

Minding the Gap

Building Better Opportunities

Evaluation

MINDING THE GAP
YOUR
FUTURE
YOUR
CHOICE



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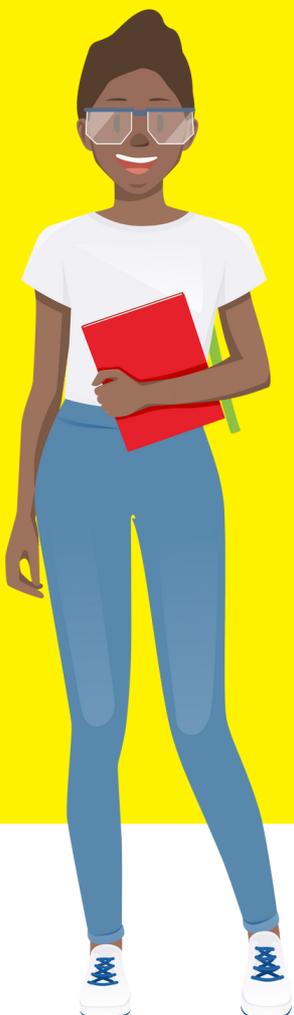
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Summary



01

This evaluation focuses on Phase 2 of Minding the Gap, covering the period from October 2019 through to the end of project delivery in March 2023.

An external evaluation was completed by Social Enterprise, East of England (SEEE) up to September 2019, for Phase 1 of the project.

What follows is an internal evaluation including end point feedback from participants, service users, and stakeholders.





What is Minding the Gap?

Building Better Opportunities Minding the Gap project, also known as MtG, launched in March 2017, with joint funding from the European Social Fund and The National Lottery Community Fund.

MtG project management and delivery has been carried out by a partnership of voluntary, community, social and educational organisations operating in Suffolk, with Community Action Suffolk as the Lead Partner.

The aim of the project was to support young people aged 16 -24 in Suffolk who faced significant barriers to employment, education and training.

The barriers defined at the beginning of the project focused around the hardest to reach, socially and rurally isolated, and disadvantaged group of young people, such as those with disabilities and ex-offenders.

Minding the Gap offered intensive support to over 1000 young people, to gain the skills and experience they needed to discover and pursue their aspirations, to move into work, training or education.



If I think back to the person I was when joining Minding the Gap, and to the person I am now, I wouldn't recognise myself.

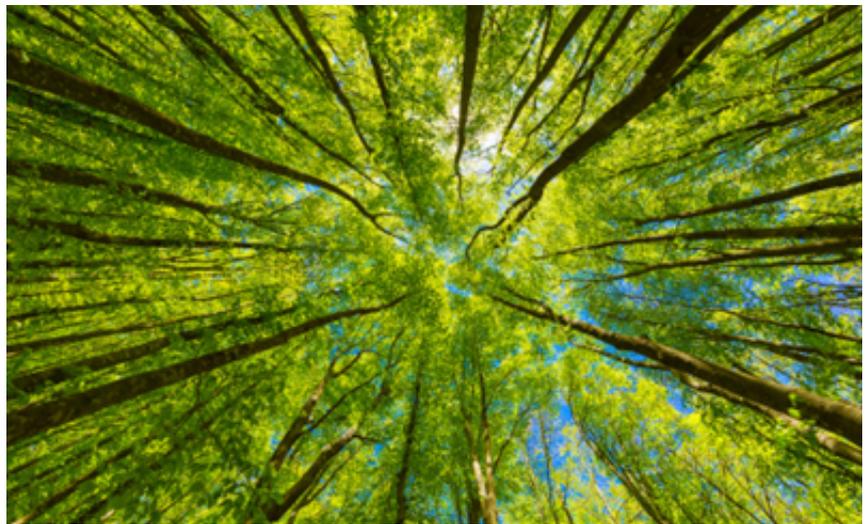
Minding the Gap really helped me gain confidence, gave me a reason to leave the house, supported me with writing my first CV and getting my first job.

I now have my second ever job in life and I am loving it, and I wouldn't have done it without the support from Minding the Gap.



A core tenet of Building Better Opportunities (BBO) projects is the integration of cross cutting themes into project delivery.

Minding the Gap has worked to ensure that the themes of sustainable development, gender equality, and equal opportunities have been embedded in everything we have done.



Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is about meeting the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It recognises the need to balance environmental, social, and economic considerations when designing and delivering activities.

Our key focus has been 'reduce and recycle' and more sustainable transport. We have demonstrated these well through travel training and our group activities with young people.



Gender Equality and Equal Opportunities

The need to treat everyone equally, regardless of race, sex, gender reassignment, age, religion and belief, sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy and maternity, or disability, plays an important part in the sustainable development of local economies.

All organisations involved in delivering BBO projects must be committed to promoting equal opportunities and non-discrimination in all areas of their work. This should be in line with current legislation, including the Equality Act 2010.

Our focus has been on targeted recruitment aimed at women, those from ethnic minorities, those with disabilities or with mental health needs and working to address the needs of those from rural areas. Our group activities have been planned with these aims in mind and to increase confidence and peer support opportunities.

Our project statistics show our achievements.



A Timeline of Success





Following the success of the project between 2017-2019 the project was extended until 2022. The target was increased to 935 participants



Project begun in 2017 with a stretch target to support 642 young people in Suffolk



A further extension of 9 months was granted, extending project delivery from June 2022-March 2023. Our target increased again to 1071.



Targets have been exceeded, with a total of 1144 young people signed up to the project. By the end of 2022. That's 107% of our target!



