

The Open School

Independent Evaluation Report March 2026

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(See Appendix 2 for Peter's short CV)*

In summary

The evidence consistently shows that the Open School produces genuine, measurable improvements in attendance, engagement, and aspiration for young people — through the mechanism of being truly known, heard, and responded to. The programme is now operating at a scale and with a geographic spread that positions it to deliver these outcomes for many more young people, subject to investment in the evaluation and operational infrastructure needed to ensure impact at an extended scale.

Executive Summary

The Open School addresses one of the most persistent challenges in the English and Welsh education systems: the gap between young people's potential and their engagement with the learning and future-building that would help them realise it. Across nine sites spanning County Durham, South Gloucestershire, Shropshire, Leicestershire, Kent, Hampshire, Oldham, Cardiff and Bristol — and with 7 partner organisations now engaged — the programme is generating measurable improvements in attendance, engagement, and emerging aspirations through mechanisms that the evaluation evidence makes unusually transparent.

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation drawing on data generated from 22 individual responses across 19 source types (see Appendix 1): structured case study responses from 7 organisations; individual learner journey accounts covering 15 students across 7 schools and trusts; whole-school and cohort-level attendance and behaviour data; impact reports from community partners; borough-level aspirations data; and a longitudinal dataset spanning 22 years of alumni outcomes from a precursor programme. The evaluation was conducted during 2025–26, a year in which the programme was simultaneously consolidating in established sites and expanding into new local authority partnerships.

The central finding is this: where young people are truly known, where their voice is not merely gathered but acted upon, and where they are connected to relationships, experiences and opportunities that feel genuinely meaningful to them, the programme produces change that standard school structures have not achieved. The evidence for this is corroborated across multiple sites, multiple student populations, and multiple implementation interpretations, and it is supported by a theoretical account of a mechanism that makes clear why the approach works when it does and what conditions it requires.

Three findings are particularly significant.

First, the programme's impact is concentrated precisely where the system's failure is most costly. In this evaluation data, students with SEND, Pupil Premium status, and persistent absence show the largest gains. At Staindrop Academy, whole-school attendance improved by 1.3 percentage points year-on-year, with SEND pupils showing the largest gain at 2.2 percentage points. At Countesthorpe Academy's Evolve provision, two students — both with significant prior absence — improved their attendance by 39.9 and 63.4 percentage points respectively. Individual learner journey accounts from seven settings show the same direction of change across contexts as varied as Post-16 curriculum access in rural Shropshire, intensive relational support in South Gloucestershire, and a coaching model embedded across a Leicestershire multi-academy trust.

Second, the programme's effectiveness depends on a set of enabling conditions that are known, replicable, and investable: a person with dedicated time to make the programme work for individual students; a mapped and activated network of community and employer partners whose offer responds to students' actual interests; and an institutional commitment — not just an aspiration — to acting on student voice. Every site showing substantive change has all three. Sites in their first year of operation report strong intent and emerging understanding, with outcome data expected in 2026–27.

Third, the programme is expanding faster than its evaluation infrastructure can currently follow. The integrating platform (known as Aspire) is becoming the connective tissue across sites, but no shared indicator framework yet exists, baseline data was not captured prospectively in most first-year sites, and the current evidence base rests on positive case selection. Addressing this is the most important next step for demonstrating impact at scale.

Investment at this stage would support: full embedding in existing sites; systematic baseline data capture from the point of student identification; the development of a shared measurement framework across sites using the Aspire platform; and the longitudinal evidence base that will make the programme's case compelling and even more rigorous.

The evidence base now encompasses 15 individual learner journeys across 7 organisations in 9 locations, with attendance data from whole-school MIS systems, community partner impact reports, and 22 years of alumni outcomes from a precursor programme. The programme is generating the kind of change its theory predicts — in the populations it is designed to serve — through the mechanism it identifies. The task now is to build the evidence infrastructure that allows this to be demonstrated at scale.

1. Context and Rationale

The problem of the reduction of engagement of young people with schooling that Open School addresses is well-documented, if not yet well-solved. In England in 2023–24, 20% of pupils were persistently absent — missing more than 10% of school — and persistent absence rates have not returned to pre-pandemic levels (10.9% in 2018/19) despite sustained policy attention (DfE, 2025). Table 1 shows that the persistent absence rates were consistently higher in KS3/4 and Post-16 than in younger age groups – these older age groups are the ones that the Open School focusses on.

Table 1 Persistent absence rates in 2023/24 by year group (DfE, 2025)

	KS1	KS2				KS3			KS4		Post 16
	Yr2	Yr3	Yr4	Yr5	Yr6	Yr7	Yr8	Yr9	Yr10	Yr11	Yr 12+
% persistent absence	14.1%	13.5%	14.0%	14.6%	14.7%	19.3%	24.5%	27.5%	28.3%	29.2%	37.2%

Young people with SEND, those eligible for Pupil Premium, and those in rural or geographically isolated communities consistently experience the steepest barriers not only to attendance but to curriculum breadth: in many smaller sixth forms, structural limitations on staffing mean that the range of qualifications available to a student depends substantially on where they happen to live.

Cardiff, which joined the programme in 2026, illustrates the policy context at its sharpest: 14.1% of Cardiff's young people aged 16–24 are currently not in education, employment or training — 2.5 percentage points above the Welsh average — and the city recorded more than 2,100 exclusions in 2024–25 alone. The programme's expansion into Wales, supported by Cardiff Council's Inclusion Strategy, reflects both the national relevance of the challenges it addresses and the growing recognition that the approach represents a credible response.

