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# Everton Free School Social Impact Study

Final Report

April 2019

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THE  
PEOPLE'S  
CLUB

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## EVERTON FREE SCHOOL SOCIAL IMPACT STUDY

### FINAL REPORT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Aims of the research

This research examines how Everton Free School (EFS) has had an impact on the lives of students that have attended the school. It addresses the following research question:

- What is the social impact of Everton Free School for its students?

The focus is on how the school provides the conditions for social empowerment. In this case, the relationships between teachers and students, the activities and opportunities that the school offers beyond the core curriculum, along with care and support systems are key aspects.

## Methods

The research was conducted during 2018 in collaboration with the School and involved the following:

1. Development of a database of school leavers
2. Design and administration of a school leaver survey
3. A series of non-participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews

## Key findings

Most of our interviewees described large class sizes and a lack of support and care from teachers as major problems in their previous mainstream education. This is combined with often very chaotic home lives, where the young people have ended up excluded from their previous schools.

## Good practices

Evidence of good practices at EFS include increased levels of attendance, small class sizes, the ability to personalise learning and take advantage of opportunities tailored to interests, and better recognition and attention to learning difficulties and mental health problems.

'I felt we was part of something... we had a reason to come to school... you felt you were worth something. It was a good opportunity, it was something new, you gained new skills.'

## Social conditions

The good practices and largely positive effect that they have had on the lives of research participants are underpinned by the social conditions at the School, which include a strong sense of collective identity, a relational approach to the students, and a structured and supportive teaching environment.

'You're not just a number, you're a student, you're family, you're a part of Everton, you're part of the club, you're part of the community.'

'A teacher in a mainstream school has been taught to teach, whereas [a teacher here] has been taught to teach and listen.'

'It was just a totally different take on education to the education that I knew... you feel like you're working with [teaching] staff and not against them... we got to know the teachers personally and they'd take time to speak to us on a personal level and I just think the fact of how intimate and small it was enabled me to progress through. It worked wonders for me. I feel like I owe a massive debt to them.'

It is important to also recognise that EFS is a social intervention for up to two years into often quite troubled lives, which places significant challenges on the work that the School staff do, including dealing with issues of criminality and violence, apathy, drug-use, mental health problems, and the social consequences of living in poverty. This can also exert a strain on the mental health of teaching staff.

## Transformative experiences

Interviewees described transformative experiences from attending EFS, which suggest that they were empowered by their attendance at the School.

'What [EFS] did for me and my personality... it enabled me to become me. It really did allow me to look at myself and be like "who am I?, What do I like?" and discover interests.'

'I felt like I was appreciated more and like, respected more... it was a godsend that I was kicked out of mainstream to come here because honestly, I wouldn't be where I am now.'

## Leaving EFS

Through the good practices and social conditions which underpin them, EFS creates potential for increased resilience, self-esteem, confidence and empowerment. However, this is to some extent limited by the broader societal context that shapes these young people's lives, and the limits to which EFS can address these within the students' time at the School.

'Since I left school, the next day I was in the gym... I got an apprenticeship with [name] doing boxing, done my coaching courses, my boxing level one, my personal training... I work there Monday to Saturday...'

'It was a huge jump to then go and do college... so I ended up leaving, and then I done a traineeship [at Everton Football Club]... then I went to Liverpool Community College and I found that I preferred that college a lot more.'

The life course of students who attended EFS varies greatly due to a wide variety of factors and although this research is based on a limited sample of interviews, it is clear that the experience of attending EFS has a profound social impact on students who were struggling to cope with education in mainstream schools.

## Recommendations

Social work training for staff or employing trained social workers among the team. This may help to support staff and students in relation to some of the more challenging problems that students face. Given the complex challenges faced daily by teaching staff, the opportunities for training in social work skills might help to avoid burnout and offer additional sources of resilience for teaching staff. Similarly, employment of a social worker or social workers, who are able to adopt the relational approach that EFS has developed may form an additional source of support for both staff and students.

## Alumni links

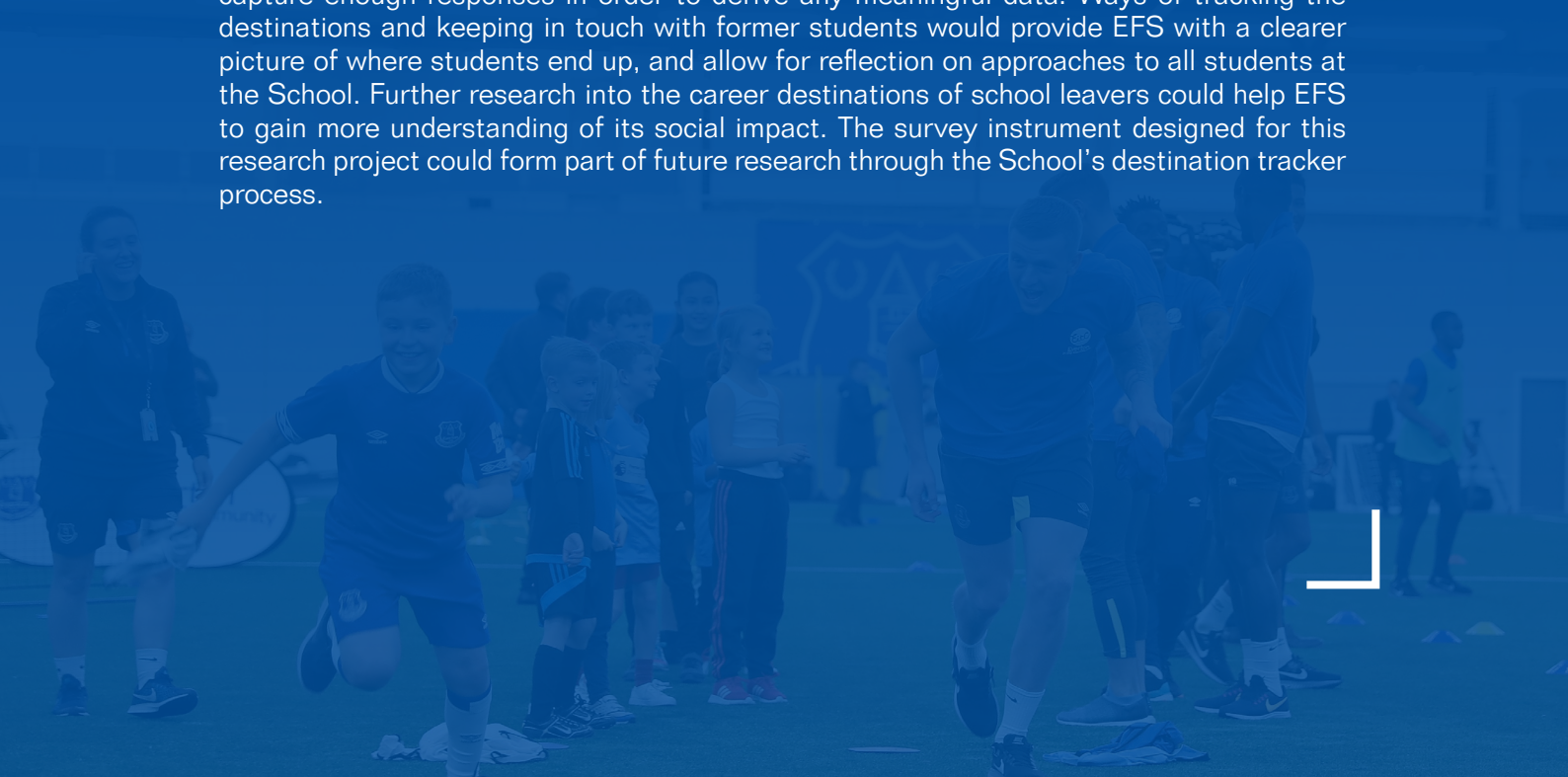
The School has applied for AP innovation funds to offer some follow-on care, for the period between leaving school and starting a job, training or college. This is likely to be a good source of support, for example, the case of the student who felt lost attending college until seeing someone else with an EFS link. In addition, it could be possible to integrate the EFS academic calendar with activities and support that EitC offers to young people, especially during the weekends and Christmas and Easter breaks, and 'alumni'-style links could be developed with school leavers. This may help them with the transition from being an EFS student to adulthood.

## Further integration into EitC activities and EFC events

Access to other EitC schemes for students and former students (including during summer and holidays) could enhance the sense of collective identity that the students are able to develop. This could require asking the students how they would like to participate in other EitC schemes and what new ones could be developed. More involvement of EFC players in daily activities and opportunities for work experience within EitC are likely to be useful. In addition, social activities and getting the students involved with EFC, especially when the move to the new stadium is complete could also be useful.