Overall Project Statistics



1144

Total number of young people signed onto the project

628

Total number of men signed onto the project



498

Total number of women signed onto the project

507

Of which identified themselves as having a disability

56

Come from an ethnic minorities background



259

Moved into education or training on leaving

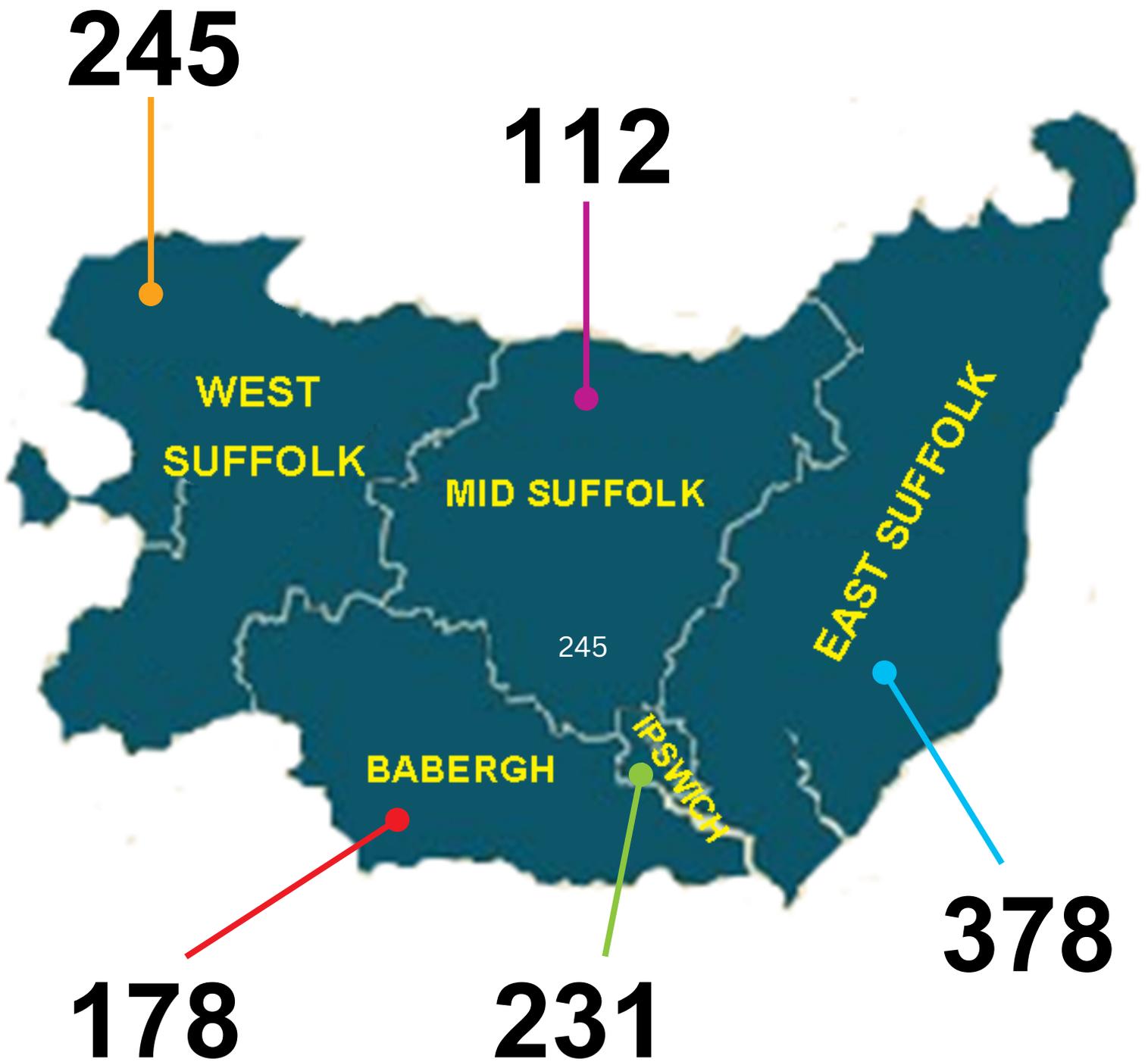
263

Moved into employment, including self-employment on leaving

72

Moved from economically inactive into job search

Participants Per District



Freya

Joined us after a referral from the Early Help Team at Suffolk County Council. This young person had not attended school since Year 10, didn't really leave the house and would not go out without the support of family.

She lived on the outskirts of Woodbridge and would not travel in a car or public transport.

We began by going out for dog walks to engage with her and she would come out with us with the family dog and our own 4-legged representatives. Slowly we stretched the distance, while discussing work and what she would like to do.

Freya was keen on horses and we agreed to arrange some work experience.

Mum would take her to an equestrian centre, where the keyworker supported her for the session. Her confidence grew and with time she was able to return home in the keyworker's car.

Freya built on her experience further completing some AQA qualifications and signed up for a short college course. The keyworker went with her on her first 2 days to ensure she would turn up. She loved college, she made a friend on the first day which helped. She exited the project to college.

Since completing college, Freya is now working full time at the doggy day care and is learning to drive.



Phase 2 Summary

Insights into the barriers faced by participants on joining the project has been gained from their sign up documentation and personal development plans.

These have highlighted that from 2020 onwards, participants were facing greater complexities:

- Lack of confidence
- Mental health issues
- Disabilities
- Lack of education
- Limited aspirations and understanding of opportunities available.
- Social isolation
- Sofa surfing/homelessness
- Negative peer group influences
- Lack of family support

Minding the Gap has:

- Focused on building confidence, particularly as lockdown restrictions eased.
- Ensured people continued to be at the forefront of this project, and support has been tailored to meet the needs of individuals.

We have adapted our approach:

- Employed specialists to offer specific workshops and to gain qualifications: Construction Course, Level 1 Health and Social Care, Cyber Skills.
- Employer engagement has provided work experience and industry insight days – “Try before you buy.”

Progress in Phase 2



Phase 2 of the project has seen some sustained progress in some of the most important areas:



Participant recruitment drive

Substantial and enduring increases in participant numbers (Fig.1):

As of 31 December 2019, we sat at just over 90% of our original target, equating to 580 participants compared to a targeted 642. Since then, we successfully recruited new participants, managing to achieve 107% of our final target (1144 participants compared to a targeted 1071).

Achievement indicators:

A wider reach for potential referrers — increased awareness of potential stakeholder and referral pathways; collaborative work with like-minded organisations — a key developmental strategy with the number of partners reducing after Phase 1; increased social media presence; revised project flyer format; recruitment of new project staff; Improved links with local Job Centre Plus branches and other local youth initiatives, via the DWP internal information systems.

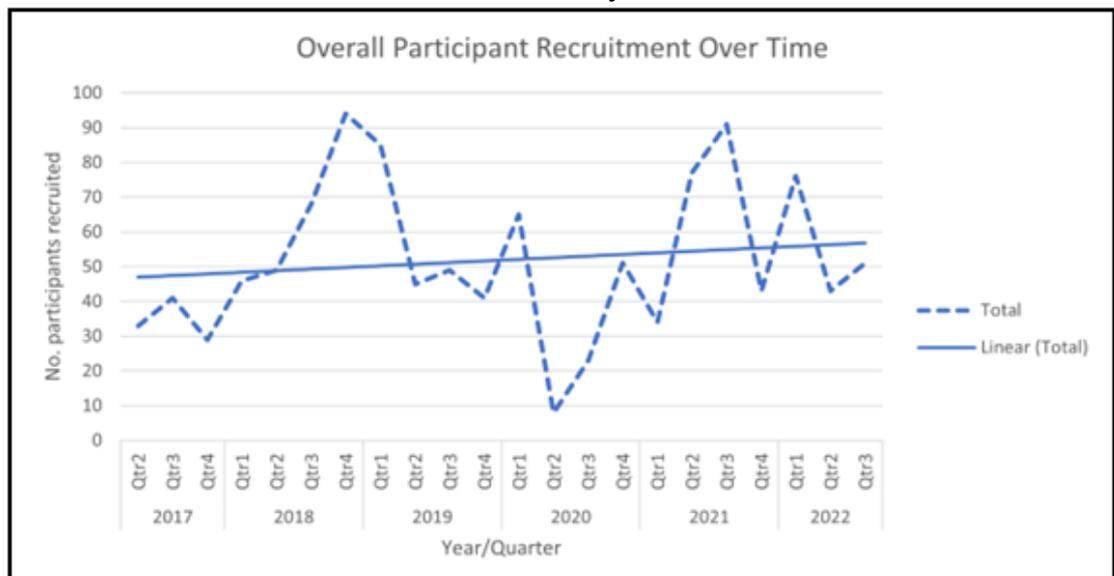


Fig 1

Fig 1. shows how the actual number of participants recruited to the project in each quarter has seen an overall positive trend over time, with a particularly impressive increase throughout Phase 2, following a sharp decline as a result of the first COVID-19 lockdown.