What is less well understood is why the interventions most commonly deployed to address persistent disengagement — attendance mentors, targeted support programmes, curriculum augmentation — show limited effectiveness for the students most deeply withdrawn from learning (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022). A substantial body of evidence points towards an answer (e.g. Klem & Connell (2004); RTI International (2023); Middleton et al. (2025)): for the most persistently disengaged young people, what is most predictive of re-engagement is not the specific content of the intervention but the quality of the relationships through which it is delivered, and whether the intervention restores a sense of agency and purposeful identity. The system knows this in principle. In practice, it is structurally ill-equipped to commission, deliver, and evaluate it.

The Open School occupies a distinctive position in this landscape. Rather than adding an intervention onto an otherwise unchanged school experience, it works to reshape the conditions of learning itself: the relationships through which students are known and supported; the curriculum available to them; and the connections between school, community, and the broader world of opportunity. Its expansion during 2024–26 — from initial pilots in South Gloucestershire and Leicestershire to partnerships across England and Wales — reflects both the programme's growing evidence base and the increasing urgency of the problems it addresses. Interest in being involved in the programme is widespread but due to the Open School's resourcing constraints its expansion has had to be constrained.

Through involvement in the Open School community, the various participants are building a network of educational enquiry (Greany, 2023). It is that network which appears to be encouraging the development of different interpretation of the model and encouraging school sites to consider potentially transformative solutions. This aspect of the development was not included in this evaluation but would merit further enquiry.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Open School is grounded in a sociocultural view of learning — the position that learning is not the transmission of information to individual minds, but participation in meaningful practices, mediated by relationships, tools, and contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This theoretical commitment is not merely philosophical; it has direct, testable implications for programme design and for what counts as evidence of success.

Three implications are particularly important for understanding how the programme works and how to evaluate it.

Relationships and belonging are learning conditions, not peripheral supports

Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis of 119 studies found that learner-centred relationships — in which teachers know and respond to students as whole people — produce effect sizes well above the average for educational interventions. Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory demonstrates that intrinsic motivation depends on satisfying three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Hattie's (2009) synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses identifies the quality of teacher-student relationships as among the highest-leverage influences on learning. The implication is that programmes that invest in the relational conditions of learning are not soft alternatives to more rigorous academic approaches; they are a prerequisite for them.

Competence is what learners do and who they are becoming — not just what they can recall

This reframes what counts as progress and what data is treated as evidence of success. Bandura's (1997) work on self-efficacy demonstrates that students' beliefs in their own capacity to act — not just their measured ability — are powerful determinants of academic persistence. Niemiec and Ryan (2009) showed that autonomy support in teaching translates directly to engagement. For a programme serving students whose prior experience of school has damaged their sense of themselves as capable learners, the first evidence of impact is likely to be a shift in self-belief and participation, not a shift in grades. This is rarely assessed.

Being known is a relational achievement — data can support it, not substitute for it

Cook-Sather (2002) and Mitra (2004) demonstrated that authentic student partnership — where young people move from passive informants to genuine co-designers of their learning experience — produces measurable gains in engagement. Fielding (2001) showed that cosmetic consultation, which collects student voice without responsive action, can increase cynicism rather than engagement. The critical distinction that emerges from this research, and that recurs across every site in this evaluation, is between collecting student voice and acting on it. The Aspire platform supports the former; the latter requires institutional commitment and dedicated human capacity.

The unified mechanism across all three bodies of research is the same: what matters most is the quality of the relational conditions in which learning takes place — the experience of being truly known, heard, and responded to by adults who have genuine authority to act on what they learn. The Open School is, at its core, a programme that creates those conditions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data sources

The evaluation draws on data generated from 22 individual responses and 17 supplementary source documents during the 2025–26 academic year (listed in Appendix 1), supplemented by longitudinal data from a precursor programme. They span nine geographic locations and fall into four categories. Understanding their provenance and quality is necessary for correctly interpreting the findings that follow.

Two purpose-designed, structured case study instruments formed the basis for consistent analysis. The Learner Journey Case Study instrument asked practitioners to document individual students' trajectories, using structured scales (for attendance, participation, and future orientation) alongside open-ended narrative questions. Responses were collected in February and March 2026 and represent 15 students across 7 organisations in 7 geographic settings. The separate Organisations Case Study instrument asked trust and school executives to document programme-level impacts, organisational context, and enabling conditions; 7 responses were received across 6 organisations and one local authority.

Supplementary qualitative sources, which were not generated primarily for evaluation purposes were treated as contextual evidence rather than primary findings, and claims based on them were calibrated accordingly. They are listed in Appendix 1.

Quantitative school data. Staindrop Academy provided an anonymised cohort-level spreadsheet with MIS attendance data for eight students in the trial cohort, alongside whole-school year-to-date attendance figures disaggregated by student group. Individual attendance figures were reported by practitioners in several Learner Journey case studies. Oldham's borough-wide data, provided by the Oldham team, allows population-level analysis across two years of programme operation.

Longitudinal precedent data. Bedford's Education Partnership (EPC) provided nine alumni profiles from the PLACE programme, which has operated since 2004 and shares core features with the Open School approach. These profiles provide a 22-year precedent for the long-term outcomes available to the current programme's students.

3.2 Analytical approach

The analysis used three complementary methods. Thematic synthesis was applied to the qualitative data, with themes identified inductively from the case study narratives and tested against the programme's theoretical framework. 'Before and after' comparison was applied to the Learner Journey instrument's structured scales, which capture attendance, participation, and future orientation at two time points; patterns across all 15 cases were analysed for consistency of direction. Cross-source triangulation was used where the same site, student population, or mechanism appeared in multiple data sources; triangulated findings are treated as more robust than single-source claims.

