

Written evidence submitted by ThinkForward

Introduction to ThinkForward

ThinkForward runs two long-term coaching programmes. They both have the common goal of supporting young people who are at high risk of unemployment to progress into sustained work. We currently support more than 1000 young people in London, Nottingham, Kent and the West Midlands.

Our **ThinkForward** programme places skilled coaches in schools. They work with small numbers of students for five years from Year 9, focusing on improving attainment, behaviour and attendance and the development of key work and life skills to prepare young people for employment.

Coaches build consistent, trusted relationships with young people through one-to-one coaching and group work sessions. The programme also offers young people a range of opportunities to connect with, and get experience of, the world of work. These activities include business mentoring, insight days, CV writing and interview skills workshops, and work placements.

ThinkForward is unique because we run the only programme of its kind that works with young people for five years.

Our check follow-up calls with ThinkForward's London and Nottingham graduates, six months after they completed our programme in the summer of 2019, shows that 86% of them (known outcomes, 86% response rate) are now in education or employment. This is an improvement on the EET rate (Education, Employment and Training) figure of 83% we recorded three months after our young people graduated.

This is an impressive outcome, particularly when we consider that programme participants had been selected in Year 8 as being at high risk of becoming NEET in the future. In addition, 74% of all programme graduates grew up in the 20% most deprived communities in England as measured by the IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index).

Our second programme is **DFN-MoveForward** operates in London, Kent and the West Midlands with young people who have mild to moderate learning disabilities, with the aim of supporting them into sustainable paid employment. Coaches are based in schools and colleges and work with young people to build life and employability skills.

We enrol students in Year 11, and they can stay on the programme until their mid-twenties, ensuring they receive support as they start a job and become established in the early stages of their working life.

Even in ordinary times, these young people face massive challenges around getting into the workplace. Just 6% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority in England are in paid work, according to the government's Health and Social Care Information Centre (now NHS Digital) in 2015.

One hundred and fifty of our young people responded to a survey to discover how Covid had affected them.

TERMS OF REFERENCE WE WILL BE RESPONDING TO

The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

Many of our Y11 young people were stressed and worried about how their GCSEs would be graded. They felt they had put in a lot of work for outcomes they couldn't influence by sitting exams.

Before results day, Connor who was a Y11 student in Kent said: 'The biggest impact for me is that I couldn't sit my GCSEs and I was really disappointed not to get the chance to prove myself. When I found out I was stressed and confused, GCSEs are one of the biggest events a young person will experience and that has been taken away from me.'

'I hope my grades come out well. I will be very upset if they don't because I know I could have done well in the exams so I really hope my results match up with what I think I would have got. I've worked hard for five years so I can pass as many as I can. I just hope I can still get good results, but I do feel it has all been taken away from me.'

And Fabiha, a Year 11 in east London commented: 'By not doing my GCSEs I was not able to show what I am capable of and could have done better. I am disappointed I have missed out on this opportunity.'

One of our coaches in Nottingham said: 'Some Year 11s admit they didn't really bother with their mocks and didn't have the chance to show what they could do. They're worried they're going to get undermarked. Some of our young people have difficult relationships with their teachers, and worry they'll mark them down because they don't like them.'

Another coach in Kent said: 'For our young people, their course often does not run as smoothly, and the risk is that they could be really hampered by the cancellation of exams. If their attendance hasn't been good or they've clashed with a teacher we're concerned this could put some of them at further disadvantage.'

Our coaches worked intensively with their Y11s to ensure they not only had a transition plan but a plan B in the event they didn't get the grades they needed. This meant all our young people had clear pathway for their next step.

On results day, coaches were available in person at school/college (where allowed) and by telephone to support young people practically and emotionally.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning

Support and learning provision were inconsistent across schools, though we appreciate there are multiple reasons for this. For example, schools' IT infrastructures are variable and the ability of teachers to use technology was mixed.

However, overall we think that pastoral teams know their students and are well aware of those who struggle with fragile home lives and a lack of resources. In some cases, schools didn't set large amounts of work. One of our coaches speculated that this was because they didn't want to place already disadvantaged students even further behind their better off peers. They didn't want to set work they knew many students would not be able to complete, due to difficult circumstances and/or lack of access to a computer.

We know from the survey of our young people, that around 35% reported issues around accessing technology. In some cases, our coaches went into school and printed hundreds of pages of work packs to deliver to students so they could continue learning.

Regardless of resources, some young people felt overwhelmed by having to learn alone. One coach said in the summer: 'Some of my young people are really struggling without a teacher there to explain things so they are just not doing the work, they feel they just can't tackle it on their own.'

