital learning strategy for secondary school and also demonstrates an increase in confidence.

Knowledge of English and Maths expectation

This was the only area where we saw either no change in students' opinions or a slight decrease in perceived awareness of expectations of secondary school. At the start of the project around 47% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a good understanding of Maths expectations at secondary school but this dropped to just over 43% after the sessions. However, we can see some improvement in the number of young people who were very unsure about Maths expectations, with those strongly disagreeing moving from 16% to just 3%.

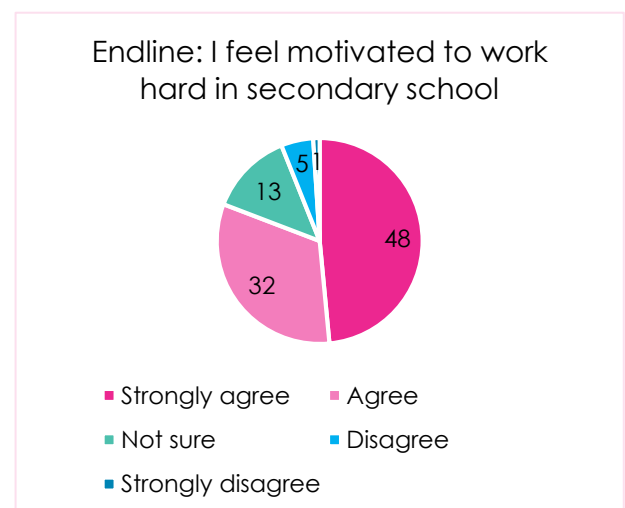
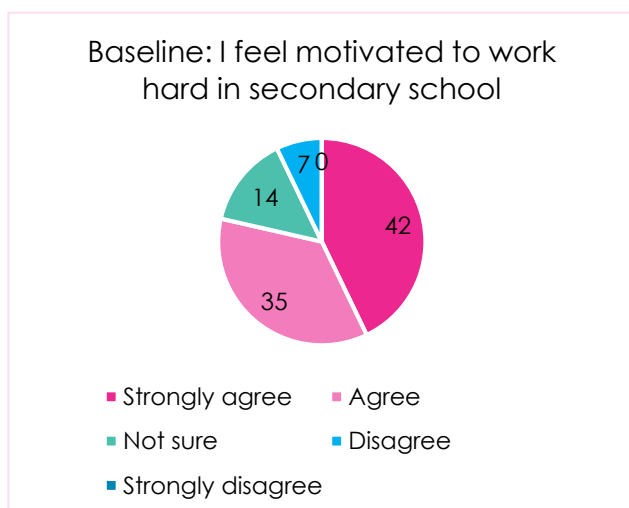


We saw similar findings with regards to English expectations with 46% of students initially either agreeing or strongly agreeing, reduced to 36% after the sessions. There is a similar shift in the number of students strongly disagreeing, reducing from 13% to just 4% after the workshops.

Looking at this data, is it pleasing that there is some shift in those with very little understanding of what to expect in Maths and English lessons at secondary school but we would have liked to see more shift towards deeper, stronger understanding of expectations. We have reviewed this aspect of the workshops for the future.

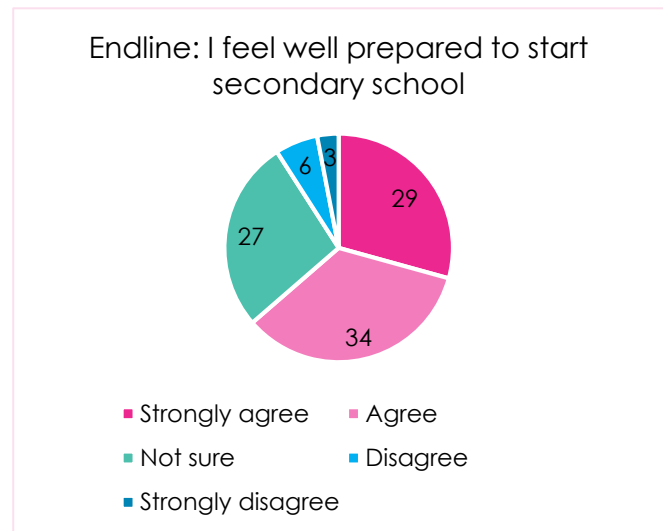
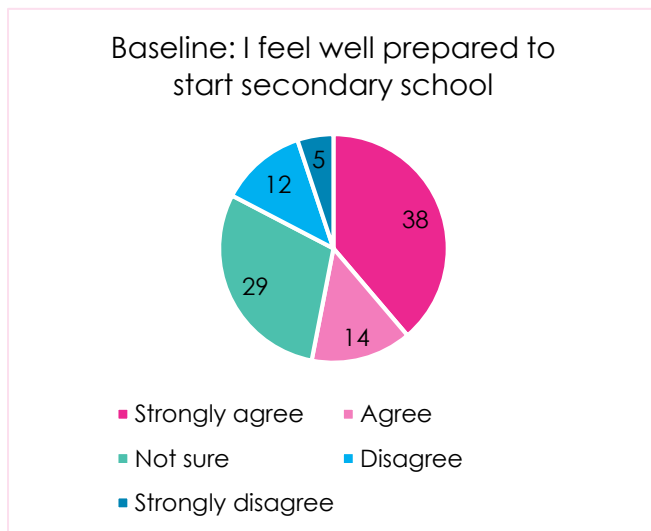
Improved engagement with school and learning