Three analytical ground rules governed the interpretation of findings:

- First, sites at very different stages of programme maturity — from 22-year precedent data at the PLACE programme to first-year pilots in Kent and Hampshire — are not averaged or directly compared; findings are attributed to the specific context in which they were generated.
- Second, the main two distinct 'implementations' evident in the data — intensive relational support for KS3/KS4 students (Implementation A) and curriculum access at Post-16 through Open 6 (Implementation B) — are analysed separately, as they operate through different practices and produce different expected outcomes.
- Third, evidence quality is explicitly distinguished; MIS attendance data and externally verified figures carry more weight than retrospective self-report from stakeholders with an interest in the programme's success.

3.3 Interpreting the findings

Two structural challenges shape the findings.

First, the data contains two distinct ways of implementing the Open School programme.

- Implementation A — intensive relational support, typically for KS3/KS4 students at risk of or experiencing persistent disengagement — operates through relationship-building, personalised provision brokering, and sustained pastoral engagement.
- Implementation B — Open 6 curriculum access at Post-16 — operates through structural solutions to geographic and institutional barriers to qualification choice.

Whilst both 'implementations' share the same underlying mechanism, they produce different outcomes through different practices and require different evaluation approaches.

Second, programme sites range from established implementations with longitudinal data (LiFE MAT, 4+ years; Oldham, 2+ years) to first-year pilots with strong intent and limited outcome data (Endeavour MAT, Bitterne Park, Cardiff). Claims are calibrated accordingly throughout.

3.4 Limitations

The evaluation has several limitations that should inform how findings are interpreted. All Learner Journey cases submitted were positive accounts; there is a strong probability of selection bias. Without baseline data captured prospectively at the point of student identification, before and after comparisons rely on retrospective practitioner recollection, which may be subject to recall bias. No comparison groups are in place at any site, so while the evidence is consistent with the programme's causal claims, it cannot rule out the contribution of other concurrent factors. The evaluation data base is also relatively small in absolute terms; the patterns identified are consistent and theoretically coherent, but they require a larger and more systematically collected dataset to bear the weight of strong causal claims.

4. Findings

FINDING 1

Impact Concentrated on the Most Vulnerable

Across every site providing quantitative attendance data, the pattern is consistent: improvements are largest for the students whose disengagement has been deepest and whose failure to re-engage would be most costly. This finding is not based on a single dataset; it emerges independently from whole-school MIS data, cohort-level analysis, individual practitioner accounts, and community partner impact reports.

Whole-school data: Staindrop Academy

Staindrop Academy in County Durham provided the most systematic quantitative evidence in the evaluation dataset: year-to-date whole-school attendance data for 2024/25 and 2025/26, disaggregated by student group. The data shows improvement across all groups, with the largest gains among students with SEND and those eligible for Pupil Premium — precisely the groups this programme targets.

Student group			Change
Overall attendance			+1.3 percentage points
Pupil Premium attendance	2024/25	2025/26	+1.8 percentage points
SEND attendance			+2.2 percentage points (largest gain)
Trial cohort: behaviour incidents	59 (Term 1)	15 (Term 2)	74% reduction in behaviour incidents

The trial cohort of eight students — all with prior attendance and behaviour concerns — showed a reduction in behaviour incidents from 59 in Term 1 to 15 in Term 2. One student, a 13-year-old with PP and SEND status who had caused significant disruption at primary school to the point that other parents reportedly moved their children to different schools, moved from partial-time alternative provision to full-time school attendance. Her attendance shifted from 79.86% to 93.33% within a single term.

Evolve provision: Countesthorpe Academy (LiFE MAT)

Countesthorpe Academy's Evolve provision — an internal appropriate provision unit designed to re-engage students for whom mainstream has not been working — reported two cases with documented attendance data that represent the most dramatic individual improvements in the evaluation dataset.

Student profile	Prior attendance	Current attendance	Change
Age 15; ADHD (medicated); high suspensions; school refusal; failed off-site direction	28.7% (2024–25)	92.1% (2025–26)	+63.4 percentage points
Age 12; EBSA; eating disorder; sensory needs; SEN; PP; at risk of persistent absence	38.5% (2024–25)	78.4% (2025–26)	+39.9 percentage points

In both cases the practitioner accounts connect the attendance improvement to specific relational and structural changes: the establishment of a named trusted adult, daily CREW routines, strong home-school communication, and a warm, small-scale environment in which students' voice is heard and acted upon. The 15-year-old student — who at the start of 2025–26 was refusing school entirely and had failed off-site direction — is now described as a role model to other students and is expected to sit GCSE examinations in summer 2026.

Where student disengagement has been long-term and there is a deep-rooted disaffection towards education, the Open School is reported as being more successful in keeping these students in school than mainstream provision. However, the success rate of students with extreme behaviour being able to bridge back from the Open School into the mainstream and stay there has been much lower in comparison to students who access the Open School provision for other reasons, such as anxiety-based school avoidance.

Individual cases: Grove School and Winterbourne Academy

Across the Learner Journey dataset as a whole, 10 of 15 cases report either a categorical improvement in attendance category (e.g. from "significant ongoing concerns" to "generally regular") or a specific percentage increase. At Grove School, two Post-16 students report increases of +6.8% and +6.1% respectively, with the more striking case involving a student who had not achieved a GCSE in English Language and had been in Wave 3 intervention for persistent absence across KS3 and KS4. At Winterbourne Academy (Olympus), a Year 10 cohort attending Project Fearless sessions — students whose regular school attendance was as low as 70% — recorded 100% attendance at programme sessions throughout.

