Working together:
The National Collaborative Outreach Programme and Brightside
In the 2017-18 academic year:

We worked with:
- 19 NCOP partners
- 2,284 mentees
- 121 schools and colleges

23,650 messages exchanged

From the exit surveys of 15 NCOP projects:*

- 74% said that mentoring had influenced their decision about their post-18 pathway
- 83% said mentoring helped them think more clearly about the future
- 78% said mentoring helped them feel more optimistic about the future
- 81% said they learnt new things from their mentor
- 82% said their mentor understood their needs
- 84% enjoyed mentoring

*Between 303 and 462 respondents
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Introduction

Anand Shukla, Chief Executive

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) is one of the most exciting developments in widening access and participation since Brightside was established 15 years ago.

The collective ethos of NCOP reflects a core Brightside belief that universities, employers, schools and the third sector will only make effective progress towards opening up higher education to more young people when we work together. That is why Brightside always works in partnership.

We need to move away from the same old pattern of isolated initiatives by individual organisations. No single organisation, however powerful or effective, can address the social mobility challenge alone. NCOP has the potential to be the vehicle for a powerful collective approach to improving impact.

At Brightside, we know that whilst talented young people are spread across the country, opportunities or the knowledge of how to make the most of them are not. There has been a welcome if long overdue focus on the influence of geography and place on young people’s educational achievement and progression in recent years, and an accompanying recognition that different communities with different social mobility challenges need tailored outreach. When there are still wide gaps in university access across the country, ‘one-size-fits-all’ clearly isn’t working.

Collaborative outreach through NCOP to maximise impact co-ordinates activity on a regional basis according to local need. Brightside is at the heart of NCOP, and we are proud to be working with 19 NCOP consortia across the country, supporting over 2,000 young people so far. Our unique online mentoring platform is perfectly suited to overcoming many of the challenges of place, providing an impactful, flexible and cost-effective means of connecting students with information, advice and personal guidance regardless of where they live. That covers a richness of widening participation work – whether it’s providing mentoring to white working class boys in Cumbria to expand their horizons; or helping 17 year olds in Lincolnshire navigate the confusing world of university choice and applications.

NCOP has allowed us to build upon the expertise Brightside has gained delivering online mentoring projects over the past 15 years, in our strategies for engaging young people for example, or ensuring the best match between mentor and mentee. Yet we’re also learning new lessons, discovering new success factors and tackling new challenges as NCOP progresses, in areas like engaging with schools, working with multiple partners and adapting our mentoring to the needs of different groups.

We use this learning to constantly refine our projects so they deliver maximum impact. We also believe that it’s important to disseminate this knowledge and best practice amongst all the organisations we are working with towards our shared goal of making sure all young people can fulfil their potential, regardless of background.

So this is why we have published this report which describes our approach to our NCOP projects, themes and challenges that have emerged, and our areas of focus for the future. I hope that you find it useful and, in the spirit of sharing and collaboration which drives both NCOP and all Brightside’s work, I would love to hear any feedback you have which can help ensure the best possible outcomes for the young people we support.
Strong relationships with schools and colleges are an essential foundation for successful interventions.

Interventions require buy-in at different levels of the school or college system. Securing this support means understanding the needs and incentives of each group, and communicating how online mentoring can benefit them in language that speaks to their priorities.

Senior leaders
How online mentoring can help the school or college achieve strategic aims, such as meeting the Gatsby Benchmarks for careers advice, and providing guidance on post-16 and post-18 options, which is considered in Ofsted inspections. It is also important to stress the safety and security of online mentoring for young people.

Teachers
How mentoring can be linked into the curriculum and increase pupils’ motivation by demonstrating how what they are learning in the classroom will be useful in their future careers.

Pupils
A valuable and enjoyable opportunity to get expert advice from an inspiring role model, which will help them set and achieve future goals, but also has immediate benefits in terms of getting support to make important decisions now.

Working with NCOP consortia has presented Brightside with the opportunity to engage with schools and colleges in new ways. The following approaches have enabled us to build strong working relationships with key schools in many regions, resulting in engaged and invested staff who believe in online mentoring and are keen to help us make it work for their pupils.