The slight decline in recruitment occurring towards the end of the project should not be read as a step backwards. Recruitment was naturally allowed to slow as the project reached its conclusion. This was designed to ensure all active participants were supported in the most effective way possible to seek to achieve the most positive outcome for them.

Focus on recruitment from target demographics

Increased number of participants from ethnic minorities. (Fig. 2)

The number of participants supported on Minding the Gap from this demographic has increased from 20 (as of 31 December 2019), to 56 at project end. The proportion of ethnic minorities has increased, when compared to those of white-British ethnicity.

Achievement indicators:

During Phase 1 there had been a lack of recruitment in the localities where Suffolk-wide statistical data identified the largest populations of non-White British to live. Targeted effort to engage with Job Centre Plus and collaborative projects with youth and minority support networks in these localities, has led to a significant increase in referrals. The switch to more group-based activities has been our 'USP appeal' in recruitment across the county. So, gaining our name as a preferred youth employment service in these areas, has in turn increased our appeal within the local population of young people from non-white ethnic groups.

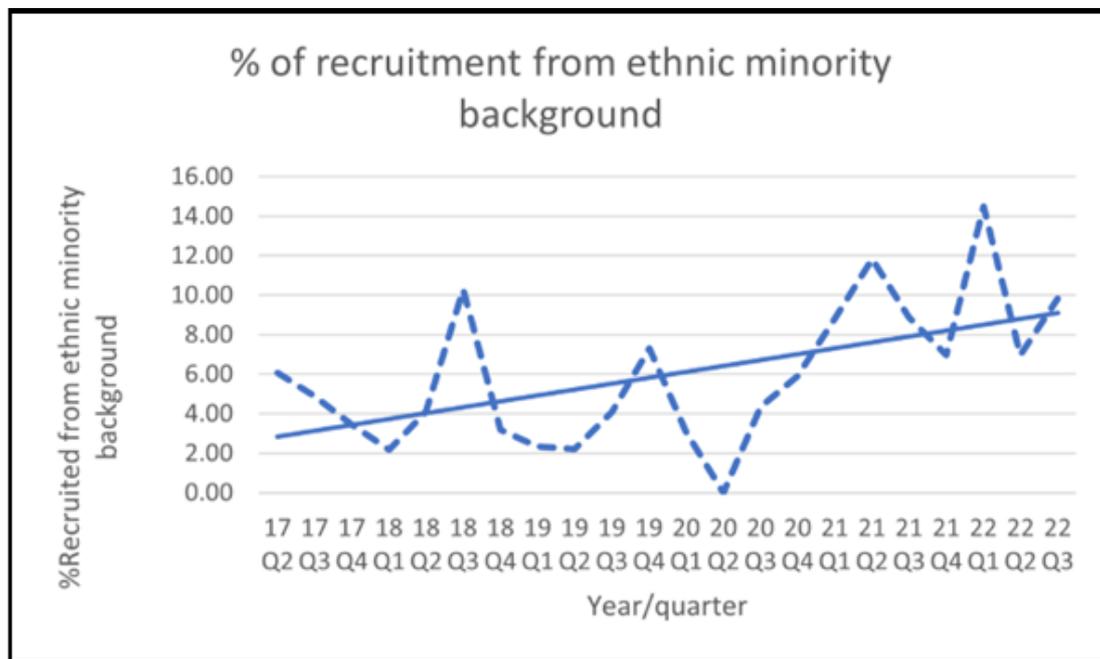


Fig 2



Fig. 2 shows how the number of ethnic minorities as a proportion of the overall recruitment numbers.

NB: The definition of ethnic minority for the purpose of these graphs is any ethnicity other than: 'White - English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, British'; 'White - Irish', and 'Prefer not to say'

Increasing the recruitment ratio of women to men (Fig. 3)

- Looking back to 31 December 2019, from a total of 580, the number of men recruited was 335 compared to 241 women, so the proportion of men to women on the project stood at 41% women, 58% men.
- A core aim of the project for phase 2 was to close this gap as far as possible. We made some good progress towards achieving this, finishing with 44% women and 55% men. The number of women for the target was 535 — The total number recruited to MtG ended up close to this, at 498 (93%).

Achievement indicators:

- Focussed effort to target promotion towards community groups who supported women and successful engagement and collaboration with the county-wide Family Nurse Practitioners service.
- We, publicised the childcare support availability, set up young mums groups, asked referrers what they felt would encourage women and focussed many of our group activities to maximise this appeal.

Fig. 3 shows how the actual number of participants identifying as male, female, or other has changed over time. This chart shows how the gap between the number of male participants and female participants recruited per quarter has been steadily closing. Several quarters in Phase 2 had a higher recruitment of female participants than male participants.