Another coach reported some of her young people were 'overwhelmed and shutting down'. Our coach intervened on behalf of students to get teachers involved to offer support with learning. We understand that teachers are not in a position to deliver mental health support, but if young people felt less anxious and better supported with their schoolwork, that could have a positive impact on their mental well-being.

An additional comment was that 'some young people just need to be in school, they can't do independent learning.' Even if schoolwork has been set and resources are in place, one coach said, 'some students just don't have anyone at home to sit with them and go through their work.'

In common with feedback from coaches in our mainstream schools, we have picked up a disparity in the frequency and quality of provision provided to DFN-MoveForward students. There is also wide variation around the ability of parents to support their children, especially where many of the parents have additional needs themselves, and wide variations around access to IT.

Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

ThinkForward coaches noticed an impact on the mental health of young people. Many told us they felt isolated and missed the peer support and social interaction of seeing their friends. Lack of motivation and the ability to stick to routines was also problematic.

Our coaches were in a unique position to play a positive role when young people were struggling. Fabiha said: 'Lockdown took a toll on my well-being. I didn't go out much, just for walks, with school being the main thing I missed - the learning, my friends and my teachers.'

Comment [AM]: ...But we understand the challenges for teachers in that this could be regarded as asking them to veer into the realms of mental health support which teachers are not qualified to deliver?

‘Coach’s calls were the highlights of my week, I bottled up all the things I wanted to talk to him about and when we spoke it felt like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. When I felt a bit low, coach as helped me to pick myself up again. He gave me lots of good advice to help me solve my problems as well as helping to stick to a routine and being organised.’

Our DFN-MoveForward coaches unsurprisingly reported increased levels of anxiety amongst their SEN young people, difficulty maintaining routines and high levels of worry about the negative impact of the crisis on their futures.

In our survey of ThinkForward young people, 33% said their mental health was worse as a result of the pandemic. Participants were asked how they rated their mental well-being before the COVID-19 pandemic, using a scale of 0 to 4. 0 meaning ‘not great’, 2 meaning ‘somewhat ok’ and 4 as ‘getting worse’. Before Covid, the average rating was 1.9 but results after the pandemic, showed worsening mental health with an average score of 2.3

Asked to give three words to describe how they felt one young person wrote "stressful, overwhelming, difficult", another said ‘overwhelmed, worried and bored". In addition, 24% reported a strain in relationships with family and friends.

Our survey also found that 52% of young people said their future was their biggest concern. Reasons given include ‘lack of formal education’, ‘not being able to get a job’, ‘exam results/any complications that may come with starting college’, ‘lack of work’, ‘if things will go back to normal or not’ and ‘having missed months of school, especially before my GCSEs’.

Connor in Kent said: ‘I do worry more about my future now. I watch the news and see that a lot of businesses are facing uncertainty, there will be fewer jobs and no-one knows how long Britain will take to recover. I know that young people looking for jobs will be badly affected by the economic impact of Covid-19.’

For many young people, school is their safe place. It is harder to safeguard young people if you can’t see them. Visual signs such as lack of clean clothes and personal hygiene are indicators of vulnerability and were not available to our coaches and school staff during lockdown.

In some cases, special schools were very strict in allowing contact with their students for safeguarding reasons. Where previously our coaches could telephone young people and their parents, some special schools introduced a blanket ban on access. We think this contributed to increased isolation – a feeling already experienced more acutely by SEN young people. Worryingly it also led to at-risk young people being made more vulnerable without the additional oversight of their MoveForward coach. It also prevented coaches from providing practical and emotional support at a time it would no doubt have been welcomed by many families.

Whilst we acknowledge that young people with EHCPs are more vulnerable, allowing telephone and video call access to young people in the early stages of the lockdown in a manner which safeguarded all parties, may have helped to address some of the problems of isolation and escalating mental health.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

The impact on young people in education is extensive and wide-ranging. Year 11s and 13s had their exams cancelled and transitions turned upside down. Year 10s and 12s lost months of learning ahead of exams next year, and we also have concerns for Year 9s who had to choose their options and make critical decisions that could affect their future without the benefit of school support.

The pipeline of future secondary children who have been negatively affected by learning and/or mental health issues as a result of lockdown will continue to ripple through the system for many years to come, with those from disadvantaged environments more badly affected,

We agree with assessments that the education gap is only going to widen further as a result of months of lost schooling. Many of our young people come from social backgrounds that already make it harder for them to succeed.