• A joined-up approach between the NCOP team and Brightside, where a school or college hears about online mentoring as part of NCOP activity. This enables consistency of messaging around targeting, and helps reduce the risk of schools feeling bombarded by different organisations.
• Frequent updates between partners regarding school recruitment and engagement helps to ensure a supportive and collaborative approach, and progress towards targets.
• Brightside training sessions for NCOP delivery teams have been particularly effective, focusing on how to explain the benefits of mentoring to schools and colleges and establishing effective recruitment strategies.
• Early introductions and lead-in time: where possible, face-to-face planning meetings with schools and colleges help to build a productive and mutually understanding relationship, which helps with the recruitment of engaged and motivated pupils.
• Flexibility in our mentoring models, and delivery methods, to suit school and college contexts. With enough lead-in time, it has been possible to adjust launch dates, project lengths and training methods to make sure the intervention fits with their term, timetable and resource.
• For pre-16 pupils, we suggest weekly in-school sessions, supervised by a teacher, for them to message their mentors. Brightside provides advice for teachers on using the online platform, to enable them to answer queries from pupils during these sessions.
Schools

Success factors

- Lead-in time to build relationships with school and college contacts before mentees are recruited
- Frequent communication between NCOP staff and Brightside to ensure a joined-up approach and smooth handover
- Build flexibility into model and delivery timeline to suit school needs, contexts and priorities

Focus for the future

Brightside has faced particular challenges reaching and engaging students in FE colleges. This is largely due to FE lecturers having less contact with their students and less structured daily timetables, making it more difficult to communicate with and get students together. We are planning to address this by seeking more advice from NCOP colleagues and organisations with specific experience of working in FE, and reviewing our training methods and content to make them better suited to the FE environment.

Case study

Next Steps South West is running pre-16 mentoring projects in schools, many in rural areas. The NCOP consortium has an existing network of schools, which are visited by Next Steps South West officers. Using materials and messaging developed by Brightside, these officers introduce online mentoring as one of a number of interventions. Once a school expresses a specific interest in online mentoring, there is a formal handover to Brightside staff who begin establishing the project with the school. All interactions with schools are recorded in a project log shared between Next Steps South West and Brightside, ensuring better co-ordination and consistency of activity.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

27 schools
103 Mentors
528 Mentees
Recruitment

Good recruitment practice at the beginning drives good engagement throughout a project.

NCOP targeting criteria has taught us more about the relationships between mentee recruitment and engagement, whether this is through recruitment assemblies delivered by Brightside, talks held by teachers or recommendations made by staff around which pupils should be offered the opportunity.

Strict targeting of individual pupils runs the risk that they feel singled out and forced to participate, which can have a negative impact on sign-up and engagement. We have seen the highest engagement in projects or schools where Brightside, NCOP staff and/or teachers have introduced the online mentoring project, communicated the benefits and helped mentees feel excited and invested before they start.

Recruitment or induction sessions allow us to talk to young people about the NCOP targeting and online mentoring. The best engagement comes from schools that have honest discussions with their pupils before Brightside comes in, so that young people understand all the factors in their selection and choice to participate. It helps if some student selection takes place prior to the mentee recruitment or training session: we have seen higher conversion rates in schools where Brightside or NCOP staff have spoken to smaller groups of pupils who have received information from teachers, rather than large numbers in an assembly or as one of a number of interventions offered at a careers fair. There is also higher attendance at recruitment sessions when they take place during tutor times or timetabled lessons as opposed to lunch time or after school.

It is important that pupils receive adequate time to consider the opportunity. Mentees who receive other interventions through NCOP should be encouraged to make links between them, and use them to inform their mentoring conversations. Young people need to understand how mentoring can provide practical help with things such as drafting personal statements that they may have learnt about in other interventions, which increases uptake. School staff, Brightside and NCOP partners should work together to ensure this joined-up experience.

Involving mentors in sessions gives young people more insight into mentoring. Several of our non-NCOP projects bring mentors into training sessions to encourage conversations and raise aspirations.