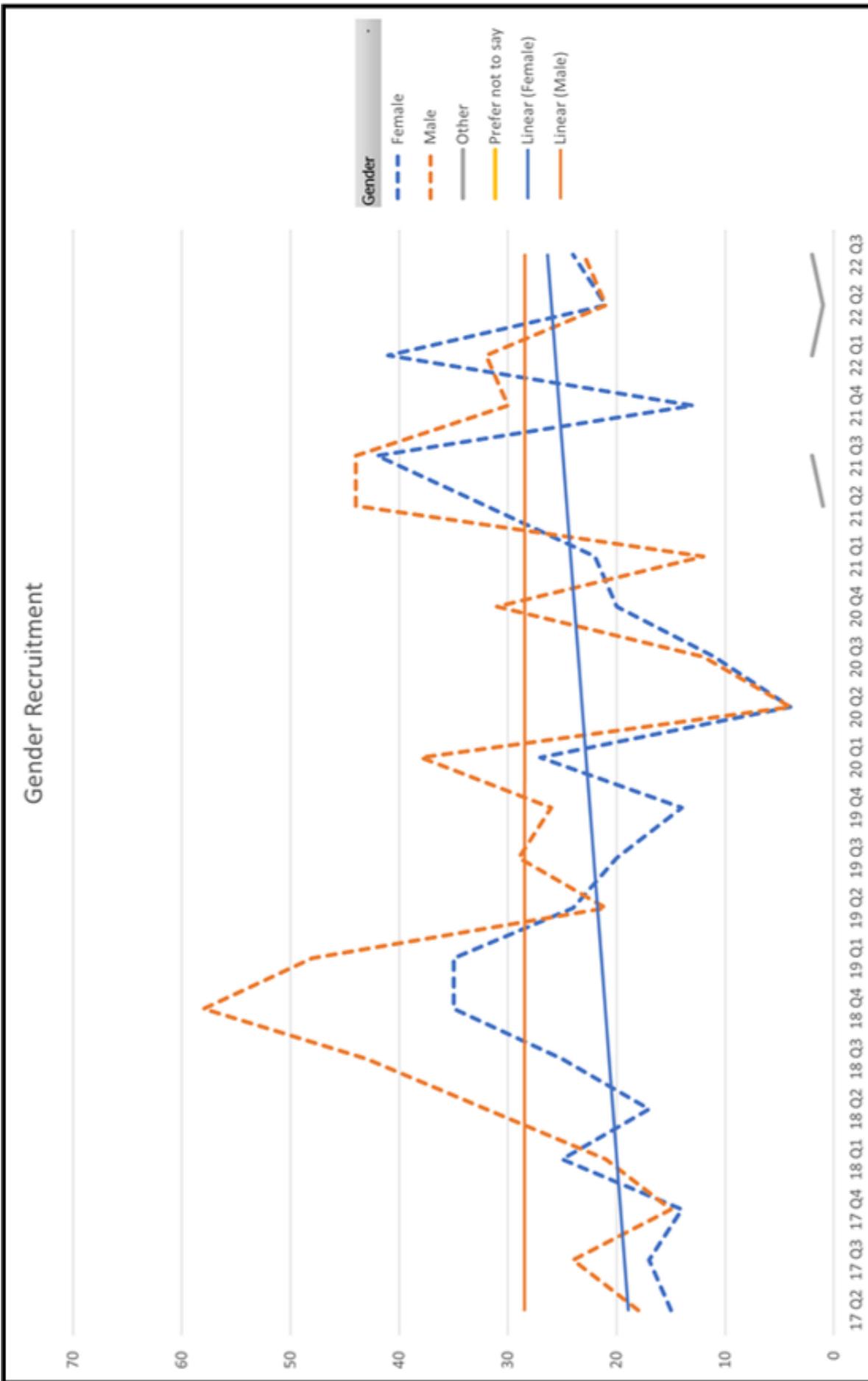


Fig 3



Improving outcomes for participants (Fig. 4)

At the end of Q4 2019, approximately 40% of participants had achieved a project result (i.e. moved into education, training, employment, or active job searching). Our final result shows a huge improvement in the proportion of participants achieving an outcome—49%.

Achievement indicators:

Achievement has benefited from more collaboration within the project. Partner Realise Futures had consistently performed well throughout their time on the project. Partners were more willing to share and acknowledge best practice. In-roads were made and relationships were more consistent with the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) and from new national employability initiatives, such as the introduction of the 'Kickstart' employment scheme. It is testament to Minding the Gap support that even with Covid, so many young people felt ready to take on such opportunities.

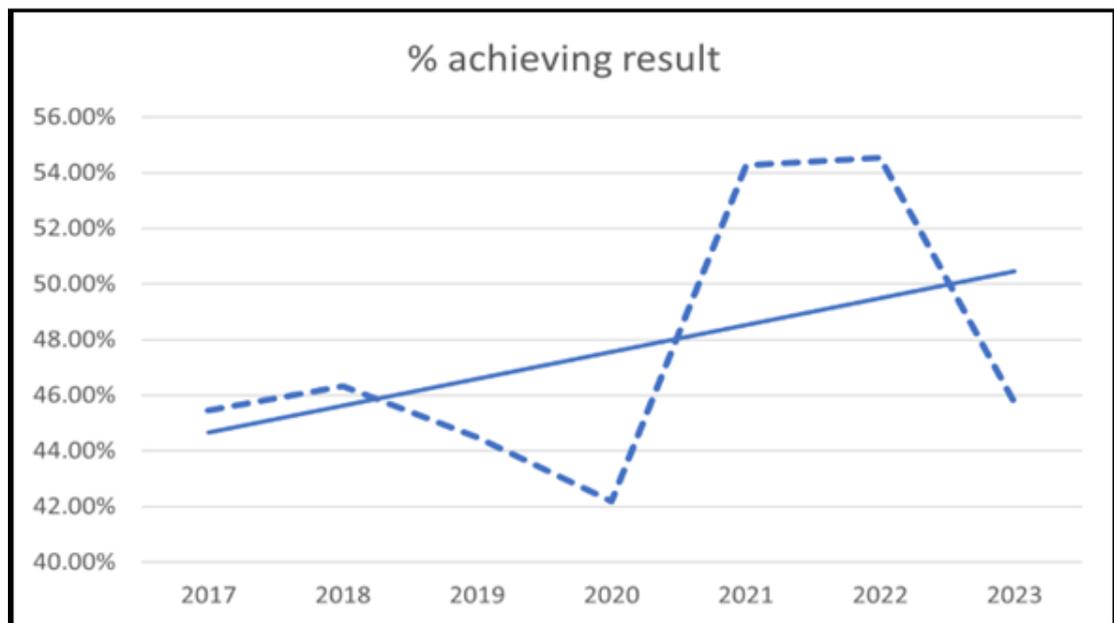


Fig 4

Fig. 4 shows how the percentage of participants achieving a project result at the point of exit has increased over time.

A particularly impressive upsurge in project results occurred throughout 2020, with an increase of over 10% in achievement of project outcomes over the year. This high success rate stayed consistent throughout 2021.

The drop off in results achieved through 2022 can in-part link to the number of barriers our young people were facing when they joined. With a limited project delivery time left, some participants hadn't reach there full potential at the point of the project closing. However, key sign posting to other similar projects or volunteering opportunities were identified, to allow a continuation of support.

Kayleigh

Age 17 on joining MtG
Referral from Young Persons Worker (Suffolk County Council)

Project Result: Job Search

What were your circumstances before joining the programme? Why did you want to join? Do you have any qualifications or previous work experience?

“I had to leave school in year 10 due to severe ear problems and was not given support after a mastoidectomy which took time to recover from. I was looking to gain a GCSE in English, but could not attend a classroom setting due to ongoing illness.”

How did you feel about your situation you found yourself in before the programme? What things were stopping you from working?

“I was feeling very hopeless and unhelped, I felt I had been treated unfairly by my schools over the years. I was struggling with constantly being ill and feeling far behind others my age.”

How has the programme helped you with these issues? What difference has the project made to you personally?

“The programme helped me to find a course I could complete at home. This has helped me feel more positive about my education.”

Which activities have you done? How did these help?

“I’ve completed my IGCSE online. I also completed other online courses including an introduction to BS1. I’ve completed a first draft of my CV. These helped me boost my skill set.”

How do you feel about work now? Did you find employment after participating in the project?

“Preparing for work in the future once my illnesses and conditions become more well managed.”

What was the support like on the programme and would you recommend it to others?

“The support on the programme was very helpful and overall positive, I would recommend it to others.”



Minding the Gap has vastly evolved and adapted since our last project evaluation at the end of 2019. Here are some of the headlines for changes in our delivery approach:

Change to direct delivery model from area partner model:

The original project reporting structure was designed using an Area Partner Model, with three key partners being responsible for coordinating the project and delivery partners in their area. This model was revised in the early stages of Phase 1 due to compliance issues with the quarterly financial claims. Community Action Suffolk took responsibility across the partnership to audit each partners financial claim moving to monthly reporting and providing direct feedback on expenditure to each partner. The Area Partner Coordinators continued to be responsible for the recruitment of participants to the project and the calendar of activities offered within their area by all delivery partners.

Change to the makeup of the partnership:

In November 2018 Access Community Trust gave notice to leave the project. The mutual decision was taken as they confirmed they were unable to deliver the required performance within the agreed timescales. From January 2019 recruitment of new participants ended and priority was given to achieving an exit result for current engaging participants. When the project was offered the extension in February 2019, Access Community Trust was consulted on whether they wanted to continue and be part of the extension. The extension was declined and they left the partnership as agreed in Aug 2019.

