

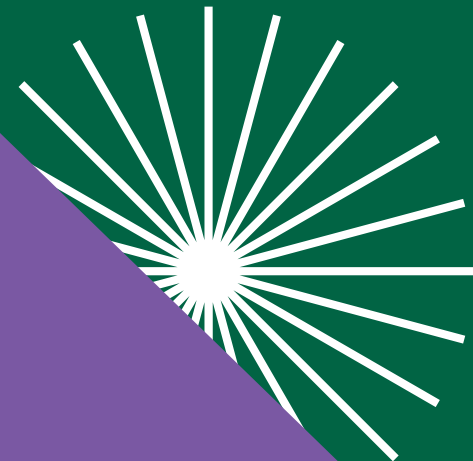


Beyond the Barracks

Beyond the Barracks Pre-16 Project Report

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Inspiring Choices

Inspiring Choices is a Higher Education Outreach Partnership and one of 29 partnerships within the Office for Students' Uni Connect Programme. Since 2017, our mission has been to close the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups. We provide tailored support to young people across York and North Yorkshire.

Working with local secondary schools and colleges we offer guidance on the full range of routes into and through higher education (HE) in the form of workshops, activities and events. Our aim is to help young people overcome barriers to their success. These include those related to academic attainment, sense of belonging and lack of knowledge.

York St John University Widening Participation Team

The Widening Participation Team at York St John University works with schools, colleges and individuals to support informed decision making around education and careers. Our goal is to reduce the barriers which can deter students from accessing higher education. We work with a range of ages, from primary school-age children to mature learners, delivering targeted projects to pupils who are statistically from backgrounds less likely to progress to higher education. We offer support, advice and guidance through a range of interactive activities and events, including workshops, presentations and visits to campus.

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Introduction

The Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP) defines a Service child as "a person whose parent, or carer, serves in the regular armed forces, or as a reservist, or has done at any point during the first 25 years of that person's life," (SCiP, 2022). The Office for Students (OfS; 2024) identify Service children as likely to experience risk 1 and risk 2 on the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR). Risk 1 relates to knowledge and skills where "students may not have equal opportunity to develop the knowledge and skills required to be accepted onto higher education courses that match their expectations and ambitions," (OfS, 2023a). Risk 2 relates to information and guidance where "students may not have equal opportunity to receive the information and guidance that will enable them to develop ambition and expectations, or to make informed choice about their higher education options," (OfS, 2023b).

Overall, GCSE attainment for Service children is not significantly different to non-service, non-free school meal children (Armed Forces Covenant, 2022). However, Service children are likely to face additional challenges such as a higher degree of mobility (Atherton & Satchell, 2023; National Audit Office 2013). By the time young people reach post-16 education, they may have moved to new schools and new communities eight or more times (Lawrence, 2021). These moves often occur part way through the academic year and at short notice (National Audit Office, 2013). Within-year movers have been shown to have a more negative association with academic attainment (Prior & Leckie, 2022). More frequent moves also have a negative impact on attainment, with two or more moves being related to worse outcomes (Prior & Leckie, 2022). Moving can disrupt a young person's education with differences in the curriculum between schools as well as having a psychosocial impact (SCiP, 2025). Parents and carers of Service children described the biggest difficulty with schooling as the differences in the school curriculum; however, they have also found difficulties with getting a place at a preferred new school, and with the transfer of education records between schools (National Audit Office, 2013).

Service children and their families may experience emotional and practical challenges when a serving family member is away on deployment (SCiP, 2025). While some young people may develop considerable personal strengths, there is also potential for emotional stress, anxiety, a higher likelihood of assuming caring roles and other responsibilities which may impact on the wellbeing of the young people (Lawrence, 2021). As well as impacting well-being and mental health, separation from the serving parent due to military duties can negatively impact on educational engagement (Atherton & Satchell, 2023). Parents of Service children have commented that in some schools there can be a lack of

understanding of issues that Service children experience and a lack of support for Service children (National Audit Office, 2013). For example, a young person may be more irritable and experience mood changes when their parents are deployed, and some teachers may see this as misbehaving rather than the instability they are experiencing (National Audit Office, 2013). Therefore, it may be beneficial to have more specific pastoral support available in school.