A strategic approach to mentee recruitment makes our other methods for maintaining engagement later in the project more effective. These include mentoring schedules which suggest key topics and resources for discussion, and our communications to mentees and mentors providing tips on how to have beneficial conversations.
Focus for the future

We will be developing our training and resources for NCOP staff and teachers around the best way to talk to young people about mentoring, in order to increase their interest and motivation. We are also conducting focus groups with students and undertaking some conversation analysis to understand what kind of communications strategies and support materials are most effective, and will devise new strategies accordingly.

Case study

Greater Manchester Higher and Brightside have delivered three online mentoring projects for Y12 pupils. GM Higher’s Hub Managers and Graduate Advisors lead the mentee recruitment, with marketing materials developed with Brightside, using a range of recruitment strategies. Once students are recruited, Brightside delivers a mentee induction session. Whilst large assemblies and information stands at HE fairs reach large numbers of pupils, there is lower attendance at induction sessions where this has been the recruitment method. We have seen the highest levels of conversion and engagement in mentees who heard about the project from Graduate Advisors in tutorial sessions, small workshops or similar. There has also been far higher engagement among mentees trained face-to-face or by webinar, compared to those who received information from teachers or electronically.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

- 76% of mentees trained face-to-face or via webinar sent 3+ messages (compared to 42% who received information packs from teachers or electronically)
- 60% of mentees were recruited through smaller information sessions
- 88% of respondents reported a better understanding of student life and university study, and 79% felt more confident about accessing university
Models

Online mentoring models need to be structured to achieve different goals for different learners.

Young people have a range of needs, depending on factors such as their age, geographical location, demographic background and educational and career interests. Our 15 years’ experience has taught us numerous lessons about the most effective ways to tailor online mentoring to meet these needs, many of which are applicable to the wide range of learners targeted by NCOP.

For example, we know that pre-16 pupils are more likely to engage with shorter interventions which introduce them to the world of careers and post-16 education in general. Year 12 and 13 pupils, who may have more idea of what they want to do after school or college, often benefit from longer and more specific mentoring based around certain careers or routes such as higher education, with a focus on practical support to help them make choices and applications.

NCOP has added a further dimension to the need to design projects based on the target group; we have learnt how much school and college priorities, resources and interests differ between NCOP consortia, but also within hubs within one region, and between individual schools and colleges within one hub. In a number of regions, initial project designs and plans have needed to be adapted due to reasons including:

• Fewer NCOP learners in a school or year group than expected
• Changing interests for schools based on the other interventions they are receiving or gaps where they want more support
• Time of year and competing priorities for teachers and learners e.g. exams

Building on this learning, Brightside has designed the online mentoring models below for different groups of young people. Although many of our NCOP projects use these models, these are not ‘off the shelf’ designs as all partnerships start with discussions around how they can be best adapted to each project’s requirements and objectives.

Pre-16 mentoring

Helps Year 9-11 pupils to:

• explore their post-16 and post-18 options
• understand the qualifications they need for different careers
• develop communication and other important employability skills
• feel confident about their future

Pupils are matched to a mentor for 10-12 weeks, with two potential routes:

• Higher Education: pupils are matched to an undergraduate mentor. They explore the various HE options available to them, and gain an insight into the student experience.
• Careers Insight: students are matched to a mentor working in industry. They explore the range of careers available in their mentor’s industry, and gain an insight into working life.
The Challenge

Helps Year 9-11 pupils to develop:

- an understanding of their education and career options
- confidence
- team-working skills

Pupils work in groups of four to five, supported by an industry or undergraduate mentor for 10 weeks. Groups design an online resource aimed at helping young people explore their options after completing school, and get involved in weekly activities on topics such as research, delegation and visual presentation.

Sector Insight

Helps Year 10-13 pupils with an interest in particular careers to understand:

- routes into a career in the sector
- roles within the sector
- workplace culture and professionalism
- career progression
- skills required for the industry

Pupils are matched with a mentor from the relevant sector. They work together through a six-week structured programme of bespoke e-learning activities designed with employers, watching videos, reading articles and discussing topics tailored to help young people develop the specific knowledge and skills they need.