The first extension of delivery time and funding for the project was a key period of change for the partnership model. Performance and value for money played a key part in the decision-making process of how the model needed to adapt. A review of performance across the partnership was undertaken in May 19, including the numbers of participants that were utilising the activities offered by Red Rose Chain, Phoenix Rising and Green Light Trust.

In Phase 1 of the project only area partners (Access Community Trust, Lapwing Education & Realise Futures) held a target for both outputs and results. For Phase 2 we considered the performance of the project as a whole and the funding distribution. Options were presented to partners to ensure we maximized value for money and resources were fully utilised across the project. This entailed a request to all partners to participate in promotion and recruitment of participants. Phase 1 of the project ended on 30th September 2019, with three partners deciding that they had achieved what they set out to do and would not continue with Phase 2. Project delivery continued with partners Realise Futures, Lapwing Education and Involve Active.

The final extension of the project was confirmed in May 2021 which would extend the project until 30th June 2023. In November 2021 Realise Futures gave notice to not continue the project into Phase 3. Throughout the project Realise Futures had performed in excess of both their output and results target and wanted to concentrate on other employability projects.

Shift to group based activity – “Hubs”:

With changes of personnel within our Partner Lapwing Education, and their later expansion into West Suffolk, the frequency of group based delivery increased significantly in phase 2 of the project.

This did not replace the bespoke 1:1 support on offer, but regular “hubs” added a new dimension to project delivery, and gave us our Unique Selling Point (USP), and a number of benefits:

- The capacity to work with more young people, allowing for faster participant recruitment to the project, reflected in the 2021 participant recruitment upsurge.
- An opportunity for young people to build social skills and confidence. Bringing young people together to work side by side allowed new friendships to blossom, social isolation to reduce, and co-operation and team building skills to flourish.
- Group activities allowed for the possibility of reducing the environmental impact of the travel involved in project delivery. As part of our cross-cutting themes monitoring throughout Phase 2, we chose to track the frequency of hubs, and monitor the methods of travel used to attend them.

- It is evident that incorporating the group based model, whilst also continuing to provide 1:1 support reflected a more nuanced understanding of, and response to, participant needs. Our 2023 participant survey informed us that nearly 40% chose “Improve social skills”, and over 35% chose “Meet new people” as their aims from the project. These aims have been well catered for through the incorporation of more group based activity. However, the decision to retain a significant 1:1 component was vindicated by almost 65% of survey respondents choosing “1:1 sessions with keyworker/advisor” as the most beneficial aspect of the project.
- To give an idea of the variety and opportunity that the hub model offered, here is a selection of just some of the hubs MtG ran throughout Phase 2 of the project: Beach cleans, upcycling, entry to employment courses, CV-writing, wellbeing, digital media projects, money management, self-employment, volunteering, industry insight sessions (animal, farming, beauty etc) confidence building, and many many more!



Key Challenges

Evolving guidance and limited best practice shared across the BBO Programme:

Resulted in continued need to change process and procedures and recommunicate to partners. In some instances this meant that we needed to action evidence retrospectively. Funding was also clawed back on a number of occasions during the project lifetime.

Action undertaken:

Established a BBO Suffolk / Norfolk working group to enable the four projects to share best practice and created greater collaboration. Project meetings with partners ensured we could keep partners informed. Familiarisation days held with all staff provided an opportunity to focus on areas of the guidance and reconfirm what was required.

High level of staff turnover across the partnership:

Resulting in service and key-relationship changes for participants and the need to upskill new staff. This also created a underspend of funds and impacted achievement of project targets in line with forecast.

Action undertaken:

Staff roles and recruitment process reviewed, along with exit interview feedback. Frequency of staff meetings increased, especially during Covid. Referral process updated, more frequent all-staff meetings', checklist and training held with new teams.

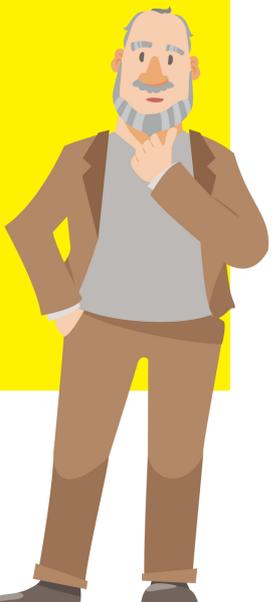
Inconsistent performance across the MtG Partnership

Resulting in performance improvement plans and resistance from partners. Partners also leaving the partnership.

Action undertaken:

Gathering feedback from partners and sharing best practice. Setting clear and manageable targets.

Key Challenges



Communication breakdown regarding procedures for eligible expenditure

Compliance errors resulted in financial impact to partners.

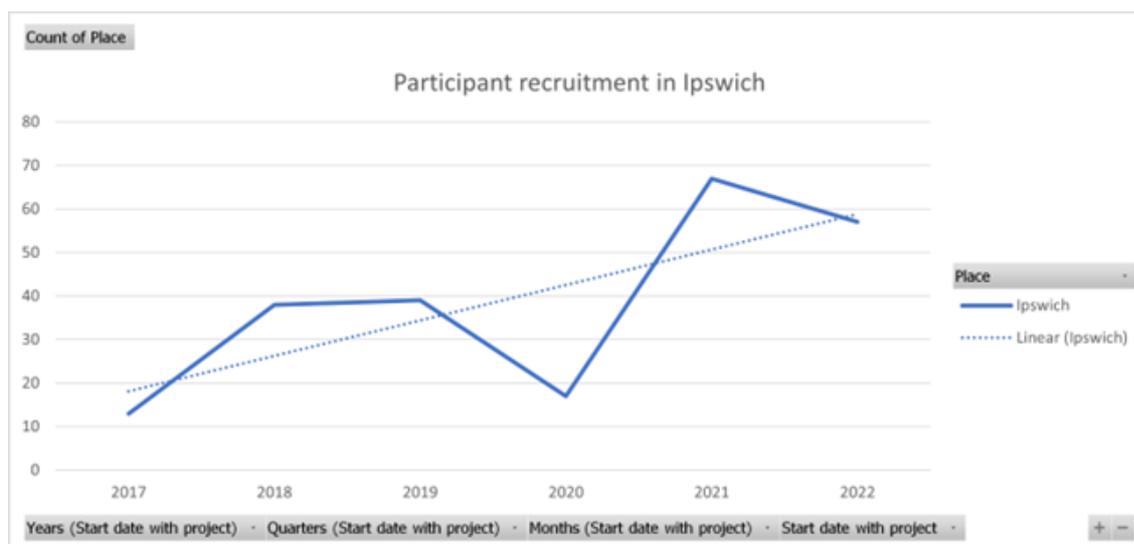
Action undertaken:

Deep dive into the key preparation required for future expenditure.

Geographical imbalance in recruitment during Phase 1

There were some key differences within the partnership in terms of forging successful referrer relationships, resulting in key-populations being very under-represented, which we addressed in Phase 2.

Such as the county town of Ipswich:



Action undertaken:

From the graph you can see the positive impact of improvements in relationships with key stakeholders such as Ipswich Job Centre Plus and other youth support services. This primarily came from changes in Lapwing Education staffing, expansion of the team with more experienced personnel, which paid dividends in recruitment in Ipswich from mid-2020 onwards.