Over 80 % of students agreed/strongly agreed that they felt motivated to work hard in school. This compared to 77 % of students before the project.



Feel better prepared for the transition to secondary school

One of the main outcomes that Future First was hoping to achieve in this pilot was to support Year 6 students to feel better prepared for their transition to secondary school. Initially only 52 % of students agreed that they felt prepared; after the project this increased to 63 %.



Outcomes and impact: Mentee findings

Improved confidence

Taking part in 'Bridging the Gap' increased Year 10 students' confidence in themselves and their abilities. At the start of the programme 87% of secondary students either agreed, or strongly agreed, that they would be successful in the future. This increased to over 97% after finishing the programme. Students also gained confidence in their ability compared to others in their age group, with 100% of students either agreeing, or strongly agreeing, that they believe that they 'are a good student' compared to others in their year group. At the start of the project this figure was 95%.

Improved leadership skills

One of the main areas that secondary mentors really seemed to develop in was leadership. Originally 81% of students agreed that they were a good leader. However by the end of the programme this number increased to 88%. A number of students commented themselves on the way that the project had developed their leadership skills as follows:

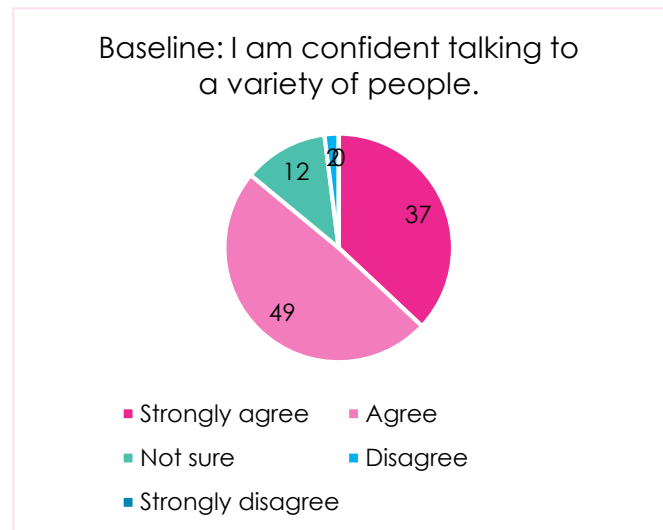
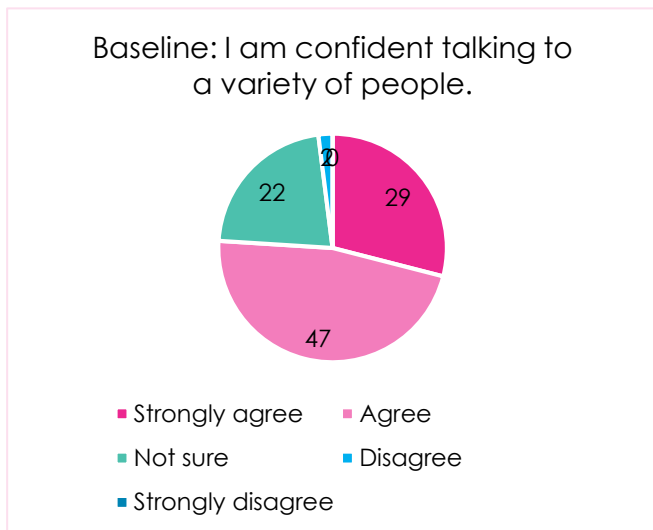
- "I feel honoured to have been given a chance to be a mentor. I now know that I have improved leadership skills, confidence and most importantly erased the problems/ worries of my mentee."
- "Being a mentor has taught me that I am a confident leader."