## Further research

This research is limited in terms of what it can say about the broader population of EFS school leavers, due to the difficulty of contacting students. The survey was unable to capture enough responses in order to derive any meaningful data. Ways of tracking the destinations and keeping in touch with former students would provide EFS with a clearer picture of where students end up, and allow for reflection on approaches to all students at the School. Further research into the career destinations of school leavers could help EFS to gain more understanding of its social impact. The survey instrument designed for this research project could form part of future research through the School's destination tracker process.





# 1. INTRODUCTION

This case study of the 'social quality' of Everton Free School (EFS) focuses on how it has had an impact on the lives of students that have attended the school. It addresses the following research question:

- What is the social impact of Everton Free School for its students?

In order to understand social impact, social quality theory was adopted as an analytical tool. Social quality broadly refers to the extent to which societal conditions and institutions can enhance opportunities for meaningful participation in society, focusing on the improvement of individual capacities, well-being and potential<sup>1</sup>. This research focused in particular on how the school provides the conditions for social empowerment<sup>2</sup>.

In this case, the relationships between teachers and students, the activities and opportunities that the school offers beyond the core curriculum, along with care and support systems are aspects of good practice in providing the conditions for social empowerment. Through a combination of research methods, drawing on reflective interviews in particular, this report examines the impact of these social relations on the lives of school leavers during and after their time at the school. While school staff articulate a concern for follow on care outside of the school term and after students leave, this may be a difficult aim in a challenging context for these young people.

The research was conducted during 2018 in collaboration with the School and involved the following:

1. Development of a database of school leavers.

This sought to merge different data that EFS has collected in order to provide a snap shot of the population of EFS school leavers.

2. Design and administration of a school leaver survey

This was an attempt at capturing a sample of responses to a series of questions related to social quality from the population of school leavers.

3. A series of non-participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews

These were conducted with staff and former students at the school to understand the impact that the school has had on the young people's lives.

The report begins by providing a short context of how Alternative Provision schooling has developed in recent years (section 2), along with the broader context of austerity and how this impacts on the Merseyside region (section 3). Next, the research design is described and the limitations of the data collected (section 4).

The findings in section 5 are presented in a thematic and broadly chronological structure, focusing on the young people's lives before coming to the school, during their time at EFS, and after they left. While conducting the survey and collecting information for the database encountered problems of access to former students (see section 4), the interviews provided rich data, which forms the basis for the findings presented here (section 5). Amongst the key findings are the importance of relationality, a caring and supportive environment, along with a sense of collective identity, articulated as belonging, family, and community. These combine to give the students a stable foundation from which to enhance their capacities and potential for progressing through their secondary school education. While the sample we interviewed cannot be representative of the broader EFS former student population, which proved difficult to reach, the accounts provided here suggest a very positive environment that has

<sup>1</sup> For further details about social quality theory see the work of van der Maesen & Walker (2012) and Herrmann & Lin (2015).

<sup>2</sup> For the benefit of this report social empowerment refers to, "the degree to which the personal capabilities and the ability of people to act are enhanced by social relations." (Herrmann, 2012, p.202).



enhanced these young people's lives during their time at the School. While a broader aim of the school's work is to improve well-being and build resilience, the transition from being an EFS student to going to college, work or starting an apprenticeship is a challenging one that is to some extent beyond the scope

of the school. EFS remains a very positive intervention in a hugely challenging context for these young people. This forms the basis of the reflections on good practice and recommendations for EFS to build on the work that it does (section 6).



## 2. ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Alternative Provision (AP) has risen up the education policy agenda in recent years following then Education Secretary Michael Gove's concerns about an 'educational underclass' of pupils outside mainstream education. Pupils in AP were considered to be at greater risk of failing to achieve academically and growing up without the skills to become successful adults<sup>3</sup>. The Department for Education established a review lead by Charlie Taylor, a respected head teacher and educationalist, to examine a 'flawed system' that failed to provide suitable education to some of the most vulnerable children. Taylor acknowledged that many pupils entered the AP system late in their school career after years of struggling to cope in mainstream schools<sup>4</sup>. He outlined how many came from the most deprived backgrounds, often but not always from 'chaotic homes' experiencing a range of social problems such as alcoholism, drug-taking, mental health issues, domestic violence and family breakdown. The review noted that only 1.4% of children in AP achieved 5 or more good GCSE's compared to 53% of their peers, that the costs of AP dramatically varied across the sector with some doing 'little more than keeping their pupils off the streets' and made a series of recommendations to address these issues<sup>5</sup>.

The Taylor Review offered a vision for the future of AP over the next six years based on funding for permanently excluded pupils being devolved to schools rather than in the hands of local authorities. His recommendations were as follows:

- schools should commission AP services
- that the commissioning process should focus on the individual needs of the child

- that all children in AP should receive appropriate and challenging English and Maths teaching
- AP providers become an integral part of the local school system

The Taylor Review represented a step-change in policy towards alternative provision in a period of austerity and radical school reform.

The school system in England during the post-2010 period experienced both tightly constrained budgets and underwent a radical programme of reform intended to raise attainment levels and reduce inequalities<sup>6</sup>. This included the introduction of Free Schools in 2011. These were state-funded schools set up in response to what local people say they want and need in order to improve education for children in their community and represented a synthesis of the Coalition government's education policy. The Free Schools programme aimed to promote greater parental choice through more competition between schools, increased opportunities for education businesses as well as other providers such as charities, businesses and groups of parents to enter the 'school market'. It enabled a new wave of schools that celebrated traditional curricula and pedagogies to be established. It also allowed other Free Schools to be established that were committed to innovation and experimentation to meet the needs of pupils. Everton Free School belongs in this latter strand.

<sup>3</sup> Gove (2011) expressed these concerns in a speech given to Durand Academy at the time of the 2010 Schools White Paper – The Importance of Teaching

<sup>4</sup> In this report, 'mainstream education' or 'mainstream schools' refers to the diverse range of schools in England, which, under a marketization agenda for the past 30 years, have expanded to include between 70 and 90 types of school (Courtney, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> See Taylor (2012)

<sup>6</sup> These reforms included accelerating the academisation of schools into chains thus reducing the role of local authorities, alongside changes to the National Curriculum and to assessment, testing and examinations in schools. Issues surrounding these reforms are discussed by Bailey & Ball (2016) Lupton et al (2016), Lupton & Thompson (2015), Timmins (2017)

### 3. AUSTERITY AND MERSEYSIDE

The defining feature of post-2010 social policy has been the 'cold climate' of austerity that has seen cuts to public spending along with the restructuring and privatisation of services.

The impact of austerity across Merseyside has been notably severe with already high levels of child poverty increasing across the board.

Child poverty in Liverpool City Region				
End Child Poverty estimates for % of children in relative low income at Jul - Sep 2017				
	Before housing costs		After housing costs	
	Number	%	Number	%
Liverpool, Riverside	4,300	26%	6,500	40%
Liverpool, Walton	5,000	24%	7,800	37%
Birkenhead	4,600	22%	7,200	34%
Liverpool, Wavertree	3,900	21%	6,100	33%
Knowsley	5,300	21%	8,200	33%
Liverpool, West Derby	4,500	20%	7,000	32%
Bootle	4,500	20%	7,000	31%
Wallasey	4,000	20%	6,300	31%
Halton	3,900	18%	6,200	28%
Garston and Halewood	3,700	18%	5,900	28%
St Helens North	3,700	18%	5,800	28%
St Helens South and Whist	3,800	17%	6,100	27%
Southport	2,600	15%	4,200	24%
Weaver Vale	2,800	14%	4,500	23%
Wirral West	1,500	11%	2,400	18%
Wirral South	1,500	10%	2,400	17%
Sefton Central	1,400	10%	2,300	16%
<b>Liverpool City Region</b>	<b>59,800</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>93,900</b>	<b>29%</b>
North West		19%		29%
United Kingdom		17%		26%
<p><b>Note:</b> North West and UK figures differ from official estimates as published by DWP and are provided for comparative purposes only. Numbers rounded to nearest hundred.</p> <p><b>Source:</b> End Child Poverty, <i>Poverty in your area 2018</i>. Figures for Liverpool City Region, North West and UK delivered by Library based on constituency data published by End Child Poverty.</p>				

Figure 1: Child poverty across Liverpool City Region

Child poverty plays an important part in the wider concept of social deprivation that covers income, employment, education and skills, health and disability, crime,

living environment and barriers to housing/ services. Liverpool is England's fourth most deprived local authority (it had been the most deprived in 2004)<sup>7</sup>. Liverpool City Council

<sup>7</sup> Data from Liverpool City Council (2015) indicates that 26 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) of around 1,500 people fall within the most deprived 1 per cent of all localities in England and 134 LSOAs, containing 45 per cent of the city's population, in the most deprived decile in the country.

and neighbouring local authorities have been amongst the hardest hit by austerity because with relatively weak local tax bases and high levels of social need they have been reliant

on central government grants for a significant proportion of their budget as shown in the map below.