COVID-19 Impact

Minding the Gap proposition was based on face-to-face delivery. Covid 19 impacted this delivery model and we were unable to support the participants through Face to face 1:1's or via group sessions.

At the start of April 2020, we were working with 130 participants across Suffolk. Our approach was to contact all participants within the first two weeks to explain that we would continue to support them via telephone, email, text, video call and issue information / activities packs for them to complete.

Initially 85% of participants engaged with us and were keen to continue with weekly contact, to review progress towards their goals.

The lockdown also impacted our key workers, who themselves were used to being out meeting young people, not staying at home trying to support young people virtually.

A key worker Model Day was created collaboratively across the partnership, which provided guidance and focused activities. Process documents were also created and shared across the teams, with priorities been given regarding evidencing activity between a key worker and participant to ensure guidance was met.

We found that some of our participants embraced lockdown and the staying at home message, maybe too much. At the time, many participants told us that when out for a walk they preferred the fact that there were very few other people out and about. We felt that this was representative of the fact that the majority of our cohort at that time were not leaving the house independently and were already living isolated lives before lockdown.



From April to June 2020, we found that engagement levels did decrease, despite our best effort at widening our offer of remote contact, ending at around 80 participants:

We sent out inspirational cards, we issued Newsletters and launched a Facebook group solely for our participants. Our key workers continued to engage with participants but where calls were not answered, these were followed up via text or media messaging such as WhatsApp, to reiterate that we were still available to support them.



After initial feedback that young people did not use Facebook, we needed to develop an approach that sold the benefits of joining the group. Keyworkers encouraged participants to join in all other communications. Our group achieved a membership of 85 participants and staff and we posted numerous video 'Virtual hubs', such as cookery, interview tips, sign-language, wellbeing and yoga, photography and how to set up a you tube channel.

We also used it to hold mini competitions to help get young people out of the house when allowed and even had a chocolate cake making hub where we safely delivered ingredients for participants to join in 'live'.



Digital Inclusion

Participants engaging with us virtually was also a challenge for some, due to lack of digital equipment. Many participants only had access to a mobile phone, which made it difficult to complete written work.

In November 2020, we linked in with the New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) on a digital inclusion project.

The LEP was coordinating a bid for ESF funding to purchase laptops or Chromebook's along with WiFi access via dongle. As part of the overall bid Minding the Gap secured 16 brand new Chromebooks and WiFi dongles. These were loaned out to participants for a period of time and then loaned out again to new cohort of participants.

Feedback on our Covid-19 response...

In 2023, we asked participants and those who referred them to look back and tell us how they felt their experiences of MtG were affected by the pandemic from 2020-2021

Participants:

- **31 % didn't enjoy engaging with the project remotely**
- **23 % were unable to see friends and this impacted their wellbeing**
- **15% didn't have enough resources to do activities online or at home**
- **15% unable to meet keyworker face to face**
- **7% unable to start a job / apprenticeship**
- **7% unable to attend group sessions**
- **7% delayed signing up to the project**





Stakeholders who referred to MtG:

- 82% strongly agreed / agreed that referrals were responded to promptly throughout the Pandemic; that they were informed of referral outcomes, that the project continued to provide a good service and successfully facilitated activities and support remotely.
- 80% strongly agreed / agreed that they were kept informed of the outcome of their referrals.
- 76% felt that the people they referred engaged well with MtG remotely.
- 67% felt that as a result of the pandemic, there were less opportunities available eg Jobs/ education routes
- 66% that the project provided face to face access to a key worker / advisor sooner than they expected.



How did we do?



Over the next few pages, we will amplify the voices of the people that made Minding the Gap such a great success.

We will present findings from surveys completed by participants, staff, and stakeholders to analyse what went well, and what learnings there are.

Throughout this section we have also included some inspiring case studies of participants who's lives have been changed by Minding the Gap.

Participant survey:



Participants View



A survey was carried out for past and current participants of the project, to gain an insight of their view on the project and how it has impacted them. A total of 28 participants responded to the survey. The survey was carried out anonymously to allow participants to give their true feedback.

In the pages that follow, some of the most useful findings from this survey are presented graphically, and a brief analysis of the findings is then offered.



Annalise

Aged 18 when joined MtG
Unemployed – referral from DWP
Project result: **To employment**

What were your circumstances before joining the programme?

Why did you want to join?

Do you have any qualifications or previous work experience?

“I was unemployed and out of education. I wanted to join the program to have a meaning in life / sense of pride.”

How did you feel about your situation you found yourself in before the programme? What things were stopping you from working?

“I felt like a waste of space and I just needed a bit of help to find a job.”

Which activities have you done? How did these help?

“I’ve had support to find work and courses.”

How do you feel about work now? Did you find employment after participating in the project?

“I am in work, I am a retail and visitor services assistant”

What was the support like on the programme and would you recommend it to others?

“I would definitely recommend this programme.”



