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The Implementation of "Attain": A mentoring scheme for care experienced young people and young people on the edge of care in Renfrewshire

Executive Summary produced for Aberlour and Renfrewshire Council

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1. Introduction

The ATTAIN project is a bespoke mentoring pilot designed to improve the educational attainment and engagement of children and young people with care experience or 'at the edge of care'. It was designed and delivered by Aberlour, and funded by Renfrewshire Council.

Mentoring is an effective approach to improve educational outcomes for children and young people with care experience. Mentoring involves the development of a trusting, supportive relationship between mentor and mentee, primarily for the potential benefit of the mentee (Busse et al., 2018). This kind of trusting relationship can enhance academic and social skills, building children and young people's efficacy, self-esteem, confidence and aspiration. These mentors were supported through Aberlour to **build relationships** with young people over a defined period, working towards agreed attainment goals such as improved confidence and self-esteem.

Referrals were secured through a range of routes, and the ATTAIN project is uniquely positioned in Renfrewshire to provide a mentoring service for children and young people who are not fully engaged with education.

An independent evaluation of ATTAIN was commissioned from the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection at the University of Stirling. This evaluation ran from March 2019 – March 2020, during the pilot of the ATTAIN project, when the bulk of data collection was completed. Some additional data was collected in April 2020-Feb 2021, to enhance the report.

2. Aims

The aims of this evaluation are:
- To explore children and young people's understanding and experience of the mentor scheme, and its role in challenging barriers to engagement with education and to attainment
- To explore mentors' understandings, experience and motivation for supporting children and young people who are looked after
- To explore barriers and enablers of the implementation of the service

3. Methods

A qualitative approach was developed to evaluate the implementation of the mentoring scheme. Ethical approval was sought and secured through the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel. Interviews were conducted with mentors (7) and young people who were mentored (6), and with key stakeholders (6). In addition, 41 trainee mentors (out of 53) completed or partially completed *Pre and post training measures of knowledge, skills and confidence* to assess the perceived impact of training. Administrative was also examined to assess referral and training patterns. A focus group was also held with delivery staff. Data sets were analysed separately, and then integrated using a matrix approach that mapped the data against the "Re-Aim" implementation model (Glasgow et al., 1999; King et al., 2010). (See figure 1)

4. Findings

Referrals, volunteer numbers, recruitment and training

Between April 2020 and Feb 2021, 78 children and young people were referred to the service. 67 children and young people were supported by Attain, with 59 still being supported at the time this report was written. Thus in terms of adoption, the service has exceeded its annual target of 60 children and young people, and the level of uptake and engagement suggests the service is highly acceptable to the target group.

Of the young people referred to ATTAIN, most were known to social care and regarded as 'at risk' or 'vulnerable', and a large number were in kinship care or were looked after at home. These figures suggest that the reach of the service is appropriate, engaging with the target population effectively. Given that young people with care experience, those in contact with social care, and those who care are generally regarded as more educationally at risk, the young people supported through ATTAIN are appropriate, and the project could therefore be seen as addressing the key aims of The Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Volunteer training and supervision experiences

More than 50 mentors have been trained and supported through the ATTAIN project. Volunteer mentors completed a self assessment of knowledge, skills and confidence relevant to their mentoring role. Pre-and post assessment suggest a skilled volunteer workforce, whose high level of existing

knowledge, skills and confidence was further enhanced by training. After the training, mentors also commented very positively on the ongoing support they received from the ATTAIN team.

Perceptions of service needs

Stakeholders, delivery partners, children and young people, and mentors all viewed mentoring as a needed and important service. All participants reflected that experiences of care and of being a carer might produce challenges to engagement with education, and to educational attainment School was viewed as potentially stressful and isolating for young people in general, and particularly for young people who might be viewed as 'different' by peers. Participants reflected that a relationship with a positive adult might offer a useful support that might help young people to overcome such challenges.