Our Sector Insight programmes have been developed with leading employers. We currently offer programmes in Business, Creative and Digital, Education, Engineering, Finance, Healthcare, IT and Law.

HE Explore

Helps Year 12 pupils to:

- consider whether HE is right for them
- find the best course and institution for their interests and needs
- understand the application process
- develop the skills and confidence to succeed in HE

Pupils are matched with an undergraduate mentor who helps to raise their aspirations and make decisions about their next steps regarding HE; whether to apply, where to apply and what to apply for. They discuss all HE options, including Higher Apprenticeships.
HE Apply

Helps Year 12 and 13 pupils to:

- choose a suitable course
- navigate the application process
- write a strong personal statement
- deal with offers

Designed to follow up from HE Explore. Pupils are matched with an undergraduate mentor who gives them practical advice on the different aspects of the admissions process, as well as support and encouragement during what can be a stressful time. They also complete a schedule of online activities designed to help students make confident and informed decisions regarding their choice of course and institution.

Pre-arrival

Helps applicants to transition to HE and stay on their course by:

- increasing confidence around progressing to HE
- developing the necessary skills for successful study
- providing an insight into all aspects of the student experience
- creating a sense of belonging, meaning they are more likely to continue with their studies

Upon receiving a university offer, applicants can opt-in to an online mentoring programme matching them with a current undergraduate studying their course or similar. During the six to nine month programme, mentors address many of the concerns widening participation students have such as adapting to university culture, managing money and worries about studying and results.

Success factors

- Use research and feedback to identify the needs of the target group before choosing a model that fits
- Be willing to tweak models if requirements, timelines etc. change
- Run small pilots in order to apply existing models in new contexts, or to develop new models altogether

Focus for the future

We are constantly evolving our models based on evaluation feedback and consultation with users and partners to ensure they deliver maximum impact. We are also developing a new model to help with the retention of widening participation students after they enter higher education.
Case Study

Make Happen is using a number of different online mentoring models, in many cases adapting projects for individual schools.

We are running Sector Insight programmes covering nine different industries. Pitched as ‘virtual work experience’ this has been particularly attractive for schools who otherwise struggle to run work experience programmes or introduce pupils to employers from certain sectors.

Following a successful start to the nine month HE Explore / Apply project for Year 12 pupils, we have now designed a shorter four month project for Year 13. This means that pupils who did not sign up first time but have subsequently changed their mind and are considering higher education have another opportunity to receive mentoring. This has also allowed us to work with schools and FE colleges who were unable to launch earlier in the year.

We have also designed a bespoke pre-16 mentoring project to complement a school’s existing work on pupils’ behavioural styles. This pilot is now being scaled up from 20 to 150 pupils.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

Schools: 17
Mentees: 262
Mentors: 161

“Many of the students found out detailed information about a career path that they may be interested in.” Teacher
Mentors

It is important to have a range of mentors who can advise young people on a variety of different pathways.

One of the main advantages of online mentoring is the ability to connect a young person with the most appropriate mentor for their background and interests wherever they are in the country, rather than who is closest. This is particularly valuable for schools in more remote communities, which may have a limited number of employers or higher education institutions within the local area. As well as bridging geographical divides, online mentoring makes it easier to connect young people with mentors from different social backgrounds in a space in which they often feel more comfortable interacting.

Many of our NCOP partners have access to excellent student mentors who can help young people with understanding applications, student finance and the university experience. We have learnt that using existing Student Ambassador pools is the most effective way to recruit, and one early challenge we encountered was that the majority of partner colleges with HE provision had not yet established these systems. In recent months, we have been pleased to see an increase in mentors studying HE courses at college, as this enables us to better serve young people who have decided that the traditional university experience is not for them.

Brightside can also provide mentors from a wide variety of industries and professions, who offer an informed insight into different jobs, and explain their own career path to their current role. Mentors who followed alternative routes can encourage young people to be more flexible in their career thinking, and raise aspirations about achieving similar things. Through discussions with NCOP partners, we have learnt more about the importance of local contexts and tapping into local labour market information in order to help young people explore industries and opportunities in depth, alongside considering skills development needs in particular areas.