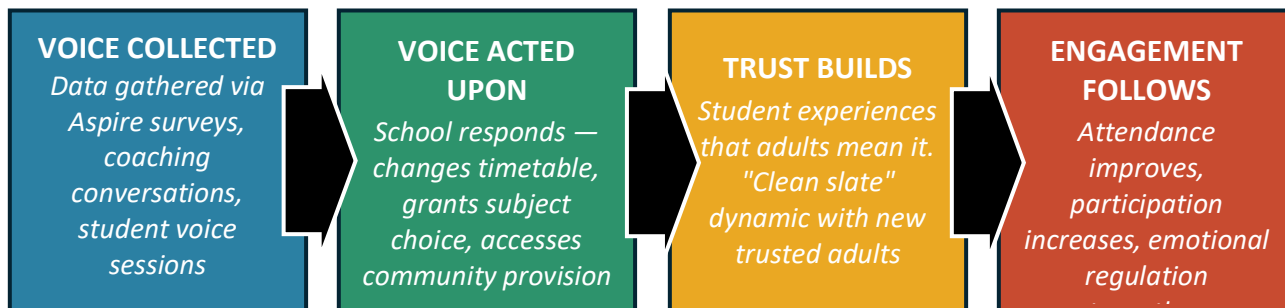
'He is no longer the student we knew in KS3 and KS4. He now carries himself with a real sense of pride... He has formed a new friendship group, building positive relationships with peers he would never have interacted with lower down the school.'

— Practitioner account, Grove School

FINDING 2

The Mechanism: Voice Acted Upon Produces Trust; Trust Produces Engagement

Across every site generating substantive change, practitioners and students describe the same sequence of events. This is not a post-hoc rationalisation; it appears in independently generated accounts from four different organisations, and it is consistent with the published research base on student voice and self-determination.



The critical distinction, which recurs across every site, is between collecting voice data and acting on it. Several organisations report gathering student aspiration and wellbeing data through the Aspire platform. The sites showing the most significant change are those where specific and planned actions were then established as a direct result of what students said.

At Staindrop, two students requested specific changes — one to return to school full-time, one to trial alternative provision for two days a week — and the school agreed. Both students describe this as the turning point.

'The student was able to explain that they felt school was not able to provide them what they felt would be useful for the future. In discussion they were asked what they would like to do or are interested in. From this we were able to find a provision... The significance of having this conversation, being heard and this being actioned has been significant for the student.'

— Practitioner account, Staindrop Academy

At Grove, a student with a history of poor attendance and disengagement made a formal case to change his subject choices and was trusted to do so. His own words in the case study describe this act of trust as the thing that made him want to work hard.

'The teachers have been amazing, and they gave me the space to change without judging me for my past. They trusted me to take the subjects I really wanted to study, and that trust gave me the confidence to work hard and succeed. This mattered as it put the ownership on me.'

— Student account, Grove School

At Olympus, the external provider sessions — Integrate UK, Ablaze — work because they respond to students' actual interests with content that feels relevant and real rather than generic.

The mechanism also explains an important negative: simply surveying students without responding to what they report does not produce the effect. Fielding's (2001) research on student voice demonstrates that cosmetic consultation — voice collected but not acted upon — can produce increased cynicism. Several organisations are in early stages of implementing the Aspire platform's data collection functions; the outcome data from these sites will be available in 2026–27, and it will be important to track whether the data collection is accompanied by responsive action.

FINDING 3

Different Implementations of the Mechanism Require Separate Evaluation

One of the most important analytical findings of this evaluation is that whilst the Open School operates through one clear mechanism (see Finding 2), the way it is implemented in practice is context dependent. Within the evaluation data there is clear evidence of two different ‘implementations’ of provision, targeting different populations, and producing different expected outcomes. Conflating them in reporting will produce incoherent findings. These differing responses appear entirely appropriate in that schools use pedagogies to respond to their communities in the ways they offer learning. This accords with recent work on developing effective locality-based models, based on collective moral purpose, common cause and integrated ways of working (Greany and Cousin, 2025).

	Implementation A: Intensive Relational Support	Implementation B: Open 6 Curriculum Access
Primary population	KS3/KS4 students at risk of or experiencing persistent disengagement, often with SEND, PP, or prior adverse experience	Post-16 students in rural or small sixth forms with limited curriculum access
Underlying mechanism	One shared mechanism - Voice acted upon (see Finding 2)	
Key provision	Trusted adult relationship; personalised provision brokering;	Structural alignment of sixth-form timetables; access to subjects not available in own setting;
Key outcomes (year 1)	Attendance; emotional regulation; participation; emerging aspiration	Curriculum breadth; independent study skills; broadening post-18 options
Best-evidenced sites	Staindrop, Countesthorpe (LiFE MAT), Olympus, Grove (Wave 3 students)	Idsall (Marches), Sir John Talbot's (Marches), Grove Sixth Form
Programme maturity	4 years (LiFE MAT); 1 year (Staindrop, Olympus)	1 year (Marches, multiple sites)

The LiFE MAT Real LiFE Curriculum, which underpins the Open School approach in Leicestershire, is the most mature example of Implementation A, having operated since 2021. The coaching model at the heart of Real LiFE — in which a dedicated CREW leader maintains a sustained pastoral relationship with each student, supporting personalised learning and project work connected to the real world — has now produced longitudinal evidence across multiple cohorts, including the four-year journey of the student documented in one of their case studies. That student, initially so anxious he regularly needed to leave the room in Year 7, is now in Year 10, attending consistently, and played a leading role in a student voice session at the first Open School peer review event.