Key points:

- The ATTAIN project has exceeded its first year target for both mentor recruitment and engagement of children and young people
- ATTAIN is receiving appropriate referrals, and has engaged appropriate referring services effectively
- ATTAIN has recruited and trained significant numbers of mentors, providing a strong foundation for the project to progress.
- Renfrewshire Council staff have engaged with the project as volunteer mentors.
- In terms of implementation, the project therefore has good REACH, engaging appropriate target groups in both the delivery of the service, and the use of the service.
- More than 50 mentors have been trained and supported by Attain
- Mentors report enhanced knowledge, skills and confidence in key training areas
- Trainees were positive about the training, and felt it was fit for purpose and prepared them well for mentoring.
- Supervision was highly regarded, and the Aberlour team were viewed as very positive
- Stakeholders viewed the ATTAIN project as offering a needed and valued service

In interviews, mentors and mentees reflected on the impact of care experiences and of caring responsibilities on education, and commented positively on their experiences of the ATTAIN programme, and the ways in which the programme had helped young people enhance their school experience, their social skills, and sense of wellbeing. The themes from the interviews are summarised in Table 1.

Themes from interviews with young people and mentors	
Barriers to young people's engagement with education	*Young people and mentors described how experiences of care, risk of care, and of being a carer could disrupt young people's educational experiences and increase the challenges young people experience in school.*
Enhancing the school experience	*Mentoring was seen by mentors and young people as a positive experience that could enhance school experiences. Benefits included space to reflect on school and on educational habits, practical help in developing learning skills and emotional support.*
Enhancing emotional and social wellbeing	*Young people all reported that their mentors had helped them develop social skills. Having a space in which they felt heard supported young people's emotional wellbeing.*
Mentoring as relational practice	*Young people and mentors saw mentoring as an important relationship, and felt that the value of the role was in the relationship itself. They felt that the benefits of mentoring relied on young people having confidence in the mentor. To achieve this, there was a need for the mentor to be committed to the relationship.* *Mentors and young people expressed concern about the time limited nature of the relationship and suggested a longer period of mentoring would be beneficial.*

Table 1: Themes from the interviews with mentors and mentees

> *Key points:*
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> - Young people and mentors described mentoring as a very positive experience
> - They reflected on how experiences like adversity, mental health difficulties, and stigma might challenge children and young people's capacity to engage fully with education
> - They reported that engagement with the mentoring scheme had enhanced subjective wellbeing, increased confidence, and improved educational engagement
> - They recognised the importance of mentoring as a *relational practice*
> - In particular they noted that the relationship was at the interface of professional and friend, and that this together with the voluntary nature of the contact gave it its particular and special quality.
> - Some expressed concern that the allocated time for the mentoring relationship was too brief, and that a more sustained period of engagement was required.

Mentoring through Covid19

The pandemic had a significant impact on the programme roll out, disrupting the day to day face-to-face encounters between mentors and mentees. The ATTAIN team worked flexibly to support ongoing contact between mentors and mentees, providing guidance, mobile phone access and other support to enable them to shift their activity online and to telephone contact. The model was sufficiently robust to flex in this way, but as noted in the mentor interviews, over time, contact did start to reduce for some young people.

Some mentor interviews were conducted after the start of the pandemic and we were able to capture some insights into how COVID19 and associated restrictions had impacted on the ATTAIN project. Alternative provisions were offered through virtual 'Big Nights In', zoom contact and texting with mentors. Some children and young people seem to have engaged very well with the virtual interactions, whilst others seemed to increasingly disengage as the pandemic progressed. In the small number of interviews conducted during the pandemic, it was clear that both parties retained a sense of commitment to the mentoring relationship, it did prove more challenging. Mentors commented positively on the support made available by the ATTAIN team throughout the pandemic, indicating that

the Big Night In initiative had been very useful, and that their supervisor in the ATTAIN team had been consistently available to think through the complexities of working virtually with young people.

Stakeholder and Delivery Team

The stakeholder and delivery team focus groups and interviews reflected positively on the ATTAIN programme, and demonstrated a high commitment to its continuation. The implementation of the programme was successful, but the need for long term commitment was highlighted. Short term funding strategies were seen as counterproductive in developing and delivering an effective mentoring scheme, and did produce specific challenges in the implementation of Attain.