Getting the right match is crucial to building a fruitful mentoring relationship, and this takes time. Whether mentors are recruited by Brightside or our NCOP partner, it is imperative to take a collaborative approach, and introductions to each other’s networks bolster recruitment. It is also important to get a sense of expected numbers from schools and colleges as early as possible, to avoid recruiting too few or too many mentors.

All mentor training involves technical information about using the platform and safeguarding guidance, alongside advice on communicating with young people and understanding their needs. Where there are geographical or timing restrictions, this training can be delivered by webinar, although face-to-face training where possible is more interactive, engaging and effective. NCOP presents the exciting opportunity to bring together mentors from multiple institutions for peer support and sharing good practice. Some of our longer NCOP projects have used mid-point surveys to gather information on their mentoring experience so far in order to develop our support material and consider top-up training webinars.

Success factors

- Gather likely numbers from schools/colleges as early as possible so that target mentor numbers can be adjusted accordingly
- Provide ongoing support and training for mentors throughout the project
- Emphasise the relevance and usefulness of mentors’ knowledge and experience, regardless of subject or job role
Focus for the future

Whilst Brightside’s mentors are from a wide range of industries, the majority have or are studying bachelor degrees or above. We provide them with resources about other routes such as apprenticeships to discuss with their mentees, but we are actively seeking more mentors with personal experience of degree apprenticeships and other vocational qualifications to enhance our provision.

Case Study

Hello Future is running a project targeting white males from disadvantaged backgrounds, which can be a difficult group to engage with educational interventions. Schools specifically requested that mentors be professional males in work rather than students. Taking into account the local labour market, Brightside searched our mentor database for mentors with a background in engineering. In order to widen some mentees’ horizons, we also used suitable mentors working in industries such as IT and business consultancy or with experience of the armed forces.

Learning lessons from previous projects working with this group we addressed the higher risk of disengagement by focusing mentor training on practical strategies for dealing with unresponsive mentees. Hello Future were also keen to facilitate engagement by using the Hello Future Graduate Interns to run workshop style sessions which addressed barriers to engagement, for example how to write an appropriate email to their mentor. This proved successful, with the majority of mentees in the first cohort sending 10 messages or more.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

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<td>22</td>
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From the survey of the first cohort:

• 100% increase in mentees who agreed or strongly agreed to the statement ‘I know people I can call on for employment or education advice’
• Number of mentees who chose higher education as their most likely post-18 option doubled
• 100% of mentees said their mentor understood their needs
Interventions

Online mentoring is an impactful standalone intervention, and can also add value to other NCOP activities.

Brightside has worked with over 150 partner organisations since 2003, who have used our online mentoring in myriad ways. In many cases, online mentoring underpins a wider package of activities including university visits and face-to-face workshops.

As a means of providing high quality information, advice and guidance to young people, online mentoring can be integrated with other activities offered by NCOP consortia, providing additional support and continuity. Brightside can incorporate support for other activities into our bespoke mentoring schedules for each project. For example, mentees can prepare for university visits by discussing it beforehand with their mentor, and their impressions and experiences afterwards. Online mentoring can also enhance the benefits of summer schools, by allowing young people to maintain contact with mentors and ambassadors afterwards.

Creating an effective holistic package requires advance co-ordination between the different organisations involved. We have seen success where project details, aims and timelines are consolidated into a ‘menu’ of activity for schools, enabling them to see how different interventions fit together. By clearly outlining the specific objectives and benefits of each, it also allows schools to select the activities most relevant to their pupils’ needs.

Such an approach addresses issues around communicating with schools that emerged in the first stages of NCOP, with some teachers reporting feeling bombarded by a multitude of offers from different organisations, creating strain on their time and decreasing the likelihood of the buy-in and support necessary for success. Most importantly, this allows the creation of a series of interventions that will have the highest impact on individual pupils. Clarity of message emphasising that young people are taking part in one coherent overall programme rather than unrelated ‘one-off’ activities improves engagement and thus outcomes.