Open 6, the Post-16 curriculum access model, is generating a different but complementary evidence base. Practitioner accounts from Idsall School, Grove School, and Sir John Talbot's — all in the Marches Academy Trust — document students who were previously limited to the subject choices available in their own sixth form, and who are now accessing Health and Social Care, Criminology, Further Mathematics, and Economics through a collaboratively timetabled cross-school arrangement. The Marches Academy Trust's Year 2 planning document demonstrates a sophisticated approach to enrichment that goes well beyond subject access: EPQ, ASDAN, Young Enterprise, Model United Nations, Duke of Edinburgh, financial literacy, and a structured programme of external speakers and industry visits, all designed to develop the breadth of knowledge and self-directedness required for competitive post-18 destinations.

‘Open 6 enabled students to remain in their own sixth form setting but access a broader curriculum. It also supported teacher retention.’

— Claire Turner, Marches Academy Trust

FINDING 4

Aspiration Shifts: One Step at a Time

Across the 15 Learner Journey cases, a consistent pattern emerges in how students' orientation to their futures changes. The Learner Journey instrument captured practitioners' assessments of each student's clarity and confidence about life after school on a four-point scale: (1) actively disengaged from thinking about the future; (2) very unclear or low confidence; (3) some ideas but still uncertain; (4) clear and confident about post-school plans.

Mapping 'before and after' scores across all 15 cases produces a clear pattern: no student moves directly from level 1 to level 4. The typical shift is one step along the spectrum — occasionally two. This is not a failure of ambition; it is what the programme's theory of change would predict. For a student in their first term of engagement, many of whom have histories of severe disengagement and school avoidance, having developed a preference for a subject or an openness to explore possible futures is a meaningful shift. Expecting fully formed career plans is the wrong benchmark at this stage.

Student / Site	Age	Before	After	Notes
Staindrop (PP/SEND)	13	Actively disengaged	Some ideas	Now can name preferred subjects for first time
Staindrop (second case)	13	Actively disengaged	Some ideas	Exploring alternative provision aligned to interests
Grove (Wave 3)	16	Very unclear	Some ideas	'More choices now'; developing skills through Open 6
Grove (Post-16)	17	Some ideas	Clear and confident	Higher-level apprenticeships as target post-18
Grove (Post-16, medical)	17	Very unclear	Some ideas	More open to a variety of pathways
Sir John Talbot's (EPQ)	17	Clear and confident	Clear and confident	EPQ on NHS provision; nursing career confirmed
LIFE MAT (4 years)	15	Actively disengaged	Some ideas	Now leads student voice; speaks confidently about future
Idsall (Open 6 Maths)	17	Some ideas	Some ideas	Remote working skills; increased confidence for HE
Marches (HSC/Criminology)	17	Some ideas	Some ideas	Independent working; university readiness developed
Winterbourne/Olympus	14	Very unclear	Clear and confident	Speaks about future 'with curiosity'; exploring specific careers
Countesthorpe Evolve (ADHD)	15	Actively disengaged	Clear and confident	Making apprenticeship applications; high self-expectations
Countesthorpe Evolve (EBSA)	12	Actively disengaged	Clear and confident	Talking about aspirations; looks forward to coming to school
Countesthorpe CREW (ASD pathway)	15	Very unclear	Some ideas	Now education-focused; thrives in project-based activities
Countesthorpe CREW	16	Some ideas	Clear and confident	Clear post-16 plan; strong sense of belonging in CREW
Grove (EAL/hybrid)	17	Some ideas	Clear and confident	Higher-level apprenticeships identified; university ruled out positively

'Previously her attendance issues meant that gaps were so significant she felt unable to even know which lessons she liked. This is allowing her to consider what she would like to do in the future, even though she is still unclear.'

— Practitioner account, Staindrop Academy

'They now speak about the future with more curiosity and possibility. They reference specific careers they learned about through mentoring and talk about wanting to "find something I'm good at" rather than avoiding the topic. Their language has shifted from uncertainty to exploration.'

— Practitioner account, Winterbourne Academy (Olympus Trust)

FINDING 5

Two Structural Conditions Drive Impact

A consistent pattern across every site showing substantive change is the presence of two enabling structural conditions. Sites reporting strong intent but limited early outcomes are typically those in which one or both conditions are not yet firmly in place.

Condition 1: A person with dedicated time

At Patchway Community School (Olympus), a dedicated staff member maintains a core cohort of 6–7 students, conducting weekly one-to-one check-ins that combine pastoral support, life-skills coaching, and provision brokering. The programme at Patchway follows an 80/20 model: 80% academic support (English and Maths) and 20% mindset and relational coaching. At Staindrop Academy, the single most important structural change in 2025–26 was the appointment of a non-teaching Attendance and Support Officer — a person with no history of sanctioning students, with whom students were prepared to have conversations they would not have with teaching staff. At LiFE MAT, the coach's effectiveness is directly attributed by the submitting practitioner to the depth of knowledge of the student's enrichment life: coaching conversations are genuine rather than formulaic because the coach knows the student as a whole person.

'We have supported colleagues to be freed up from the restrictions of the timetable and thinking more about the specific needs of students and then looking outwardly for how to meet those needs.'