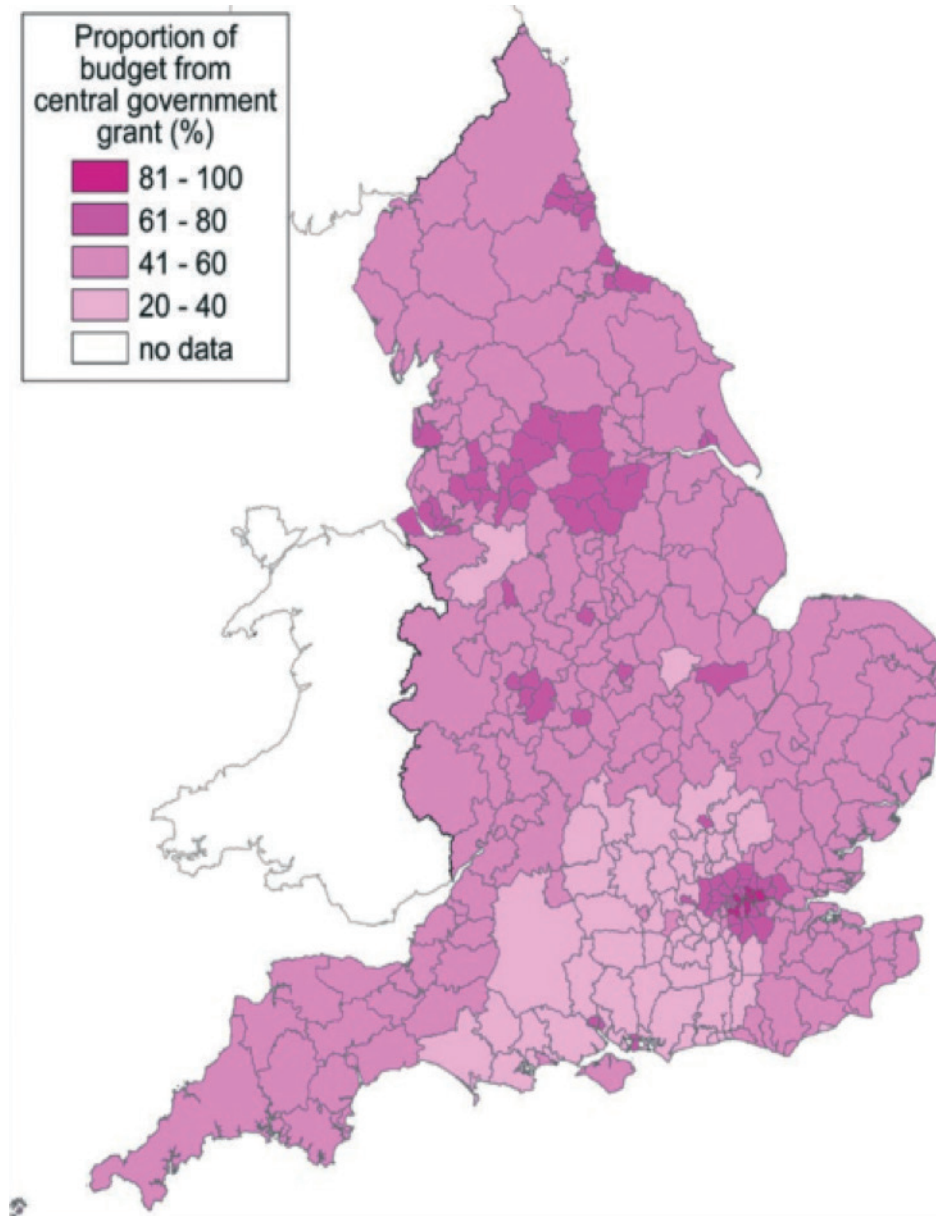


Figure 2: Map showing proportion of local government budget coming from central government grant in England, 2009-2010 (Gray & Barford, 2018)

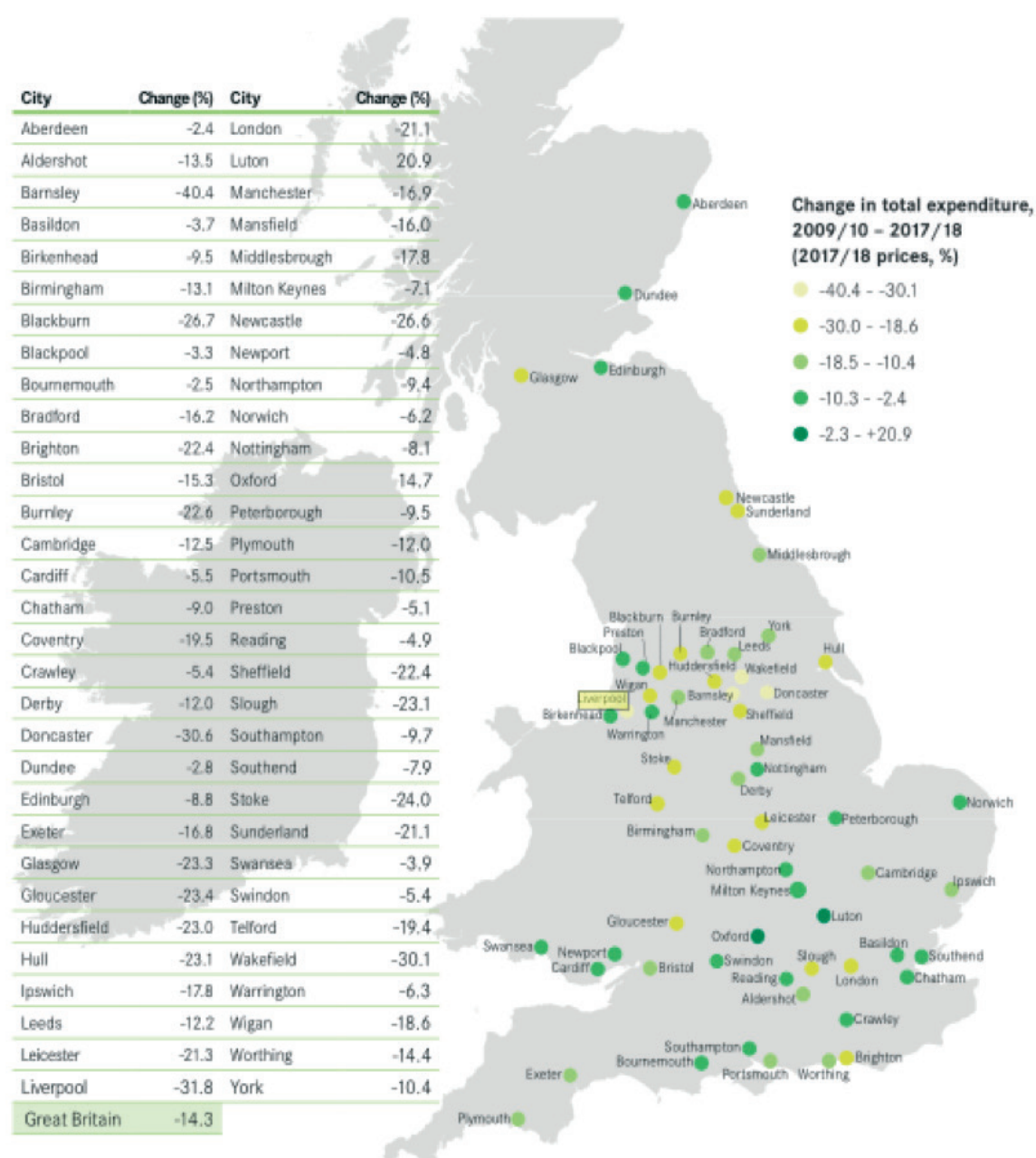
The significant reductions in central government grants for local authorities have put considerable strain on public services across the United Kingdom but have been particularly acute across northern England

and parts of Greater London. Cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Newcastle are all coming to terms with the legacy of industrial decline and deeply entrenched levels of poverty.



Liverpool with a cumulative reduction since 2010 of £444 million in local authority spending, the equivalent of £861 for every

resident, has been particularly severely affected by austerity<sup>8</sup>.



Source: MHCLG, Local authority revenue expenditure and financing England; Scottish Government, Local Government Financial Statistics; Welsh Government, Revenue budget (RA) data collection

Note: Figures for Scottish cities are for 2009/10–2016/17 as data for 2017/18 is not yet available.