Main aims for the project

To achieve employment

Get back into education

Gain new skills

Build confidence

Improve social skills

Meet new people

Try new things

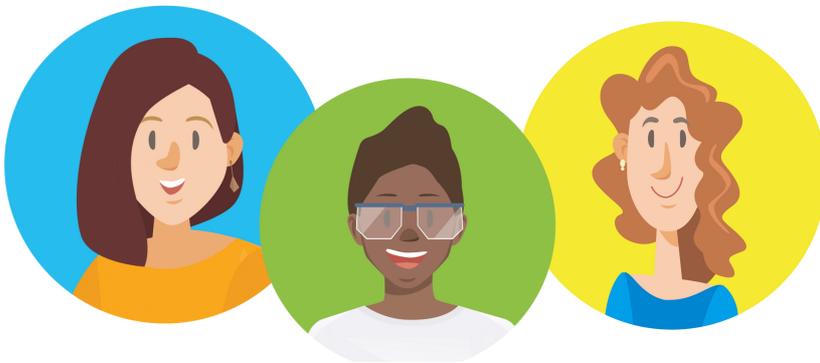
Increase motivation

Improve wellbeing

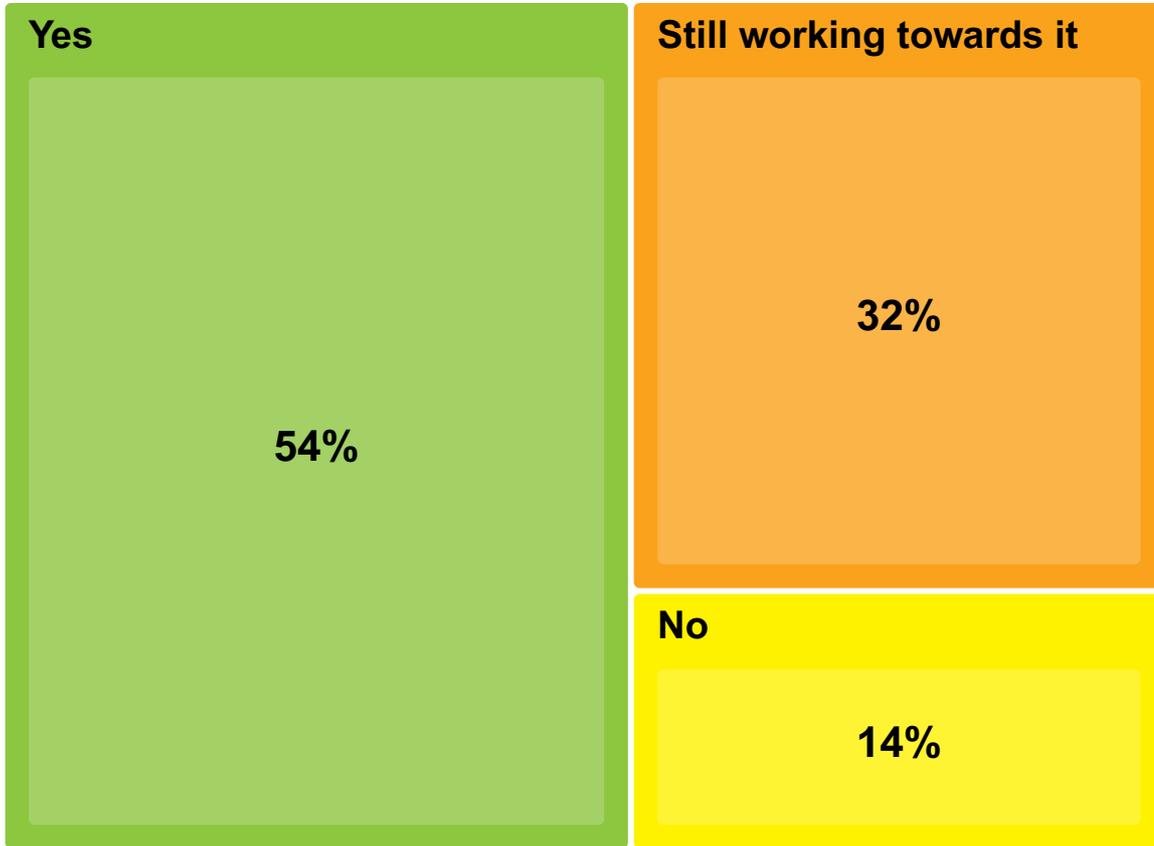
Improve financial situation

Other

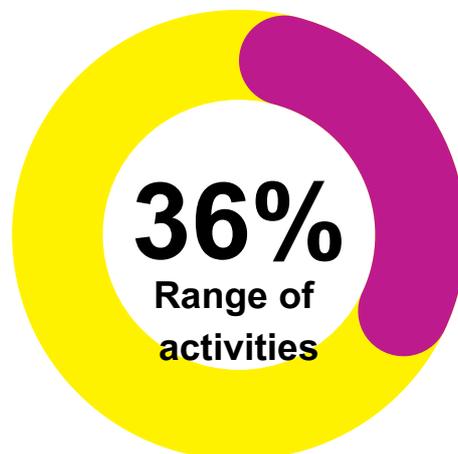
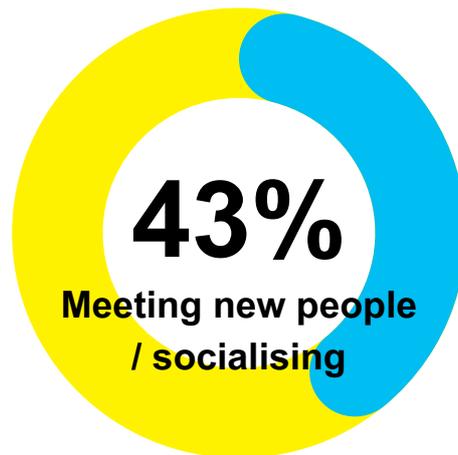
"After being in lockdown and leaving school I had no next step or aspiration. Minding the Gap gave me options as well as skills to pursue them—along with qualifications and getting me into the community."



Have you achieved your aim?



What was most beneficial?



What can we take away from the results of the participant experience survey?

Impact and positivity of experience:

First and foremost, the survey results give us a glimpse of the impact that the project has had on the lives of young people, and the positive feelings that participants have with regard to their experience.

Headline figures include 54% of respondents saying that they had achieved their aims on the project, 82% of respondents feeling that the support they received was right for them, 71% of respondents telling us that they felt they had sufficient time on the project to achieve what they set out to do, and perhaps most telling of all, more than half of respondents telling us that they had recommended Minding the Gap to other people.

More useful than any of these statistics are the words written by participants telling us about their experience. On the next page we have compiled some of the things the participants said when asked about their experience with Minding the Gap.



The importance of the 1:1 approach:

As the graphic on the previous page indicates, 64% of participants who responded to our survey felt that 1:1 sessions were the most beneficial aspect of Minding the Gap.

The value of this individualised approach was also reflected in our 2020 participant survey and was highlighted by referrer's in the responses to the referrer's survey that will be discussed in the next section.

There were numerous instances of participant's naming their key worker in their survey responses, highlighting the importance of the 1:1 relationship that Minding the Gap offered.

“She would give me support and speak to me in a way that was specific to my needs at the time and never rushed me”

The crucial statistic that tells us we succeeded in making our 1:1 support effectively tailored to the needs of young people is the fact that 82% of respondents told us that they felt that the support they received was right for them.

The importance of taking well-being seriously, and taking a paced, incremental approach to support:

As the graphic on page 33 indicates, confidence building and emotional/well being support were also of significant importance to participants.

Furthermore, 71% of respondents told us that their main aim for the project was to “Build confidence”, and 50% told us that their main aim was to “Improve wellbeing”.

The holistic approach to support offered by Minding the Gap, combining wellbeing support with employability skills seems to have been the key to it’s success. The following quote encapsulates how keeping both of these aims in view led directly to project results:



“My greatest achievement would be getting a job.

I was 21 at the time I joined Minding the Gap, and my mental health issues prevented me from doing what everyone else deemed ‘normal’ for that age. So I was very insecure about not having a job at that age, but I started a Kickstart programme with universal credit, and my key-worker from mind the gap helped me write my first ever CV and cover letter and gave me tips and pointers for my interview and first day. She was always there if I needed her and would always ring to wish me luck or congratulate me when I got the job”

“I have participated in group activities despite being extremely socially anxious”

“Getting over my severe anxiety and depression and meeting new people”

“Being able to leave the house for the first time in years and now have a traineeship”

“My greatest achievement on the course was having the confidence to attend in person group sessions and getting a job thanks to my coach at the time”

“Talking to a room full of strangers without being afraid”

“Starting my volunteer work, which led to me having the 10x social interaction I used to have, helped my confidence, and eventually led into paid work too”

“Got into paid employment after 3 years out of work”

How do these results compare with what participants said in our previous Phase 2 survey?

We conducted a similar survey in 2020, at the beginning of Phase 2. At that time, we asked participants what they felt was of most value to them, or could be to others in future.

When comparing the two surveys, a few important observations can be made:

=> The 1:1 approach has been consistently valued:

In our 2020 survey, the most desired form of contact for participants was 1:1 meetings.

A guiding principle that we took forward into phase 2 was summed up by this simple quote,

“I suffer from social anxiety so initially prefer one-to-one”

With 44% of those on MtG overall self-identifying as having a disability, this is reflective of a common participant experience, as for many, this is mental health or wellbeing based.