Improved communication skills:

Secondary mentors developed their speaking and listening skills across the project with students commenting:

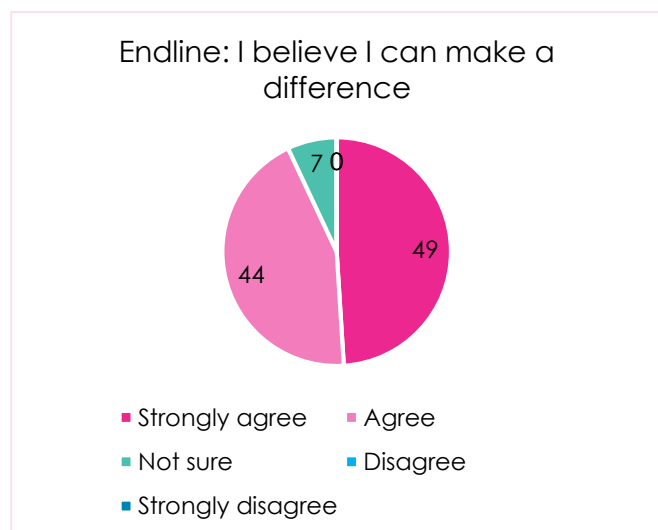
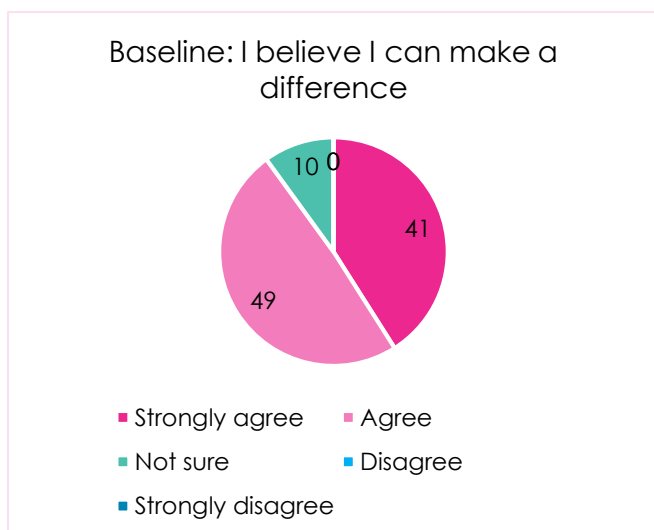
- “Being a mentor has had a positive impact on me because now I am more confident in talking to different people.”
- “It has helped me gain confidence talking to other people, younger or older than me, as before I would be silent but being a mentor has helped boost my confidence.”
- “Being a mentor has made me more confident as a student. [It has] made me more comfortable speaking to younger people. I am sure that it will help me in later life.”

At the start of the programme only 75% of students felt confident talking to a variety of people compared to 86% of students at the end of the programme.



Improved sense of purpose

‘Bridging the Gap’ not only improved the sense of purpose and responsibility in mentors but it also inspired them to be more proactive in supporting others in their community. At the start of the project 97 % of students either agreed, or strongly agreed, that they would like to help others in the local community. This increased to 100 % by the end of the project. Students’ belief in themselves that they ‘can make a difference’ also rose: 92 % of students commented that they now believe that they can make a difference, 49 % of which strongly believe it.



One student commented:

"It has motivated me to help children and [know] that I can make a difference."

Data collection

In general, participating schools were very supportive with the data collection process. Due to Covid restrictions, some sessions did have to be delivered virtually which meant that we relied more heavily than normal on schools to complete baseline and/or endline surveys.

Project participants

With the support of school staff we were able to support the students who we had originally intended to target. Students who were either:

- not on track to meet age related expectation in English
- not on track to meet age related expectation in Maths
- low in emotional-readiness for secondary school.

Engagement

Staff from both the secondary and primary schools have been very engaged with the project. The initial interest and uptake by schools was quick and they all agreed that supporting their students to transition to secondary school was a significant priority for them. Unfortunately, in a very turbulent year for schools, consistent communication was challenging at times but we were able to maintain this with the majority of participating schools. However, this was particularly challenging with our secondary school in Huddersfield, which was exacerbated by school staffing changes and further Covid restrictions in the summer term. This resulted in the secondary school reluctantly having to withdraw from the project fairly late into our delivery window, meaning it was too late to replace them.

Feedback from schools

School staff were very excited for both secondary school students and Year 6 pupils to take part in this project and felt it provided a fantastic opportunity to enhance their transitions provision.

"The Year 10 students were really excited and we had a huge number of really good applications. They loved the idea of going back to their primary schools and being a mentor"

Deputy Headteacher, Moor End Academy

"It was also a wonderful opportunity for our students to have some leadership opportunities and to showcase the skills they have built in mentoring younger students.

We've had some really good feedback. The mentors that were chosen felt great prestige and they definitely got a lot out of it - a lot of them said that they want to continue the links they had made with their mentees when they arrive in Year 7. In terms of mixing and social cohesion it has also really helped both sets of students - having them work with people they wouldn't normally work with."