For consistency, this data excludes RECS spending, which was included in data for 2009/10 but not for other years.

Figure 3: Change in total spending, 2009/10-2017/18 (Centre for Cities, 2019)

<sup>8</sup> According to the Centre for Cities (2019), the 31.8 per cent reduction in spending over the 2009/10 to 2017/18 period was the second largest of any city in the United Kingdom.

Everton Free School is located on the edge of the Kirkdale ward amidst an area of intense

social deprivation as shown in the map and tables below.

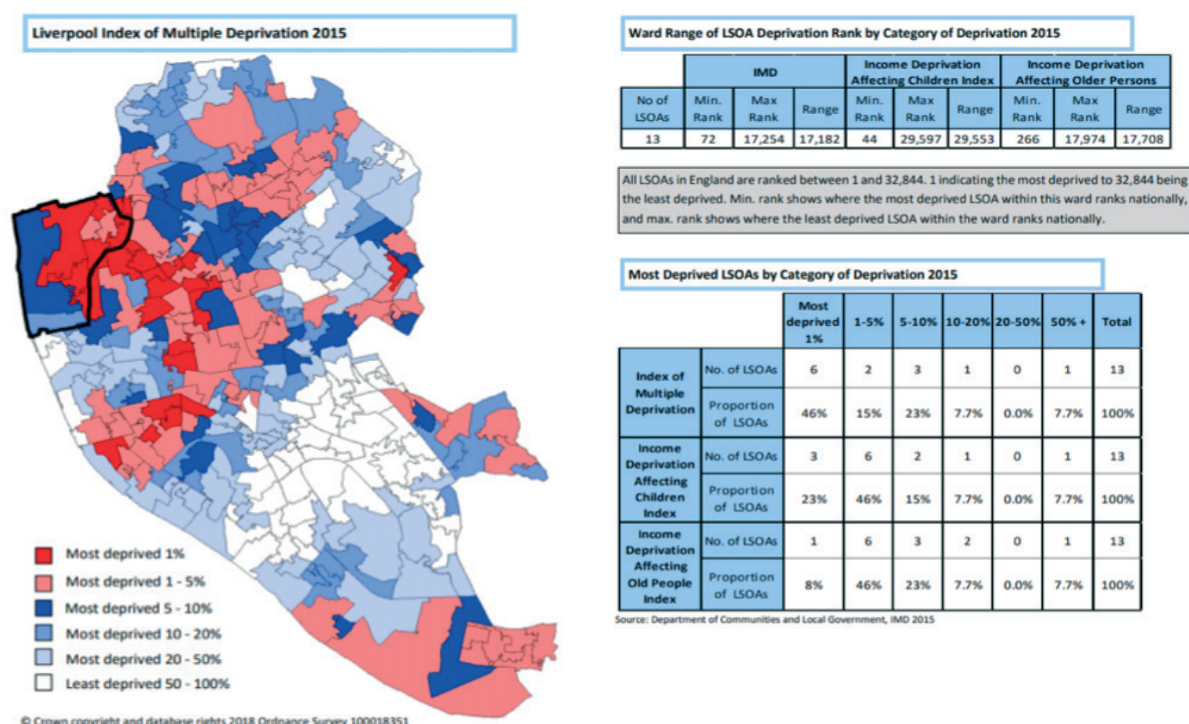


Figure 4: Social Deprivation in Liverpool (Liverpool City Council, 2015)

## Education and Social Deprivation

It has been demonstrated that there is a strong social gradient in educational

attainment<sup>9</sup>. The Parliamentary constituency of Walton in which EFS is located has a relatively poor level of overall educational attainment and progression through local secondary schools as illustrated in the table below showing Attainment 8 scores<sup>10</sup>.

2017 Attainment 8 GCSE scores by percentile			
	25th Percentile	Mean Score	75th Percentile
Walton	35.2	38.9	42.4
Liverpool Region	38.6	45.6	49.4
England	39.8	46.4	50.1

2011-2017, A\*- C in Maths & English GCSEs

Figure 5: Attainment 8 scores (House of Commons Library, 2018a)

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Hills (2010) and Social Mobility Commission (2017)

<sup>10</sup> Attainment 8 is an average score based on a student's best eight grades in a range of GCSEs with a maximum score of 80 points for eight A\* grades with one grade difference being equivalent to one grade difference.

Similarly, Progress 8 aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary education to the completion of secondary schooling. For example, a school with a Progress 8 score of -0.25 has a pupil that on average, achieved a quarter of a grade less than other pupils with similar starting

points. Across the Walton constituency, the average Progress 8 score was 0.59 with some schools recording a score of -1.30 indicating that pupils were on average achieving grades that were nearly a grade and a third lower than their peers with a comparable starting point in schools across the country.

2017 Progress 8 GCSE scores, ranked by school	
	Progress 8 Score
North Liverpool Academy	-0.15
Archbishop Beck Catholic Sports College	-0.39
Alsop High School Technology & Applied Learning Specialist College	-0.61
Notre Dame Catholic College	-0.85
Bank View High School	-1.30
Fazakerley High School	-1.30

Figure 6: Progress 8 scores (House of Commons Library, 2018a)

The image below shows the home addresses of former EFS students mapped against the Index of Multiple Deprivation for the Liverpool City Region with the most deprived LSOAs red-shaded. It shows a strong correlation between deprivation and attending EFS after exclusion from mainstream education with a

concentration in the north of the city around Everton. As EFS has become established over time as an Alternative Provider, particularly after moving into the new school buildings in 2015, it has attracted excluded students from some of the most deprived communities across the Liverpool City Region.

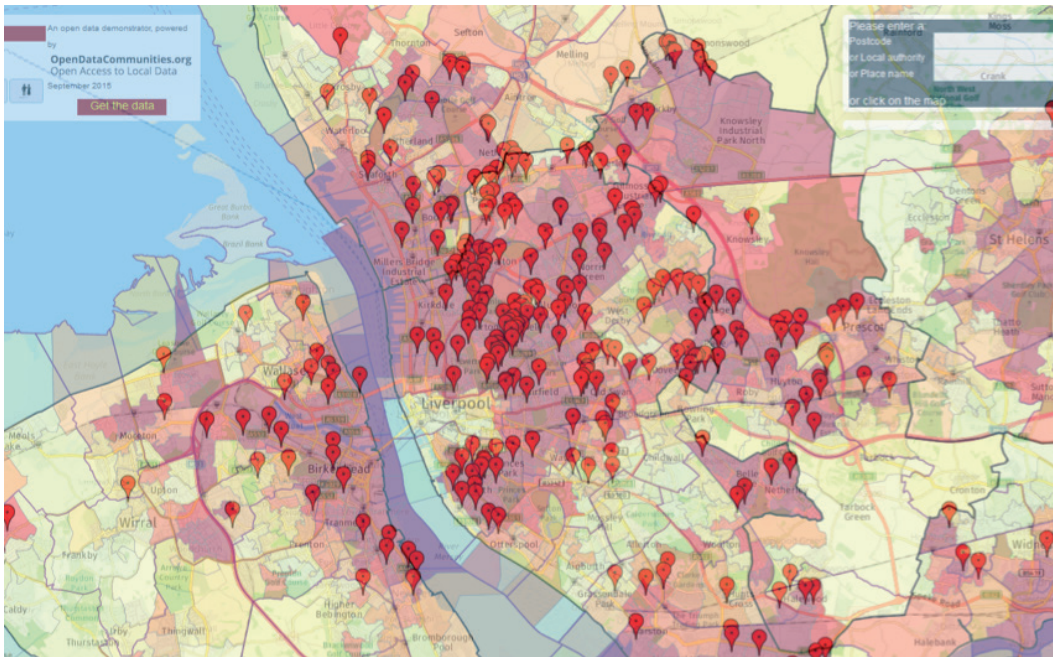


Figure 7: EFS student homes mapped against social deprivation



In an increasingly competitive 'school market' there are likely to be pressures on mainstream schools to remove pupils who are disruptive from their registers, including those who are unlikely to perform well at GCSE, through 'off-rolling' (OFSTED, 2018). The Educational Policy Institute has estimated that 'unexplained' exits, due to a variety of reasons, have increased from 47,225 (7.8%) in the 2011 cohort of pupils to 55,309 (8.1%)

of the 2017 cohort. Some 330 schools (6% of the total number of secondary and specialist schools) had at least 30 unexplained exits from their cohort and accounted for 23 per cent of the total number of unexplained exits (Hutchinson and Crenna-Jennings, 2019). It is in this changing and stressed environment that this research was conducted at Everton Free School.