- **At home**

Fifty percent of our current enrolled cohort are on FSM. Significant numbers of our coaches supported their young people's parents to navigate the arrangements to access the government's FSM voucher system, with some needing support to complete forms digitally. This is a good example of the extended service we stepped in to provide during the crisis.

As mentioned before, we know from our survey that around 35% of our young people who responded don't have access to technology. We also know that 36% don't have a quiet place to study. Factors like these can seriously jeopardise a young person's ability to learn.

In addition, for 35% of our young people their ThinkForward coach was the biggest source of support during the pandemic. This highlights the lack of a support system at home or in their community for many vulnerable young people.

More generally, some of our coaches are feeding back that parents are losing their jobs, adding to the instability of families that may already be struggling, and placing greater financial and emotional pressure on families.

- **At school**

Our coaches anticipate that some young people will struggle with the return to school following months out of the classroom. Schools will need to be flexible with behaviour policies, but at the same time we appreciate that they must balance that with the pressure to catch up. Our coaches are playing their part, supporting students to reintegrate into school, but in some cases this may not be easy.

On a similar note, students transitioning into new settings are more likely to find the move difficult, having missed out on interviews and open days. Again, we are providing

Comment [AM]: Not sure we answered the FSM aspect of this question? We know that communication could have been better and a significant number of our coaches supported parents in navigating complex and varied arrangements to access FSM (some needing support to complete forms digitally).

additional practical and pastoral support to our young people to smooth their path for example, intervening on their behalf with new providers, if they are struggling to settle in.

We also know that some schools are reluctant to release young people for sessions with their ThinkForward coach, as they prioritise learning and adhere to Covid-19 safety procedures which restrict interactions for staff who work across different year groups.

There is also a bigger worry that headteachers may not have the money to pay for crucial interventions such as ThinkForward, if there are additional costs to run their schools brought about by changes to class sizes, PPE and new technology needs, and demands on staffing. This could impact on us and other charities who provide a vital layer of additional services in schools for less advantaged students.

- **Employability activities**

One of the ways ThinkForward supports young people is to provide them with visits to the workplace through insight days and mentoring. Social distancing measures which are likely to be in place for some time will severely disrupt our ability to hold these kinds of events. This denies our young people exposures to the world of work, face-to-face contact with mentors and other working professionals, and enrichment activities.

We have set up digital alternatives for example, a bank of video resources on careers advice. We will be hosting online interactions, for example our mentoring programme, but these are not as fulfilling as face-to-face contact and in-situ workplace experiences.

Young people will be losing the opportunity to build relationships, enjoy new workplace exposures and broaden their thinking and horizons, all to the detriment of enabling them to be work-ready.

Fabiha said: ‘In the past during the holidays, my coach always found work insight days that interested me, and which helped me find out about the world of work. This summer I am sure I would have had a window of opportunities through ThinkForward to gain more experiences of different workplaces.

‘Being in lockdown meant I was unable to do of these activities. The ones I have previously participated in before really helped me with possible and potential career paths, so it is very unfortunate to miss out on that this year.’

- **Part-time employment**

Many young people rely on part-time work to act as a steppingstone to further opportunities, to supplement their income and to gain valuable experience and work/life skills. As the labour market contracts (particularly in areas like hospitality), it means a shortage of, and increased competition for, these kinds of roles.

- **SEN young people**

For the young people on our DFN-MoveForward programme, we are pleased that education/supported internship providers are able to draw down the ESFA and Access to Work funding (DWP) required for 2019/20 interns to return to their supported internship programmes in 2020/21, allowing them to complete their rotations/placements over either one, two or all three academic terms.

This response has been precisely what is needed, and supported internship providers such as DFN Project SEARCH have worked hard to develop a framework for curriculum delivery this autumn term whilst returns to host businesses are largely on hold.

There are still only a few examples of host businesses who can accommodate these, or new, interns in the autumn term of 2020/21. This means interns are largely returning to the classroom environment this term to focus on theoretical employability rather than fully immersive work-based learning, and are losing out on the valuable, practical experience that provides the opportunity for them to develop their skills.

We would like to see more action around job opportunities rather than supported internships, i.e. how can businesses be incentivised to recruit young people, including those with SEN, and how can government schemes can be developed to ensure that young people aren't the most severely impacted by COVID in terms of their employment prospects.

Conclusion

Young people can see the increasingly bleak picture of a shrinking labour market coupled with additional competition for jobs, and it worries them. In our survey 'my future' was cited as the biggest concern by 52% of respondents, showing that the long-term impact of coronavirus is very much on the minds of young people who can see their employment prospects fading.

It will be increasingly hard for ThinkForward to encourage young people's aspirations if there is very little for them to aspire to.

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