— Steve Moir, Olympus Academy Trust

Condition 2: A mapped and activated local provider network

The Olympus implementation makes the two-stage function of external providers explicit: providers create the initial hook that brings disengaged students to a room they will not leave; internal mentoring then builds on that engagement to develop sustained participation. At Patchway and Winterbourne, this involves Integrate UK (filmmaking and serious youth violence education), Ablaze (career mentoring matched to student interests and background), Bradley Stoke Radio (broadcasting as a creative hook), and the University of the West of England's Future Mindset programme (campus visits for high-prior-attaining disadvantaged students). At Staindrop, Civic Forum partners and coaching volunteers provide the external offer. In Cardiff, 80+ local providers have been mapped to the platform, giving schools visibility of support that was previously fragmented or unknown. This provision map is now being used to enable the match of students based upon their stated interests.

Both conditions carry a challenge that multiple respondents name explicitly. The dedicated coordination model is difficult to scale when it depends on specific individuals; the capacity built around particular people is not automatically transferable. And knowing which providers are generating sustained impact — rather than initial engagement — requires longitudinal follow-through data that is not yet available at most sites. These are solvable problems, but they require investment to solve.

FINDING 6

A Growing National System with an Evaluation Gap to Close

The programme is now operating across nine geographic locations in England and Wales, spanning a range of contexts, key stages, and implementation models. The pace of expansion is one of the evaluation's most significant findings — not as evidence of impact in itself, but as evidence of the programme's capacity to adapt to diverse contexts and of the scale of the problems it is addressing.

Location	Stage	Key features	Strongest evidence
County Durham (Staindrop)	Year 1	Rural, high SEND/deprivation; non-teaching support officer; trial cohort	Whole-school MIS attendance data; behaviour incident data
South Gloucestershire (Olympus)	Year 1	2-school model; Patchway (relational) + Winterbourne (provider-led)	100% Project Fearless attendance; community partner impact data
Shropshire (Marches)	Year 1–2	18 schools; rural; Open 6 Post-16; aligned timetables since 2019	Multiple Post-16 learner journeys; Year 2 enrichment planning
Leicestershire (LiFE MAT)	4+ years	10-school MAT; CREW coaching model; Real LiFE Curriculum	4-year longitudinal case; multiple learner journey submissions
Oldham	2+ years	Borough-wide; Aspirations platform	Y7 attendance 0.2% drop vs 1% in prior years; sustained into Y8 (94%+)
Kent (Endeavour MAT)	Year 1	3 secondary schools; Aspire surveys Feb 2026	Intent and early engagement; outcomes expected 2026–27
Hampshire (Bitterne Park)	Year 1	2,000+ roll; coastal/deprived; KS3 and Post-16	Greater cohort-level student understanding reported
Cardiff, Wales	Early stage	LA-wide; 80+ providers mapped; 14.1% NEET; 2,100+ exclusions 2024/25	Willows High pilot; aligned taxonomy between LA, schools and providers
Bristol	Expanding	Aspirations rollout; cohort platform; 1-to-1 mentoring	Rollout data; cohort-level skills and wellbeing tracking

The Oldham data deserves particular attention as a population-level indicator. Operating the Aspirations approach at borough scale for two years, Oldham has maintained Year 7 attendance above 94% into Year 8 — a drop in attendance of 0.2 percentage points compared to the 1 percentage point drop seen in previous years. While it is not possible to attribute this change solely to the programme, the direction is consistent with the mechanism the programme identifies, and the scale is meaningful at a borough level.

Bedford's PLACE programme, which shares core features with the Open School approach and has operated since 2004, provides the most important longitudinal precedent data available to the evaluation. Nine alumni profiles from the PLACE programme include people now working as urban planners, army officers, and business owners, with near-zero NEET rates and attendance records that challenge conventional assumptions about what is achievable for students from high-deprivation contexts. The programme operated at a cost of approximately £5,500 per pupil — around 30% below mainstream school costs for equivalent provision. These are not direct comparators for the current programme, but they are a credible indication of what is achievable when the relational conditions of learning are prioritised consistently over an extended period.

The Aspire platform is becoming the connective tissue across all programme sites — the shared instrument through which student voice is collected, needs are mapped, and provision is matched. Its potential as a shared evaluation infrastructure depends on all sites using it consistently and contributing to a common dataset. That is the most important operational priority for 2026–27.

5. Evidence Assessment

Not all findings in this report carry equal evidential weight. The following assessment distinguishes between findings that can be claimed with reasonable confidence and those that are well-supported by the data and theoretical framework but require a larger and more systematically collected evidence base before they can be stated as established findings.

Claim	Evidential basis	Confidence
Attendance at Staindrop improved year-on-year across all student groups, with the largest gains among SEND and disadvantaged pupils	Whole-school MIS data, year-to-date comparison 2024/25 vs 2025/26	High
Behaviour incidents in Staindrop trial cohort fell from 59 to 15 between Term 1 and Term 2	Cohort-level data provided by school	High
Two Countesthorpe Evolve students improved attendance by 63.4pp and 39.9pp respectively	Practitioner-reported, consistent with school records	Moderate-high
Individual student attendance improved by +6.8% and +6.1% at Grove School (specific figures)	Practitioner-reported with specific figures	Moderate-high
Open 6 provides curriculum access to qualifications not otherwise available to Post-16 students in rural sixth forms	Multiple practitioner accounts; organisational case study from Marches	High
Students in Open 6 develop independence and self-direction skills through the structure of remote and blended learning	Consistent across multiple Post-16 practitioner accounts	Moderate
The mechanism connecting voice acted upon → trust → engagement → attendance operates consistently across sites	Independently generated accounts from 4+ sites; theoretically coherent	High for mechanism; moderate for causal attribution
LiFE MAT's Real LiFE Curriculum model produces sustained positive change over a 4-year engagement	One institution; case study and dissertation evidence	Moderate — single institution, strong theoretical grounding
Oldham borough-level programme associated with maintained Year 7 attendance (0.2pp drop vs 1pp in prior years)	Borough-level data; limited programme attribution	Moderate — population-level, plausible attribution
100% Project Fearless session attendance for students with regular attendance as low as 70%	Olympus Trust notes and provider data	Moderate — not independently verified
PLACE programme alumni show strong long-term outcomes including near-zero NEET	Nine alumni profiles; 22-year programme	Moderate for long-term plausibility; different context and era

6. Evaluation Priorities for 2026–27

The five priorities identified here reflect the gaps in the current evidence base.