## 4. SOCIAL QUALITY, METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This research is framed by social quality theory and is concerned with the extent to which citizens are able to participate in social relationships under conditions which enhance their well-being, capacities and potential. This perspective is based on the assumption that humans are social beings, rather than individualistic atoms, and that they derive their sense of identity, self-realisation and well-being, to a great extent, from their participation in meaningful social relationships. This means that social research, from a social quality perspective should focus on the social relations and social conditions in which people live, rather than on solely 'inherent' individual characteristics or values. Instead, it is the social conditions, which shape to some extent, the actions and agency available to individuals<sup>11</sup>.

This concern with social conditions refers to the two main tensions that characterise social quality theory. On the one hand, a tension between individual histories and changes in society, and on the other hand, a tension between the everyday lives of people, and the systems of rules and societal structures that govern them<sup>12</sup>. While everyday life takes place within the context of these tensions, self-realisation is sought by individuals through their interaction in various collectivities, such as families, communities and workplaces, or in this case, a school.

This allows us to contextualise the lives of school leavers within the Merseyside region. As argued in section 3, Merseyside is a socio-economically deprived city region with the attendant social problems that young people might face such as deprivation, crime, drug-use, chaotic families. Moreover, education

policy in England has focused overwhelmingly on a results-based, performativity model, with enforced competition between schools<sup>13</sup>. Both of these broader issues have shaped the educational experiences of students at EFS. Social quality is concerned with evidence of social empowerment, where social conditions increase the possibilities for participation in society. In this case study, it refers to the ways in which the school provides the conditions to enhance the personal capacities and abilities of school leavers to have good lives. The report highlights evidence of empowerment as good practice, and suggests ways in which the school could be more empowering for these young people.

### Methodology and methods

A reflexive critical ethnography approach was adopted in association with a case study method. This required a combination of research methods, including a survey, non-participant observations, and in-depth qualitative interviews, and reflection on the emerging themes from the different methods, followed by linking them to the broader societal context described in section 2. The case study approach aimed to identify the unique characteristics of EFS in the everyday relations within the school<sup>14</sup>. This does not attempt to generalise to all AP schools, but rather is used to learn about good practice at EFS, and to consider how to improve the work that EFS does. For this research, we produced:

- A database of former students.
- A map of the school population.
- A survey distributed to c.200 former students.

<sup>11</sup> More expansive explanations of social quality and its meanings can be found in van der Maesen & Walker (2012) and Beck et al. (2012)

<sup>12</sup> See Corbett & Walker (2017).

<sup>13</sup> As discussed by Lupton *et al.* (2016).

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller description of critical ethnography and the case study method see Carspecken (1996) and Stake (1995) respectively.

- Non-participant reflective observations of the school day during the fieldwork period.
- 18 in-depth qualitative interviews (6 with staff members, 12 with former students).

## Population and sample

The EFS database developed for this research covered 290 pupils who attended Everton Free School for at least 100 school days between September 2013 and July 2017. It is important to emphasise that EFS has pupils joining and returning to mainstream schools at various points in the academic year so a larger number of pupils actually attended the school. The pupils who attended for a short period of time have been included as although they may not be able to comment on the social impact of EFS, they still provide an important insight into the deeply deprived areas across Merseyside from where pupils are drawn from.

The information available for each cohort varies and complete data is not available for each academic year. For example, the most complete data is recorded for those who attended Everton Free School most recently, the 2016-17 cohort; however, information on attendance and behaviour is not available for this period. Where information such as this is not available or incomplete this has been noted.

Of the 290 pupils who have attended Everton Free School, 73% were male and 27% female, this is representative of wider gender disparities in alternative provision<sup>15</sup>. Ethnicity information was available for 261 pupils with 88% identified as White British, 11.2% identified as Asian, Black or Mixed Ethnicity and 0.8% identified as White Gypsy Roma or White Irish. The percentage of White British pupils at Everton Free School is 18.3% higher than the national average for state funded secondary schools and 18% higher than the national average for children in pupil referral units<sup>16</sup>.

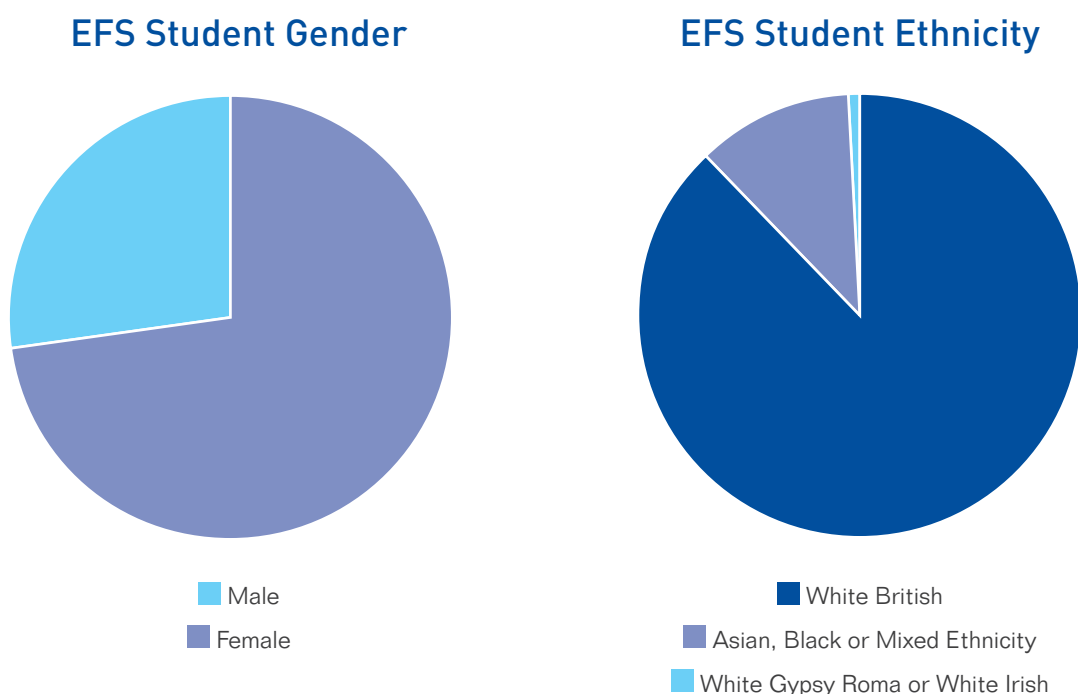


Figure 8: EFS student demographics

<sup>15</sup> Gill et al. (2017), for example, note that three boys are permanently excluded for every one girl.

<sup>16</sup> Full details are provided by DfE (2018a) and Gill et al. (2017).

Although information on national identity was only recorded for 93 pupils, the information that is available highlights a range of nationalities attending Everton Free School. 89%, the vast majority of pupils for whom this information was available, described their national identity as British. However, the remaining 11% included pupils with national identities from the EU, Africa, South America and the Middle East.

Information on previous schools was available for 284 pupils with 9% of pupils having attended or been registered at multiple schools before Everton Free School. It is important to note that for the remaining 91% of pupils, although they are recorded as only attending one previous school, this does not include if they have been educated out of mainstream classrooms or at on-site alternative provision, have tranted or have been out of education.

Information on eligibility for free school meals was available for 259 Everton Free School pupils. Of these pupils, 56% were recorded as being eligible for free school meals when they started at EFS although this figure would change over time. This 56% figure for free school meals eligibility is more than four times higher than the 12.4% national average for secondary schools and more than twice as high as the 24.6% Liverpool average for secondary schools. Despite children who are eligible for free school meals being four times more likely to be excluded, the percentage of pupils at Everton Free School who are eligible remains high even when only discussing pupil referral units, where 39% of 11-15-year olds are eligible, or local authority alternative provision where 17.6% of 11-15-year olds are eligible<sup>17</sup>.