Beyond the Barracks

Beyond the Barracks is a collaborative programme between Inspiring Choices and York St John University's widening participation team working with schools in North Yorkshire. Beyond the Barracks is a pre-16 mentoring scheme working with military service children. The aim of Beyond the Barracks was to help learners to recognise the skills they already have, including those they have gained from their experiences of being a military service child. Another aim of the programme was to increase knowledge of higher education and address risk 1 and risk 2 of EORR by providing information and advice about higher education.

Service children are not a homogenous group (Atherton & Satchell, 2023). There are differences between which service that their parent or career is in (e.g., Army, Royal Air Force); differences in socioeconomic background; Service children with disabilities; Service children who are young carers. More evidence is needed to assess the impact of the different groups progression to higher education and the interaction of belonging to multiple groups underrepresented in higher education. Therefore, the programme purposefully selected a small group of learners from each school to participate and assigned each mentor to a smaller group of learners so more individualised support could be provided.

Session Overview

Beyond the Barracks was delivered in the Spring and Summer Term of the 2024/25 academic year. The programme included five in-school sessions and a higher education campus visit. Each session was supported by student ambassadors from York St John University.

Week One: Pathways to Higher Education

In week one, discussion was focused on pathways into higher education, student finance and apprenticeships. Learners discussed which pathways appealed to them and any concerns they had about pursuing their pathway.

Week Two: Skills and Qualities

In week two, the focus was on skills and how life as a military service child can

equip young people with many transferable skills. Learners then worked on creating a CV using the skills they had discussed.

Week Three: Looking After Your Wellbeing

In week three, the session looked at how to support your own wellbeing. This included talking about times of the year that can be stressful for young people such as exam periods or moving schools.

Week Four: Revision and Study Skills

In week four, the session included exploring different revision techniques and how you could adapt revision styles to suit your own preference. Learners practiced using some revision techniques and created their own revision games.

Week Five: Life as a Military Service Child

The fifth week focused on the skills, challenges and experiences students had encountered during life as a military service child. The students created a military service child shield (artwork) to represent their experiences.

HE Campus Visit:

To complete the project, learners had a campus visit to York St John University, alongside other schools participating in the project. In the morning, learners completed their military service child shields and had a campus tour led by student ambassadors. In the afternoon, learners designed their own university society and presented their work back to the group. Learners finished the day with a subject taster session with the Policing department.

Method

Participants

Three secondary schools from York and North Yorkshire participated in the Beyond the Barracks project. In total, 34 learners participated and all learners were from military service families. The project was aimed at learners in Year 7 to Year 11 (Year 7 = 4; Year 8 = 5; Year 9 = 12; Year 10 = 9; Year 11 = 2; 1 did not specify) however, one learner from Year 13 also participated. The mean age of the learners was 13.7 years (SD = 1.45). There were 19 female learners and 15 male learners. The learners home postcodes covered all quintiles of POLAR4; however, half of the learners lived in an area of quintile 4 (Quintile 1 = 6, four of these were also UniConnect target learners; Quintile 2 = 1; Quintile 3 = 3; Quintile 4 = 17; Quintile 5 = 4, 3 unknown).

Data Collection and Analysis

Learners completed a pre-mentoring and post-mentoring questionnaire, which included questions on their intentions to attend higher education in future (TASO, 2023), skills that they may have developed throughout the project and spaces to make qualitative comments. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to assess whether there was a significant difference between responses based on the school the learner attended. The pre- and post-mentoring questionnaires were matched; 24 learners fully completed both questionnaires. Where learners had answered both the pre- and post- questions, the responses were analysed using a paired samples t-test. Qualitative comments were grouped together by theme.

Quantitative Results

The results of the one-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant difference between the responses of the learners based on the school that they attend. Therefore, responses for all learners were combined for further analysis. Table 1. shows descriptive statistics and the results of a paired samples t-test for the higher education-based questions. The results of a paired-samples t-test showed that there was a significant increase in their intention to attend higher education in future from pre-mentoring to post-mentoring, with a small effect size. There was no significant difference between the other higher education-based questions. Table 2. shows descriptive statistics and the results of a paired samples t-test for skills-based questions. There was a significant decrease in their self-reported communication skills and their problem-solving skills from pre-mentoring to post-mentoring. However, the effect sizes for these relationships were negligible. There was no significant difference between the other skills-based questions.