Director of Learning for Futures, Fir Vale School

"The project proved to be a huge success. It not only fostered confidence in the Year 6 pupils transitioning to secondary school, but also allowed our Year 9 mentors to develop their leadership skills."

Assistant Principal, Southmoor Academy

"An extremely useful project! Takes some of the anxiety and stress away from transitioning from Year 6 to secondary school. Well done Future First!"

Year 6 Group Lead, Barnes Junior School

Outcomes

Overall, we are really pleased with the outcomes of the project, especially given the challenges of the pandemic. We are pleased to have delivered positive outcomes in almost all areas for both mentors and mentees. The mentees left the project feeling better prepared for secondary school and much more optimistic, with an increased knowledge of secondary school life. They also improved and developed their communication skills, gained confidence and became more engaged with school and learning. With regards to the mentors, they successfully developed their confidence, leadership skills, communication skills and agreed that the project provided them with a sense of purpose and responsibility.

Whilst knowledge of Maths and English expectations at secondary school were not increased as a result of the 'Bridging the Gap' programme, we have valuable learning. To improve knowledge in this area, not only did students speak to their mentors about Maths and English, but also took part in a task where mentors and mentees discussed the equipment you would need and the type of topics you might cover. However, as the session took place in the primary schools, students were not able to see protractors and compasses, so could not understand fully what they were. We will ensure they had access to them in future and would propose to hold the session in the secondary school classroom..

Testing, sharing and scaling

Obviously, the main challenge this year has been attempting to overcome Covid related restrictions and school closures. The shift to virtual delivery, where necessary, certainly impacted on mentor and mentee interactions. As well as this, at times mentors and mentees were self-isolating so although they had been matched based on interests and hobbies sometimes mentees would have to work with a different mentor due to unexpected absence. It also meant adapting facilitation arrangements as we were faced with a mix of requests. For example one group of schools asked for their sessions to be delivered virtually, whilst another asked for them to be delivered in person but taking place outside on a school playing field. We listened to schools and accommodated requests to provide the best experience possible for young people. However, engagement and communication between mentors and mentees was much better during the in-person workshops, as opposed to the virtual sessions.

Future Planning

In the near future, Future First are hoping to be able to offer transition support to other Year 6 students throughout the country through the use of secondary school mentors. This project has been instrumental in developing our understanding and approach.

Feedback for SHINE Trust

Future First has really enjoyed working with the SHINE Trust over the past two years. Our staff have particularly appreciated your communication and flexibility. Thank you.

The impact and evaluation workshops organised by SHINE Trust were particularly beneficial for improving our Theory of Change. They also provided useful practical advice on how to evidence our outcomes and the impact of mentoring on Year 6 pupils. For example, assessing improved study skills through the steps children take to complete a task and their reflections on why these skills are important.

Financials

The original budget allocation has varied slightly as a result of Covid, the postponement of the project from Summer 2020 to Summer 2021 and adaptations that had to be made for virtual delivery. As you can see in the budget table attached, although the overall spend was consistent with the original budget, the cost allocation varied as detailed below:

Resource development

Initially, Future First budgeted for all mentoring sessions to be delivered in-person. However, due to Covid restrictions a few schools requested that some of their sessions were delivered virtually instead which meant that Future First had to create two types of workshop for every session (virtual and in-person).

In addition to the resource development undertaken by Future First in 2021, we also created resources for 2020 Year 6 leavers. This wasn't accounted for in our original plan but, in light of the cancelled programme due to school closures in 2020, we wanted to provide some reassurance to pupils who were meant to participate as they transitioned to secondary school under such strange circumstances. We shared transition resources with staff in the primary schools which included a video of advice from volunteers at one of our employer partners, Ashurst law firm, and a 'changes and transitions' resource to help pupils reflect on how their existing experiences prepare them for the challenge of moving to secondary school.

Head of Primary and Programme Officer allocated time

As the project was postponed for 12 months, it meant that staff meetings had to take place twice ahead of the project starting. It also meant that a whole new set of mentors needed to be recruited and matched to mentees. All the data for 2019-20 Year 6 students was no longer relevant, so new data sets needed to be collected.

Although the above changes resulted in an overspend, the fact that our Huddersfield cluster of schools pulled out, meant that we were able to redirect some of the budget that would have been spent delivering to make sure that the students who were taking part in the project received quality support from Future First and the programme resulted in the desired impact, despite the challenging context.

Please see attachment for more detail.

Finally

We would like to put on record our gratitude for funding this pilot work which has not only changed the lives of the young people who participated, but built learning at Future First which we will use in delivering future work in primary schools. Thank you!