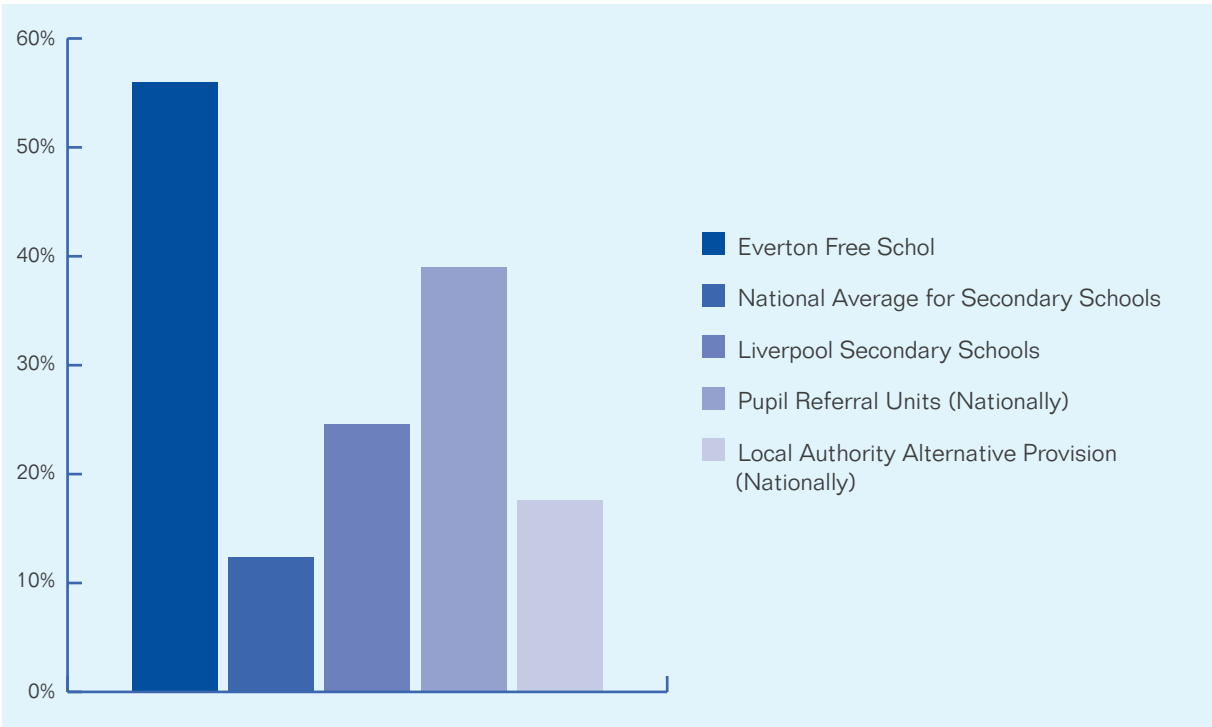


Figure 9: Proportion of students eligible for free school meals

<sup>17</sup> All figures are taken from Department for Education and Liverpool City Council (DfE, 2017; 2018a; 2018b; LCC, 2017; IPPR, 2017).

Information on if a pupil was registered as a looked after child was available for 268 pupils. 6% of pupils who had attended Everton Free School were registered as looked after. An additional 3% of pupils are recorded as having local authority social care involvement or have a 'child in need' plan in place<sup>18</sup>. Children in care are twice as likely to be permanently excluded, however, children who are defined as 'in need' who remain at home with parents or carers are three times as likely to be excluded<sup>19</sup>.

The first Ofsted report for Everton Free School in 2014 rated the school as good and stated that pupils make very good progress despite their attainment prior to attending Everton Free School being generally poor. Ofsted visited the school when it was situated across various different sites before it moved to its current location at Spellow Lane, so it is important to consider that this report may not be truly representative of the school currently. The most recent Ofsted report for EFS in 2018 rated the school as good and praised the good quality of education, strong practice and marked improvement in specific areas with safeguarding practices particularly praised. "The gains in attendance made by pupils when they join the school contribute to their safeguarding because they spend more time in a safe and well-controlled environment (Ofsted, 2018a)." A combination of effective leadership across senior and middle leaders, strong support from school governors with effective teaching leading to improved pupil outcomes as measures by GCSE and other results, particularly compared to similar provision locally and nationally. The Ofsted inspection gave a strong endorsement of Everton Free School: "The school's impact on individuals is often very marked, with pupils' life chances being completely transformed. This demonstrates the very positive impact the school's practice has (Ofsted, 2018a)."

It is important to note that while the Ofsted rating remained as good, alternative provision

such as EFS is inspected under the same system as mainstream schools where a high level of attendance is a prerequisite for being considered outstanding. Despite having school attendance consistently above 85 per cent, approximately 25 per cent higher than the national average for alternative provision, it is difficult to see how EFS can be recognised as outstanding under the current inspection regime. There is a strong likelihood that under a more appropriate inspection system that acknowledged the often extraordinary challenges that alternative provision schools and pupils experience that EFS would be recognised as an outstanding beacon of excellence.

Ofsted's 2016 survey into alternative provision stated that alongside gaining qualifications in English, Maths and Science it is important that pupils also develop their personal, social and employability skills. Although the results data for Everton Free School is only available for a small number of pupils the range of qualifications achieved as well as GCSE English, Maths and Science highlights Everton Free School's commitment to this wider development. Pupils achieved qualifications in ICT, Music, Sport, Preparation for Working Life, CV Writing, Mental Health Awareness and First Aid that provided them with achievements, confidence and skills for life after school.

Contacting former students was a challenge as most were unresponsive to phone calls or the postal survey distributed to their last known addresses. This is a well-known issue with survey research<sup>20</sup> but may be a more acute issue for a research population that comprises many people living in relative deprivation. Given that it was difficult to obtain responses from a proportion of the school leaver population, a pragmatic approach was adopted with regards to the interview sample. In the end, through negotiation with the School staff, a convenience sample was used, whereby

<sup>18</sup> Child in Need plans are put in place when a child is not deemed as at risk, but is in need of additional support. The support can be in relation to their health, safety or development. A child is defined as 'in need' if they are disabled or have complex needs (Family Rights Group, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> See Gill *et al.* (2017).

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Bryman (2006).

the School staff contacted former students that were likely to respond. This compromise meant that it is not possible to generalise the findings of this research to the broader population of EFS school leavers. As a result, it is likely that the research participants are representative of students who have had a positive relationship with EFS, as they are still, in some way in contact with the school. Therefore, the findings and analysis which follows proceeds with that caveat in mind, and offers a constructively critical approach to interpreting the case study data.

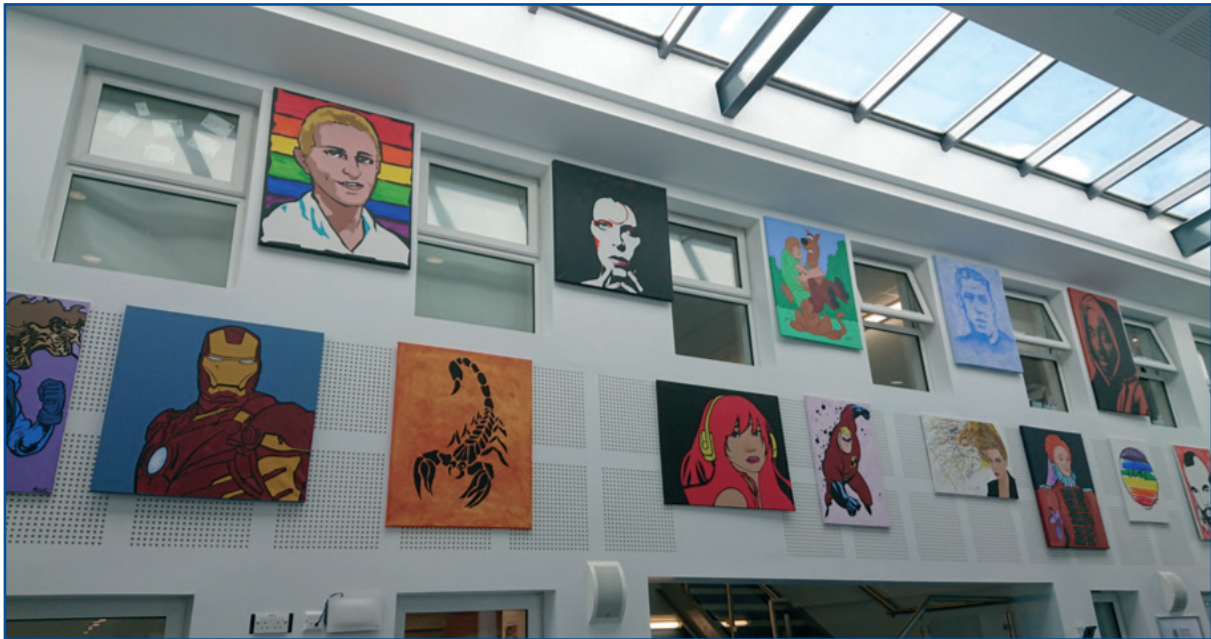
However, the rich qualitative data and emergent themes provided in the findings section are driven by the students' accounts of their experiences of being a pupil at EFS and their lives afterwards. These are valuable in order to understand the social impact of EFS, although the overall picture may be more complex. In the recommendations, further research is suggested in order to deepen the

data collected here. Interviews took place with 6 teaching staff (3 male, 3 female) and 12 former students (8 female and 4 male).

While the survey instrument was designed and piloted, the very low response rate (<20 out of 200) did not allow for any meaningful analysis of the data. However, the survey could be used for future research (see appendix), should a way to tracking the addresses/email addresses of school leavers be developed by the school. While the database provided useful contextual data, the findings for this project are strongly grounded in the observations and interview data. A challenge for future research would be for finding ways to contact those hard to trace former students in order to understand a broader range of experiences with EFS, for the school to learn how to improve how it could work with these young people, in particular.