Qualitative Results

Challenges or barriers to education

Learners were asked if they, as a military service child, had experienced any challenges or barriers to their education. The most common barrier to their education, with nine comments, was moving around a lot and “missing out on lots of lessons because of different curriculums.” Each move meant a new school and trying to settle in again. Some learners found the transition to be very difficult, “it gave me horrible anxiety and I'm a target for bullying as people don't know me,” (Learner 16). Learners did not explicitly say how many times they had moved but it

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and results of paired samples t-test for higher education-based questions

	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect Size
	Pre	Post				
HE intentions	3.93 (0.73)	4.19 (0.68)	2.267	26	.032*	0.44
Sense of belonging in HE	3.44 (0.61)	3.35 (0.61)	1.247	26	.223	0.24
I have the skills I need to be successful at studying in higher education.	3.52 (0.75)	3.37 (0.74)	0.891	26	.381	0.17
I know where to go for information or guidance on going to university/higher education.	3.44 (1.09)	3.63 (1.04)	1.000	26	.327	0.19
I feel confident meeting new people and making new friends.	3.00 (1.36)	2.85 (1.43)	0.700	26	.490	0.13
I have a good understanding of what subjects you can study in higher education.	3.70 (0.95)	3.74 (1.06)	0.166	26	.869	0.03

Note. * $p < .05$

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and results of paired samples t-test for skills-based questions

	Mean (SD)		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect Size
	Pre	Post				
Communication	3.28 (1.02)	3.20 (1.15)	0.527	24	.001**	0.11
Teamwork	3.48 (0.82)	3.72 (0.84)	1.365	24	.270	0.27
Leadership	3.48 (1.23)	3.48 (1.19)	0.000	24	1.000	0.00
Problem Solving	3.96 (0.79)	3.80 (0.96)	1.281	24	.014*	0.15
Confidence	3.21 (1.10)	3.13 (1.15)	0.419	23	.294	0.09
Resilience	3.48 (1.00)	3.36 (1.08)	0.473	24	.449	0.10

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

appeared that some had moved more often than others. Prior and Leckie's (2022) findings of more frequent moves resulting in more disruption to education is echoed by the young people in this programme, "due to how many schools I've been to (13?) the curriculum is different, so I have gaps and overlaps in my knowledge," (Learner 16). Moving doesn't just affect their education but also their personal lives, Learner 22 said to "never get too attached."

Another challenge, mentioned by four learners, was parental deployment. When their serving parent or carer is away on deployment, there can be a lack in concentration on their schoolwork, "sometimes my dad goes away and I lose focus in learning," (Learner 6). Parental deployment not only disrupts education but in other parts of their lives such as their emotional wellbeing, "I don't see my dad as much as I want," (Learner 17). Therefore, it could be beneficial for schools to know when a parent or carer is away on deployment and provide additional support at these particularly difficult times.

Five learners reported they did not experience any challenges or barriers to their education but did not give any further explanation. Learner 7 said no, "because it doesn't matter if you are a service child," suggesting that they don't see themselves as different to other learners at their school. Learner 2 stated "it helped me more than it hindered," and similarly, Learner 27 said "because I know how to handle most things like bullying and hard decisions," suggesting that learners are gaining skills through their Service child background. One learner mentioned a potential future barrier to their education in terms of finance, an issue that many learners from different backgrounds and not just military service children could face, "I don't believe there is anything preventing me from the pursuit of higher education other than finance," (Learner 24).

Skills and Qualities

Learners were asked if they, as a military service child, have gained any skills or qualities. Many of the learners discussed their social skills, specifically their "ability to talk to new people," (Learner 2) "good at making new friends when we move," (Learner 19) "better communication," (Learner 27) and a gain in "confidence because we move around a lot and meet new people," (Learner 23). Other learners mentioned physical and practical skills, for example "I can climb and swim and build fires," (Learner 4) "I am good at climbing difficult objects," (Learner 18) and "getting better at sports," (Learner 27).

Participating in Beyond the Barracks

Learners were asked which part of the Beyond the Barracks programme was most useful. The most common responses mentioned parts of the campus visit and learning about higher education. For example, participating in the Policing taster session (Learner 1, 5, 12). They also found it useful to experience the campus for

themselves, Learner 20 said the most useful part was “getting to see higher education personally.” Likewise, Learners 24 and 25 said, “trip to YSJ [York St John University] to view day to day university life,” and “visiting university and seeing what it’s like.” Additionally, learners valued the knowledge gained around university and higher education, “information on my future when I go to university,” (Learner 8) “knowing what happens in future,” (Learner 15) and “learning about what you need to do in higher education,” (Learner 17). Learners also found it useful to be part of a project that was for military service children as they found it useful “to hear other people’s experiences,” (Learner 10) and beneficial “talking to people with similar backgrounds,” (Learner 23). Two learners said that the whole programme was the most useful part for them.