Priority 1: A shared indicator framework across all sites

The most urgent evaluation need is for all programme sites to collect the same minimum dataset using consistent indicators and consistent definitions. The Aspire platform is capable of supporting this if deployed consistently, but consistent deployment requires a formal decision about what the minimum dataset includes, and organisational commitment to its use. The Baseline Data Framework developed alongside this evaluation provides a starting point for that minimum dataset, covering structural inputs, relational conditions, curriculum access, agency, and participation across six domains.

Priority 2: Prospective baseline data at the point of student identification

In 2025–26, the absence of baseline data at most sites means that before and after comparisons rely on practitioner retrospection. For 2026–27, baseline data should be collected at the point each student is identified for the programme — before any intervention begins. This applies to both Implementation A (individual student attendance, participation, and future orientation on the Learner Journey instrument scales) and Implementation B (qualification access before and after Open 6; post-18 intentions).

Priority 3: A larger and more representative Learner Journey dataset

Fifteen cases from seven organisations represent a meaningful dataset for a formative evaluation; they are not sufficient for confident extrapolation. For 2026–27, the target should be a minimum of 50 Learner Journey submissions, including cases from new sites and, critically, cases where outcomes were mixed or where the programme did not produce the expected change. Understanding failure cases is as important as documenting successes for a programme that aspires to scale.

Priority 4: Post-16 academic outcome and destination data for Open 6

Implementation B currently has no data on qualifications achieved or post-school destinations for students who accessed subjects through Open 6. This is the most significant gap in the Post-16 evidence base. Without it, the claim that Open 6 widens post-18 access cannot be tested against outcomes rather than intentions. Students completing their programmes in summer 2026 represent the first cohort from which this data could be collected.

Priority 5: Comparison data

Comparison with national persistent absence data — published annually by DfE, disaggregated by year group, student group, and region — provides a compelling and immediately available benchmark that no programme site currently exploits systematically. Documenting attendance trajectories against national trends for equivalent groups, over equivalent time periods, would allow the programme to make a strong comparative case without requiring a formal control group. Where it is feasible, a matched within-school comparison — identifying students with similar prior profiles who were not included in the programme — would strengthen causal claims further, and a waitlist design offers a practical route to this in sites with more students than current capacity allows. This does not require a randomised controlled trial; it requires a systematic approach to identifying a reasonable counterfactual. Open School should work with programme sites to develop both the national benchmarking approach and any within-school comparison design for 2026–27.

7. The Investment Case

The case for investment in the Open School rests on three converging arguments: the scale and cost of the problem it addresses; the quality of the evidence that it works; and the specific, tractable nature of the gaps that investment would close.

The scale of the problem

Persistent absence, curriculum narrowing, and the transition from school to NEET status are not marginal concerns. In England alone, persistent absence affects more than one in five pupils. In Cardiff, 14.1% of young people aged 16–24 are NEET — a rate that has resisted conventional policy responses. The EEF and the Children's Commissioner have both identified the quality of young people's relationships with trusted adults, and the extent to which they experience genuine agency in their learning, as the most powerful levers available. The Open School is, in effect, a structured approach to pulling those levers systematically.

The strength of the early evidence

The early evidence is sufficiently consistent, across sufficiently varied contexts and populations, to support confident claims about direction of effect. The cases documented in Finding 1 are representative of a pattern that appears independently across seven organisations and nine locations: attendance improvements concentrated in the students whose disengagement has been deepest, produced through the mechanism identified in Finding 2, and sustained across the range of implementation models described in Finding 3.

The PLACE programme in Bedford — documented in Finding 6 — provides the most important longitudinal precedent: near-zero NEET outcomes, across 22 years, at approximately £5,500 per pupil, 30% below mainstream schooling costs.

What investment would do

The primary gap between the current evidence base and the evidence base needed to demonstrate that impact rigorously, systematically, and at scale is not a lack of programme impact — the early signals are strong. It is a lack of the evaluation infrastructure needed. Investment at this stage would fund four things:

First, a dedicated evaluation lead to manage the shared measurement framework, coordinate baseline data capture across sites, and ensure that the Learner Journey and Organisations instruments are completed systematically and representatively — not only in successful cases.

Second, the technology infrastructure to aggregate data across the Aspire platform consistently, creating a programme-level dataset that grows with each cohort and each new site.

Third, site embedding in new and early-stage locations (Endeavour MAT, Bitterne Park, Cardiff) to establish the dedicated coordination roles and community partnerships that the evidence identifies as the non-negotiable enabling conditions for impact.

Fourth, a longitudinal follow-through design for existing sites — tracking the first cohort of Open 6 students into post-18 destinations, and tracking Implementation A students' attendance, qualifications, and post-school outcomes over a five-year period.

The programme is generating the kind of change its theory predicts, in the populations it is designed to serve, through the mechanism it identifies. The evidence base is now wide enough to make that claim with confidence. The next investment phase is about building the infrastructure to demonstrate it rigorously — and to take it to the scale where its potential impact matches the scale of the problem.