## 5. EVERTON FREE SCHOOL



EFS is a key part of Everton in the Community's commitment to the local community around Everton Football Club. It has some links with other schemes that Everton in the Community (EitC) runs, such as Safe Hands and Breathing Space, projects for young offenders and looked after children respectively, and the links with EitC and the Football Club offer work placements and opportunities for apprenticeships. EFS provides schooling for students aged between 14 and 16 up to their GCSEs. In addition, the school also provides a Sixth Form College, focusing on sports courses. It began operating across a number of sites, including a period at the Learning Exchange (LEX) at Liverpool Community College, with sports lessons run at Everton Football Club's training ground, Finch Farm. This early incarnation involved collecting students first thing in the morning from across the city in a minibus, and transporting them between sites for different classes. There was also the advantage of encouraging attendance, because as one teacher put it:

'a lot of the students were not coming in, the attendance wasn't very good at the time... so I started my day at 6.30am, and I'd go and pick up in a minibus with a colleague and we'd pick kids up from County Road to Oran Park, to Kirby, to Croxteth, Moss Green, Tuebrook, Toxteth. Bring the kids in, give them their breakfast... then teach'.

These early issues have been successfully addressed by the use of bus passes to pupils but remain an indicator of the commitment of staff to the pupils and EFS. While the School Principal reflected that being in the LEX had some positive impacts, as the students interacted with older college students, acting in some sense as 'role models' and helping to 'moderate behaviours', it was apparent that the need for a single site was necessary and is reflected in previous research on EFS<sup>21</sup>. By 2015, the school had moved to a purpose-built site on Spellow Lane, just around the corner from Everton FC's home stadium, Goodison Park. The aim is that the School will be a key part of the legacy project when Everton Football Club move to a new stadium

<sup>21</sup> See Putwain & Nicholson (2014).



at Bramley Dock and the building is a key part of this.

*The building is light, airy, with lots of open spaces, natural light, shades of blue and white, and student art on the walls. It immediately creates a relaxed environment for the staff and students.*

Initially the school began with one single student, but EFS began to grow as more students were recruited through the commissioning process. This involves a detailed meeting with a prospective student and their parents or guardian, and explaining the offer that the school can make for them. This follows the Taylor Report recommendations mentioned in Section 2, given that the school focuses on the student's individual needs and their opportunities, along with offering a strong 'core' curriculum. In the interviews, students reported that they were aware that this was a 'last chance' for them regarding their education, but, as the findings section shows below, the interviewees found EFS to be a much more positive experience than their previous schooling. However, the Deputy Principal pointed out that the commissioning interview recognises that the student is in a difficult place - 'very reluctant', and attempts to provide a 'hook' for the prospective student, in order to encourage them to see EFS as an opportunity. This usually relates to sport, whether the link to Everton Football Club or the opportunity to get involved with sports coaching.

*Most of our interviewees have described the opportunities that EFS afforded them as much more than just sport.*

Central to the EFS ethos is the emphasis on encouraging students to 'find their element', which involves a focus on their own particular interests and passions, in order to give them the incentive to attend school. EFS runs Prince's Trust, Duke of Edinburgh, and Inside the City schemes as options, one day a week,

to this end. While the Prince's Trust and Duke of Edinburgh schemes focus on vocational skills, employability and gaining experience of work in order to attempt to build resilience and preparation for life after school in the students, Inside the City provides trips and educational experiences in Liverpool, in order for the students to experience cultural aspects of their city. As the Deputy Principal puts it: 'for some children, it could be that they enjoy their art, construction, mechanics, they enjoy their beauty, their hairdressing, their food technology'. These are seen as an important complement, to both 'hook' students in, and help them 'find their element'. In addition to offering a 'clean slate', opportunities for personalised learning, and additional activities, the core curriculum of English, Maths and Science is viewed by students as an important draw to the school, as they recognise how important achieving these core GCSEs is for their future.

The school has adopted 'the 3 Rs': Respect, Responsibility and Resilience as key characteristics it seeks to instil in students. It has a mission statement to help all students:

- Excel and achieve 'nothing but the best'
- Value the potential of team work
- Enjoy new ways of thinking
- Revel in learning
- Tackle challenges without fear
- Open new doors of opportunity
- Nurture their talents and never give up

The evidence presented in the findings section suggests that the School has a strong commitment to this mission, with some striking examples of success in achieving these aims, reflected in the positive accounts given by school leavers of their time at EFS. The commitment of staff to the students' needs was apparent, along with innovative approaches to improving the students' educational experiences such as restorative justice have been adopted. The emphasis on the three Rs is also apparent in the statements made by former students, as the strong sense of relationality encourages respect.

*Students described feeling more responsible at EFS; the package of support and care is intended to encourage resilience.*

In addition, the school offers a psychologist, a nurse, a smoking cessation programme and some drug work as forms of broader support for the students. As the next section shows, the emphasis on relationality – respectful relationships – is integral to developing positive relationships within the school.

EFS sees its role as an intervention, where a

student's behaviour and circumstances have led them to be expelled from their previous school. As the Deputy Principal put it:

“We’re a bridge. We’re picking them up at a certain point in their lives, where normally things have gone wrong and we’re trying to get them onto the next phase in their lives. That might be staying in our sixth form, could be going to college, could be going to some form of work and training, could be an apprenticeship... so it is bridging them from where they are to where they need to be.”



## 6. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings take a broadly chronological approach to the themes discussed by staff and students relating to the young peoples' lives before attending EFS, during their time there, and their lives after leaving. The former students interviewed describe their experience of mainstream education first, before providing accounts of beginning their education at EFS.

*While being students at EFS, the main themes identified are the importance of small class sizes, personalisation of learning, and opportunities for wider engagement, including vocational work and training.*

It is argued that these aspects are underpinned by social conditions for success that the school provides; a relational approach, a structured, caring, and supportive environment, and a strong sense of collective identity. Some challenges that the school faces are discussed, and the final section considers the impact that EFS has had on students.

### Before attending EFS

Interviewees described similar experiences of mainstream education before attending EFS. These include struggling in large class sizes (which was cited as a factor by almost every interviewee), a general lack of sufficient help, care, and support, and disciplinarian and alienating relationships experienced with teaching staff. It is important to also acknowledge that in the accounts provided by former students, behavioural issues, and wider family and social problems outside of school are likely to have been downplayed.

Former students described how they felt unsupported and uncared for in mainstream schools:

"I came from Brazil to the UK... they started to throw me around schools... None of them wanted me... I didn't speak much English, and probably if I took a GCSE with them, it would [affect] their results overall... I was lost because they are putting me in schools but they're taking me out, or the schools don't want me... they found a school for me... it was in Wavertree, but it wasn't nice. I went there for three weeks. I wasn't learning."

(male school leaver)

"They just didn't get me, why I was always naughty, because I couldn't put my point across that I can't read and I can't concentrate with 36 people in the class."

(female school leaver)

Large class sizes were described by former students as a problem for their concentration, which led to a sense that their needs were neglected and, in some cases, it exacerbated learning difficulties.

"I had anxiety, so I hated being in a classroom with 30 plus people and just being at the back and just feeling like they wouldn't even tell if I wasn't here really."

(female school leaver)

"20 people in a class, all shouting and that... I used to get dead anxious."

(female school leaver)

"Too many rules, too many kids in the classroom, I just couldn't settle... I think I needed more assistance."

(female school leaver)

"I just couldn't concentrate really in [a mainstream school], obviously that's your GCSE year and there's a lot of stress, so I ended up having to come away from it."

(male school leaver)

"when you're in a class with loads of students... they expect you to learn what



everyone else is learning... obviously the teacher's not going to sit with you; you want them to... [but] with there being loads of people in class, people get distracted or people start talking... then someone else will be shouting... you just feel like you get thrown into school and you're kind of expected to do what they ask of you and it's not that easy for some people."

(female school leaver)

*"the teachers [in mainstream school] never used to sit down with you and help you and explain what the meaning is of the stuff that we are doing."*

*(female school leaver)*

Some former students described disciplinary and alienating relationships with their teachers in mainstream education, which reflected an absence of care and oppositional approach to these students.

"I felt the teachers were against me."

(female school leaver)

"I used to cry going in 'cause I used to hate it that much... I was always on report, I was always getting suspended. It wasn't even major things, it was silly little things... and they just didn't care. You couldn't talk to them about anything. They were proper strict teachers."

(female school leaver)

"They shout at you and say, 'you're on detention, you've got to stay behind,' or, 'no, you can't go the toilet'."