Success factors

- NCOP staff and third party providers know which other interventions schools are participating in
- Design projects to complement one another and offer them as a package
- Inform mentors when mentees take part in another intervention; to help ideas for conversations

Focus for the future

We recommend that third party organisations in each consortium submit their proposed timeline of activity to a designated NCOP lead, to collate and share between all partners. Those responsible for different interventions with the potential to complement each other, can then make direct contact to discuss the most efficient ways to integrate their work, and establish set roles and responsibilities.
Case study

Study Higher has run a pilot project providing ongoing support to year 12 pupils who attended a STEM summer school prior to their transition into year 13. Mentees worked with student ambassadors over the course of a few days to learn about higher education, before being paired with industry mentors for six weeks until returning for Year 13. As well as helping them explore future careers, mentors also answered questions around results day and helped draft personal statements. This combination of interventions has been factored into project planning for the next academic year.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

- 7 schools
- 7 Mentors
- 11 Mentees
Evaluation

Proving impact will be key to the long-term success and sustainability of NCOP.

Brightside is pleased that outcome evaluation is at the core of NCOP. There is a paucity of evidence about what works in outreach, which has in part contributed to the demise of previous national programmes such as Aimhigher. We hope the programme-wide evaluation being undertaken by CFE Research will significantly strengthen this evidence base, and has real potential to both improve outreach work in general and, if proven to be successful, make a solid case for the continuation of NCOP in some form.

As an impact-driven organisation, all of Brightside’s mentoring is based on our Theory of Change, which identifies the behaviours, such as self-efficacy and growth mindset, alongside the skills young people need to make confident and informed decisions about their future. We have designed an impact framework survey using verified scales to measure these behaviours, which we are administering across many of our NCOP projects. Our evaluation complements the standard CFE survey for NCOP learners, which focuses on outcomes for young people in terms of how knowledge gained during an intervention has influenced their preferred post-18 routes.

Robust evaluation data is invaluable, but care must be taken in its collection, and our NCOP work has made this even more apparent. Many interventions use baseline and exit surveys and many see fewer beneficiaries completing the latter, sometimes making accurate comparison and conclusions more difficult. This risk is compounded when work is being carried out by multiple partners, if young people are being asked to complete too many surveys. It is therefore best to integrate them as much as possible. To keep the evaluation process user-friendly, we have designed our surveys to be succinct, which also allows room for partners to include their own questions rather than necessarily needing to design their own. This reduces the burden on young people, and increases the likelihood of them engaging with the evaluation to provide robust and accurate information.

Success factors

✔ Work together to reduce the risk of ‘survey fatigue’
- Use teacher surveys, case studies, open text questions and focus groups to gather qualitative data for project evaluations
- Involve school and college contacts so that the right data can be collected at the most appropriate and convenient time

Focus for the future

Brightside is one of the first third sector organisations to join HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker). This will enable us to monitor the destinations of mentees who progress into higher education, helping to demonstrate the long-term impact of NCOP. We are also working with social investment consultants CAN Invest to develop an impact management system which will make it easier to collect and understand impact data during a project, as well in aggregate after it has concluded.
Case study

Brightside’s online mentoring project with Southern Universities Network (SUN) is being run as a randomised control trial (RCT) in collaboration with the Behavioural Insights team (BIT) and CFE Research. The RCT will examine the progress of a control group against a treatment group who took part in a condensed eight week HE Explore / Apply online mentoring project, matching results from the CFE survey and Brightside’s impact evaluation framework and engagement data with the pupils’ post-18 destinations collected from the National Pupil Database by 2020. This is one of the first times an RCT has been applied to a widening participation intervention, and will be an important contribution to wider understanding of what works in this area.

In the 2017-18 academic year:

- Mentors: 30
- Schools: 6
- Mentees: 38 in treatment group

Mentees showed an increase in:

- Feeling more positive about their future (+28%);
- More awareness of people they could call on for advice (+41%)
- Knowledge of how to get the qualifications and training they need (+44%).
- Knowledge about available HE courses (+49%)
- Knowledge of where to find information about applying to HE (+37%)
Our NCOP partners