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Appendix 1: Data Sources

The following table provides a complete inventory of the data sources on which this evaluation draws.

Source	Type	Date	Location/Organisation
Learner Journey Case Study responses (×15)	Structured instrument via Google Forms	Feb–Mar 2026	LiFE MAT, Idsall, Marches, Grove, Sir John Talbot's, Staindrop, Winterbourne, Countesthorpe
Organisations Case Study responses (×7)	Structured instrument via Google Forms	Feb–Mar 2026	Marches MAT, LiFE MAT, Olympus, Staindrop, Endeavour MAT, Bitterne Park, Cardiff LA
Staindrop Academy cohort data	Anonymised MIS spreadsheet	2025–26 YTD	Staindrop Academy, County Durham
Olympus Trust evaluation notes	Meeting transcript (Gemini)	Oct 2025	Olympus Academy Trust, South Glos.
Olympus Trust notes summary	Internal programme document	2025–26	Olympus Academy Trust
Olympus Quotes	Student and staff voice document	2025–26	Olympus Trust (Ablaze, Integrate UK)
Marches Open 6 Year 2 Planning	Programme planning document	2026	Marches Academy Trust, Shropshire
Grove School Framework Dashboard	Aspire framework tool	2025–26	Grove School, Shropshire (Marches)
Idsall School Framework Dashboard	Aspire framework tool	2025–26	Idsall School, Shropshire (Marches)
Cardiff Open School Press Release	Public document	Feb 2026	Cardiff Council, Wales
Cardiff Open School Strategy Slides	Internal strategy document	Feb 2026	Cardiff Council, Wales
Bristol Aspirations rollout PDF	Programme presentation	2025–26	Bristol, South West England
Oldham East Learning Review PPTX	Learning review presentation	2025–26	Oldham, Greater Manchester
Bedford EPC Treasury Pitch	Strategic proposal document	Feb 2026	Education Partnership, Bedford
Professor Twining Letter (Bedford)	Letter of support	2026	EPC, Bedford
PLACE alumni profiles (×9)	Longitudinal alumni data	1999–2026	PLACE programme, Bedford

Ablaze Career Mentoring Impact Report	Community partner impact report	2025–26	Ablaze, South Gloucestershire
Serious Youth Violence Workshops Impact Report	Community partner impact report	2025–26	Integrate UK, South Gloucestershire
Olympus Update June 2025 PPTX	Programme update presentation	Jun 2025	Olympus Academy Trust

Appendix 2: Short CV

Peter Twining

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PROFILE

Professor of Education with 40+ years of experience spanning primary school teaching, higher education, and independent research and evaluation. Expertise in educational technology, curriculum reform, qualitative research methodology, and the future of schooling. Director of Belief2Practice; Honorary Professor at the University of Newcastle (NSW). Former Co-Editor in Chief of Computers & Education — the leading journal in the field — and PI on grants totalling over £10 million.

CURRENT ROLES

Director, Belief2Practice PTY Ltd	2024 – present
Honorary Professor of Education, University of Newcastle (NSW)	2024 – present

SELECTED ACADEMIC APPOINTMENTS

Professor of Education (Innovation in Schooling & Educational Technology), University of Newcastle	2019 – 2023
Professor of Education (Futures), The Open University (OU)	2013 – 2019
Co-Editor in Chief, Computers & Education (Elsevier)	2015 – 2017
Associate Dean (Research & Knowledge Transfer), Faculty of Education & Language Studies, OU	2009
Co-Director of the Centre for Research in Education and Educational Technology (CREET), OU	2009
Head of Department, Department of Education, The Open University	2007 – 2009
Director, Vital Professional Development, The Open University	2009 – 2013
Senior Lecturer, The Open University	2003 – 2013

EDUCATION

PhD — Enhancing the impact of investments in educational ICT, The Open University	1995 – 2002
PGCE Primary Education, Roehampton Institute, London	1985 – 1986
BA (Hons) Social Psychology with Cognitive Studies, University of Sussex	1979 – 1983

SELECTED FUNDED PROJECTS (AS PI/DIRECTOR)

ARTS Digital Badges — NCFE / Assessment Innovation Fund	£99,925 2021–22
New Purposes, New Practices, New Pedagogy (NP3) — Society for Educational Studies	£200,000 2015–17
Vital Professional Development — Department for Education / DCSF	£9.4m 2009–13
Schome Park Programme (Phase 3) — Becta / NAGTY / Innovation Unit	£89,263 2007–08
Evaluation of Tablet PCs in English Schools — Becta	£95,878 2004–05
Software Use, Re-use & Customisation in Education (SoURCE) — TLTP3	£299,001 1998–01

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

Aubrey-Smith, F. & Twining, P. (2024) From EdTech to PedTech: Changing the way we think about digital technology. Routledge.

Twining, P. et al. (2020) Developing a quality curriculum in a technological era. Educational Technology Research and Development, 69(4), 2285–2308.

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Twining, P. et al. (2017) Some guidance on conducting and reporting qualitative studies. Computers & Education, 106, A1–A9.

Twining, P. et al. (2013) Moving Education into the Digital Age: The contribution of Teachers' Professional Development. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 29(5), 426–437.

SELECTED KEYNOTES

Quality education and standardisation — World Education Summit (online)	2022
Schooling in the automation age: What is quality education? — ICOTAL, Pakistan	2020
If school is the problem, what is the solution? — OU Inaugural Lecture, Milton Keynes	2019
Assessment – new frontiers? — Surpass Conference, Amsterdam	2016