Learners were asked what they had learned about themselves while participating in Beyond the Barracks programme. Six of the learners mentioned confidence, “I gained more confidence,” (Learner 8), “I’m a lot more confident sharing my ideas,” (Learner 22), “Confidence is key,” (Learner 5). The suggested increase in confidence contrasts with the findings in the quantitative results where there was no significant difference between their confidence at the start of the programme and the end of the programme (n = 5 reported a decrease, n = 14 reported no change, n = 5 reported an increase). Some learners reported a realisation of skills that they have, for example “I’m quite good at communication,” (Learner 27). Learner 9 said “that I have an idea of what to do going on,” suggesting that they had a better understanding of their future plans. Other learners similarly mentioned thinking about their possible futures “I learnt about different courses I could do in University,” (Learner 8) and “how to get into higher education,” (Learner 17).

Thirteen learners reported they found it helpful to share their experiences with other military service children. Learners found it helpful “because they understand the situations,” (Learner 26) for example, “not a lot of people know what it’s like to be constantly moving,” (Learner 11). Learner 8 explained “I like being around people in the same situation as me and we can relate over experiences.” Sharing experiences “makes me feel better (Learner 15) and “shows I’m not the only one,” (Learner 21) but they also had individual experiences, “it shows how different branches produce different life experiences,” (Learner 24). Learners were also self-reflective, “you can understand yourself better,” (Learner 17) “I found new parts of myself,” (Learner 27). In contrast, 11 learners said they did not find it useful to share their experiences. Many did not offer an explanation however, Learner 18 said “I don’t like meeting new people,” and Learner 20 said “because being aware of others having somewhat similar situations is knowledge I already possess.”

Conclusion

The aim of Beyond the Barracks was to help learners recognise the skills they already have, including those they have gained from their experiences of being a military service child, and to increase knowledge of higher education. The qualitative comments suggest that the learners could recognise some skills that they already have, such as their social skills. Some learners reported an increase in confidence through participating in the programme. However, the quantitative analysis revealed no significant difference and a very low effect size for many of the skills, therefore, further focus on the development of skills is recommended. For the second aim, the qualitative comments suggested an increase in knowledge of higher education, including the different course options, and an insight into life at university. Many learners found the campus visit element of the programme the most useful part. The quantitative analysis showed a significant increase in learners' expectations to attend higher education in future. However, there was no significant difference in the sense of belonging in higher education therefore, further effort to help individuals feel connected to the higher education environment, peers and others in higher education could be beneficial.

Next Steps

The small group sizes at each school were a strength of this programme as it enabled more time and attention to be spent with individual learners. However, this created a small sample size for statistical analysis and therefore caution needs to be applied when interpreting the results. A larger sample size would increase confidence in the results. However, this should be achieved by running the project on more occasions rather than increasing the group size within one cohort to maintain the personalised nature of the project.

The analysis only included participants that answered questions on both pre- and post-mentoring questionnaires. Therefore, the analysis was based on learners in Year 7 to Year 10. Further analysis is required to test whether their educational stage (e.g., Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4) and decisions learners have to make as they progress (e.g., GCSE subject choices, post-16 options) has an impact on their attitudes towards skill development, post-16 options and higher education.

The programme included five approximately hour-long in-school sessions and 4.5 hours on campus. The in-school sessions were delivered in the Spring Term, and the campus visit delivered in the Summer Term 2024/25. Therefore, the

programme was delivered over a relatively short period. To create a more sustained programme, a Beyond the Barracks part two has been developed and will be delivered during 2025/26 academic year with the schools and learners that participated in the original programme.

To aid in the development of part two, feedback from the learners, staff and student ambassadors has been considered. Learners asked for more information on post-16 options, apprenticeships, budgeting and future thinking, so the new sessions have been developed around these themes. The quantitative results did not show progression in areas such as problem solving and resilience; subsequently activities have been included within the mentoring sessions with the aim of building confidence in these areas.

Working with returning military service children can be challenging due to the high mobility of some military service children. Therefore, the opportunity to work with some of the same learners for a second consecutive year is important for support of the learners and the development of the Beyond the Barracks programme.

We would like to thank the schools and the learners for their engagement in the programme.

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