Relationships between the involved organisations (local authority, education and the voluntary sector) were seen as central to the success of the project, and it was felt that it was important to 'get these right' from the start. It was recognised that mentoring was a significant commitment and that there might be a range of barriers to recruitment as well as enablers, including the need for mentors to be supported by their own employees, the particular personal qualities of the mentor, the availability of time to mentor, and the desire to 'give something back' to the community.

5. Conclusions: An implementation science based analysis of the evaluation data

The data presented above suggest that overall the pilot has been successfully implemented, and that the experience of mentoring has been positive and beneficial for mentors and mentees. In this section we map the evaluation data against an implementation science framework to distil key learning from the pilot, and to draw out key insights for future implementations. We summarised the evidence, and map it against key characteristics of effective implementation derived from Glasgow's Re-Aim implementation evaluation model (See figure 1, page 10). Key findings emergent from the data currently available include:

- Stakeholders, mentors and young people with care experience see the Attain intervention as much needed, providing an important source of support for children and young people to improve their educational engagement and attainment. .
- The programme is recruiting appropriate mentors and mentees for the programme offered.
- There were some initial challenges in partnership building that produced a slow initial implementation. Once these had been addressed, recruitment picked up significantly.

- Training has progressed very well. The training is reaching a good range of individuals and has had a significant impact on self-assessment of knowledge, skills and confidence in mentoring young people with care experience.

- Mentoring is viewed positively by mentors and mentees.

- Mentors felt well supported in their work.

- Young people reported positive changes that increased their sense of self efficacy, improved their engagement with school and enhanced their subjective wellbeing.

Overall, the implementation of the Attain mentoring scheme has been successful. The model is clearly feasible, acceptable and has organisational commitment. The initial slow recruitment has given way to much more significant uptake by both mentors and mentees in the latter months of the project, suggesting a strong need for the service. Mentors and mentees report a range of positive outcomes from their involvement in the project, including enhanced subjective wellbeing, improved confidence, and a better experience of engagement with school and learning. Although COVID19 restrictions have disrupted the roll out of the programme, the team, and the mentors and mentees supported through the ATTAIN programme demonstrated resilience in flexing their delivery to accommodate the demands of the pandemic.

6 Recommendations

For the future of the project, the most significant challenges to overcome will be ensuring secure funding, and supporting the institutional embedding of the project in both organisations. This includes ensuring ongoing support from the Local Authority for staff members to volunteer as mentors. Based on our findings, the following recommendations are made:

- It would be beneficial for the programme to continue to be offered in the local authority area, and to receive more sustained and predictable funding, to stabilise the support offered through the mentoring scheme.

- Given the intention that many of the mentor volunteers would be recruited within the council, strong organisational support from the LA is required