On the next page, you can read Keeley’s case study that exemplifies how we sought to use an incremental approach. Building initial confidence through 1:1 support, then bringing in group work. For many, this would have initially been impossible, but would prove to become an essential part of participant’s preparation for the world of work.

This approach allowed us to make the most of the various benefits that group based work could offer, without creating a new barrier to entry for young people in need of a slower approach.

=> The proportion of those who would like to be involved in group sessions is in line with those who, in 2023, believed that group sessions were the most valuable part of the project...

=> Support with wellbeing has always been a crucial need for young people on the project...



Keeley

Keeley joined the project suffering with severe mental health issues, a history of self-harm and attempts on life. She became an inpatient for her eating disorder and as part of her recovery we were asked to assist. This was a very slowly paced journey. The keyworker encouraged Keeley to come out of the house by bringing her dog to the appointments. The keyworker demonstrated consistency and unconditional positive regard, which she really needed.

Keeley started attending the hubs with her keyworker and she ended up being a key attender at the Self-employment hubs. The keyworker slowly reduced her assistance at these events. Keeley attended Womenta, where she talked to the business ladies, which was a huge achievement for her.

Her aspiration was to run her own floristry business. We purchased her business cards and got her a mentor. Our keyworker worked some evenings so that she could assist Keeley at the Menta business workshops.

She left us to employment in a florist to build further skills. She even made it into the local paper about her floristry work.

She is in the process of slowly building her own business alongside working in the florist, and is being supported by her current employer.



(Image: Simply C Photography)

Stakeholder View

We also wanted to capture the views of our stakeholders - those Organisations and individuals who referred young people to the project.

Minding the Gap received participant referrals from a very broad range of sources; including Local Authorities, Job Centres, Health practitioners, VCFSE sector organisations, education providers, and many more.

What follows is a brief analysis of the main findings from the results of our referrer's survey.



The value of bespoke support:

It is not just the 1:1 support that has been valued, as is clearly evidenced by our participant survey, but the bespoke nature of this 1:1 support has truly made the project unique. The quotes on the following page are taken from referrer's responses to our 2023 survey and indicate the importance of being bespoke.

Word of mouth:

An interesting finding was that word of mouth was the most common means by which referrers found out about Minding the Gap. This could speak to the fact that a more localised and in-person approach to marketing is the most effective approach in the sector. This is something to consider when devising marketing strategies for similar projects in the future.

A trusted and highly regarded service:

A significant number of respondents were referring people on a very regular basis - 15% every week and 25% every month. This is suggestive that we became the established "go-to" project for many of our referrers. Or, it may only be reflective that those who referred most regularly, were more likely to complete our survey.

The high regard in which the project was held is also indicated by the fact that 95% of respondents told us that they had recommended Minding the Gap to colleagues or other people working in similar fields.

Reputation and filling a gap in provision:

The main appeal of Minding the Gap seemed to be linked to reputation of the project and a proven track record of effectiveness. In addition to this, 55% of respondents told us that the fact that "The project offered provision that couldn't be accessed elsewhere" was a factor in their enthusiasm for Minding the Gap.

Stakeholder View

“This is such a unique project, it see's to the needs of individuals rather than targeting them as one. ”

“It offered one-to-one support which was particularly important for young people with anxiety. ”

“Also the fact that it is a service tailored to each young person, meeting their own individual needs and goals without the young people having to “fit in a box” ”

“Very bespoke support to meet the individuals needs. ”

“Involve took things slow with customers who were due to be looking for work BUT had various health conditions or were further away from the labour market ”



What did our staff enjoy about Minding the Gap?

- Working as a team and watching the young people flourish was echoed throughout the staff feedback.
- The fact that you could tailor the support to each individual person.
- The availability of funding and being able to use this to the benefit of the young people – such a rarity in youth work.
- Staff felt they were building a community within their team and with the wider array of stakeholders.

“Watching it grow over the years and the amazing support it has given to participants - It was tailored for all. The great teams were working together for the community”

Overcoming barriers to Education, Employment and Training?

- Staff felt they offered a more holistic and more enduring service, compared to other options & services.
- The project was bespoke, which allowed key workers to meet young people at different stages of their life:
- Tailoring support as opposed to young people needing to fit an existing framework, which inevitably wouldn't fit with the cohort of young people.
- In addition, offering support to improve some of the contributory factors which led to a persons NEET status.



Project Staff View

Support timescales

The length of time key workers were able to support young people was considered a key benefit to the project. They felt this allowed you to actually build relationships with the young people and it meant outcomes were sustained beyond the young person leaving the project.

Impacting factors

Project staff highlighted that Covid impacted the number of referrals received. It also made it more difficult to initially contact newly referred participants. They also felt the opportunities for young people were reduced during this period.

Paper work and changing processes have always been an impacting factor for staff and this is echoed throughout the staff feedback. Whilst improvements and several ways to streamline the process had been implemented, this was considered a barrier and took valuable time away from the key workers.



Sophie

Was sofa surfing after fleeing domestic violence in her mum's temporary accommodation.

We supported her by presenting all available options to her: looking at either permanent accommodation with mum or presenting as homeless. We completed and submitted the housing form. In this time we ramped up support to almost daily check-ins and monitoring the progress with the housing.

This took a turn as she had to return to the house where she was being abused, which became a safeguarding issue and we escalated this through Suffolk County Council's Customer First for her and the younger siblings.

Then this helped to activate a change in housing and she moved into supported accommodation at the YMCA Hostel. During this time we also helped her find the supported work experience and we continued to work with her to ensure that consistent support she needed was in place.

She left the project in housing and registered to start further education.



Oliver

Oliver is a wheelchair user due to medical reasons. He is a very bright young man with a keen interest in IT.

We made sure that where we met was accessible for him and that he felt comfortable. We matched his needs with our own keyworker who also happens to be a wheel chair user and this definitely brought down barriers that Oliver was facing and opened up conversation very quickly.

We supported him in seeking a driving instructor who could teach him to drive and we begun searching for a Motability vehicle. Being able to drive would give him more independence, which was one of his key priorities.

We supported him with lots of job search and advocated on his behalf at interviews making sure that the ongoing support would be in place when needed.

He left us to employment with a Disability Confident employer.





Conclusion

Overall, the project has been a success due to the achievement / over achievement of targets across the key result areas.

Feedback gained from the participants and stakeholders suggests that the project has removed barriers to employment, education and training, coupled with the increase in employer engagement and new DWP initiatives, creating greater opportunities for work.

Throughout the project lifetime paperwork and reporting requirements were acknowledged as a constraint to delivery across the partnership. Whilst this was seen as frustrating, there was an acceptance that with any large allocation of funding from a public source, scrutiny of spend and process would be extensive.

We think it is fair to say that all the partners have learned a great deal about running a complex project and that knowledge has enable these organisations to become significantly better equipped to meet demanding targets and support a large number of young people in Suffolk.

All partners across the project lifetime have gained the benefit of access to European funding, which was a key driver for the programme: to make European funding accessible to smaller VCFSE organisations.

Since project inception, almost all Partners have gone on to additional funding from alternative streams, to provide employability and Wellbeing projects for young people. So the legacy of Minding the Gap is one of enormous benefit to the lives of young people in Suffolk, both now and for years to come.