- The programme draws referrals from a good network of sources, enabling it to reach young people who were not currently engaged with formal education or who feel disengaged from school. This is a distinctive feature of ATTAIN that should be maintained and developed. It enables the programme to reach young people who might otherwise be missed by services.
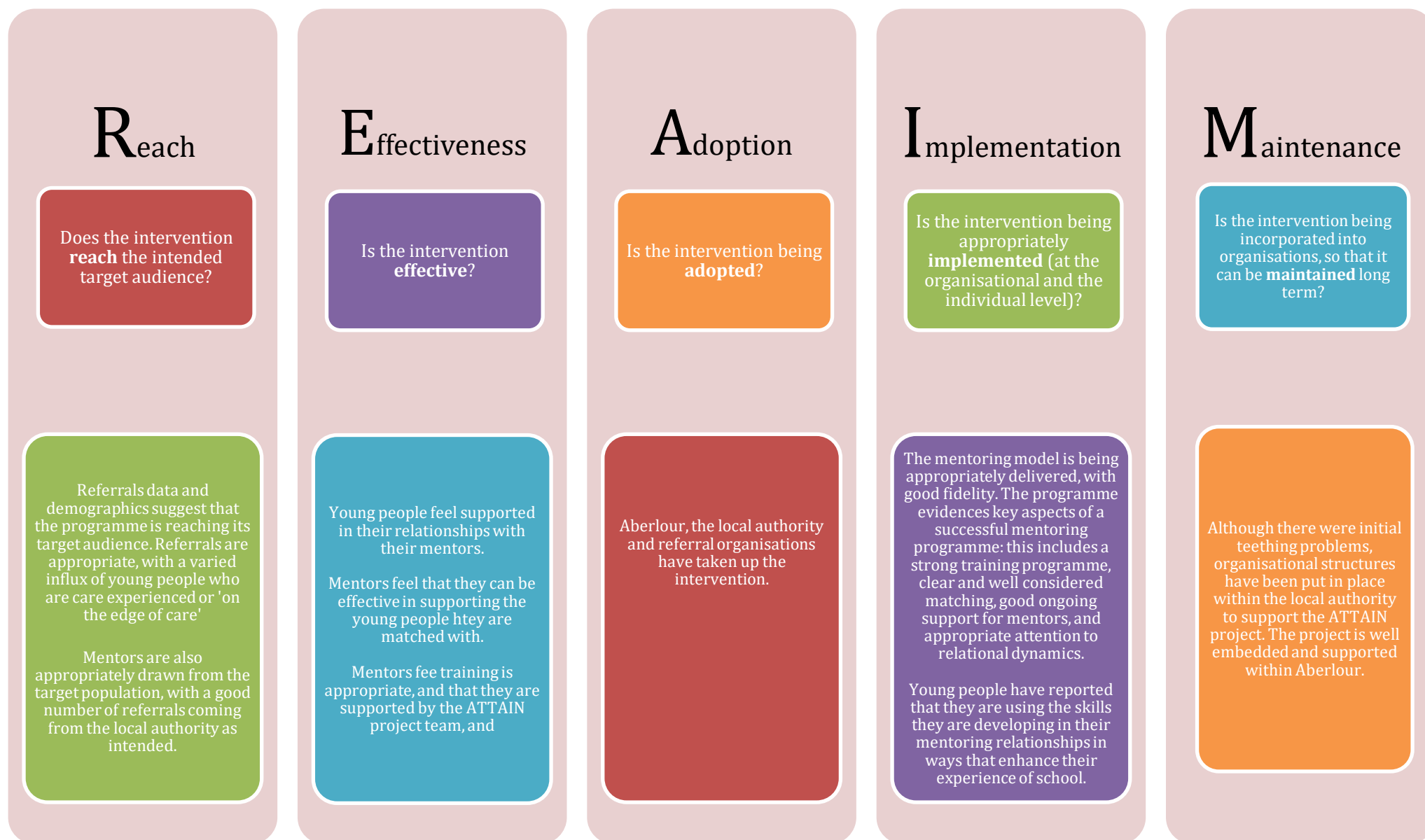
Reach

Does the intervention reach the intended target audience?

Referrals data and demographics suggest that the programme is reaching its target audience. Referrals are appropriate, with a varied influx of young people who are care experienced or 'on the edge of care'

Mentors are also appropriately drawn from the target population, with a good number of referrals coming from the local authority as intended.

Effectiveness

Is the intervention effective?

Young people feel supported in their relationships with their mentors.

Mentors feel that they can be effective in supporting the young people htey are matched with.

Mentors fee training is appropriate, and that they are supported by the ATTAIN project team, and

Adoption

Is the intervention being adopted?

Aberlour, the local authority and referral organisations have taken up the intervention.

Implementation

Is the intervention being appropriately implemented (at the organisational and the individual level)?

The mentoring model is being appropriately delivered, with good fidelity. The programme evidences key aspects of a successful mentoring programme: this includes a strong training programme, clear and well considered matching, good ongoing support for mentors, and appropriate attention to relational dynamics.

Young people have reported that they are using the skills they are developing in their mentoring relationships in ways that enhance their experience of school.

Maintenance

Is the intervention being incorporated into organisations, so that it can be maintained long term?

Although there were initial teething problems, organisational structures have been put in place within the local authority to support the ATTAIN project. The project is well embedded and supported within Aberlour.

Figure 1 Mapping findings to the Re-Aim implementation framework

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