(female school leaver)

"I ended up fighting... I didn't want to go back... the teachers didn't treat you as an individual."

(male school leaver)

The accounts provided above are in the context of often very chaotic home lives, which also impacted on school life.

"The only thing for me that got me out of it was getting put into care... a life lesson... it was like a prison to me because I got put in a kids home aged 11... I thought, 'I'm finished now,' and I didn't know how to deal with it. I was running home to my mum, getting into trouble in school, getting into trouble with police, smashing the house up, stuff like that, just to get me out the house, but it was just making my time worse and it was extending my time in care."

(male school leaver)

"The teachers were allowed to restrain [at another AP school], so if there was a kick off, you're on the floor... there was a few times where I was restrained, because things got that bad.... they put you in, like, mad locks and they twisted your arm and they put you on the floor... they see it as a way of keeping you calm, is to restrain you, but it hurt as well."

(male school leaver)

With the above aspects of mainstream education in mind, the pressures on school children, and the 'implications' of failure, were not lost on one male school leaver:

"If you fall behind in a mainstream school, then where do you go...? Obviously with it being Liverpool, there's a lot of kids who [are] challenged. There just isn't the resources in [the] local authority to support children like that. If you miss that brick, you're not going to put it back in. It is very hard to catch up and it's so easy to be written off."

Teachers at EFS, with previous experience in mainstream schools, recognised the difficulties that students face and the impact that their lives outside of school have on their studies.

"The structure, the routine, the pastoral system, wasn't working for a certain cohort of students and I knew that myself as a practitioner... I knew the kids and their families... they weren't bad kids."

*“They have given up... their confidence has been shot, and that’s not just in school... they’ve had to become comfortable with being labelled “bad”... there’s a whole number of habits they’ve got into that are hard to break out of... I don’t think it’s just [that] they want to be bad.”*

“They’ve been through all that drama of the detention, the isolation, the report card.”

“It’s one size fits all [in mainstream schools], they’ve got to try and get them through eight exams and if they don’t then the head is for the chop... it’s a performativity culture. That’s probably the reason why a lot of the students are with us... [the students] know it’s an incredible opportunity.”



## At EFS

In principle, the intention of AP provision is for the students to remain at the School until they are deemed capable of returning to their original mainstream school. However, at EFS this has only occurred in a handful of cases. The School’s role in practice has been to complete their secondary education, often from very challenging starting points, having missed out on significant amounts of secondary education in some cases. This section considers aspects of EFS that have emerged from interviews. First, it describes the students’ views on beginning their education at EFS, and their experiences while at the school. Next, the good practices and social conditions at the school are

discussed. Then, some of the problems that EFS students face, often relating to their lives outside of school, are considered. Finally, this section points out the transformative experiences that the school and its staff have provided the conditions for resilience, focusing on self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment.

## Starting at EFS

Former students described starting at EFS as a relaxed atmosphere, which is unlike their previous experiences of attending a school. Starting at EFS is about a new beginning, and all EFS students there have at some point, been ‘the new kid’: “[It was] kids who were in the same situation as me and other kids who

had been told they couldn't do stuff, and then Everton Free School gave them a go," (female school leaver). Similarly, for a male former student: "The other kids were fine. They're all in the same position really... everyone knows what it's like to come to a new school." The openness of the teaching staff is seen as part of this important transition for new students: "You don't feel like you're the new girl... I'd always feel I could go to one of the teachers," (female school leaver). Another female school leaver describes immediately feeling involved and valued by the school:

"It was the right fit for me, I loved it so much... before I started, they treated me as their own. We filmed a music video. It was the owner of Everton's wife in her horse sanctuary. I weren't even in the school [fully registered] then. I'd just gone for the interview and they were like, 'Come along!' I got to go on the Everton bus and everything and travelled down there."

For a handful of former students, the pull of Everton Football Club was important:

*"I asked if I could come to the Free School... just 'cause of the brand mainly, it's Everton. I'm a massive Everton fan. I didn't really know much about the school but when you see kids going in an Everton trackie to school, you're like, 'I want to be in Everton'."*

*(female school leaver).*

Although the 'brand identity' of the Football Club wasn't cited as the main reason for most of the interviewees for their reason for attending, as the commissioning process largely renders EFS a 'last chance' for most students (notwithstanding that many were Liverpool FC fans).

For some, adapting to the new school took time, but was helped by the structured, but flexible, approach to the school day: "I started getting comfortable when I started seeing faces I knew... I got to a point where I didn't want to go home. I was a dancer as well, so

they'd just let me go and dance in the dance hall," (female former student). While there are some very positive accounts of becoming an EFS student from the research participants, it is important to acknowledge that many EFS students face huge challenges in their lives, inside and outside of school, which makes the school experience often quite difficult. On starting work at EFS, a male teacher reflected: "When I started it was a bit of a shock... just to see the disaffectedness of the students, their reaction, their behaviour, more often than not, the apathy... but you have to cope with the anger and the aggressiveness." This can make life at the School challenging for both students and teaching staff. Certainly, the students at EFS face many difficulties, as discussed in what follows, however, the interview participants highlighted positive aspects of beginning life at EFS. One student argued that so beneficial was her experience of EFS, that she would have liked her entire secondary education to have taken place at the school:

*"I wish they'd let students start from year seven."*

## Being a student at EFS - good practices

An immediate difference between EFS and student engagement at previous schools is attendance. The Principal stated that attendance can be turned around at EFS from 0-30% to closer to 80-90%. This is reflected in very positive comments by some former students. Two female former students evidenced how wanting to come into school had positive outcomes for them. First, increasing broader engagement with the school: "I'd be up, dressed, waiting to leave the door at half eight so I could be in school. I was first in 'cause I loved being in, even started volunteering [at Wednesday night football]." Second, being rewarded for a positive change: "My attendance in mainstream was so low and I remember getting awards here for how high it was. I wanted to be here."

A male school leaver, who attended when EFS was located at the LEX regarded this to be a huge change in his outlook:

“There was everything in place, I used to get picked up in the morning and they’d bring me to school... I loved it, you know what, I’d wake up in the morning... I was happy to get up and out of the house and get on that bus and go to school.”

Another male student pointed out that the teaching staff cared about students, so that any absences were noted, not as punishment, but as a genuine concern for the welfare of the student, suggesting a much more empathetic approach: “There was days where you didn’t want to come in... The next day, when you come in, they won’t just let it slide... they’ll talk to you, get the reason out of you, and they’ll sort it out for you.” This reflects a concern that if students are not in school then they could be at risk of involvement in gangs and criminal behaviour on the streets.

## Personalisation and opportunities

A factor in encouraging a much stronger level of attendance, is by offering students opportunities tailored to their interests and to personalise their learning where possible.

*Many of the interviewees described how opportunities for wider activities, personalised learning and development were important factors for them in getting the most out of their time at EFS.*

The teaching staff highlighted the value of this for some students as it is about, “Giving them direction in life because a lot of them can’t see past their face... they’re not even bothered about next week, they just want to deal with today, so it’s helping them see there’s something bigger, and giving them direction for when they leave.” This is about helping students to ‘find their element’; their passion in life, or something they have a particular set of skills for. Another teacher pointed out that,

“Once you get to know the student and you find out what it is that makes them tick, if you tap into that and find them opportunities from that then that really works... getting involved in local projects... getting involved in local community things... like the Prince’s Trust. They make benches and they sell them to local people within the community, so they’re earning money, they’re using other skills.”

By offering a diverse curriculum and many additional opportunities, often tailored to the individual student’s interests and needs this increases the chances of students ‘finding their element’.

Most of the former students interviewed saw much value in the opportunities that EFS provides. A female school leaver described her chance for a first trip out of Liverpool, to London, as a first ‘holiday’, in which, “We stayed in a hotel. Some people had never done that before.” A male former student described how he felt valued by the opportunities offered to him, which gave him encouragement for his personal development: “I could go with the sixth form students on trips out, and help coach at tournaments, but I was still in year 11... so that helped me a lot and put me on a path to where I am now.” This personalisation was recognised by a female school leaver as something very specific to EFS’s approach to its students: “They push you towards what you want to do, where in other schools, it’s towards what the government want you to do.”

Other students valued opportunities that they were exposed to in wider EitC work, and other community projects connected to the Prince’s Trust and Duke of Edinburgh schemes, which was viewed as significantly different to their experiences in mainstream schools. A male school leaver described the opportunity he had for community participation, which he has sustained beyond his schooling:

“I volunteered at Daisy UK and Building Bridges, which is a centre for disabled people to go to. Went there, played pool with them, arts and crafts. We went on trips, we took some blind people



trampolining... it's not a normal lesson, you're not in a classroom. You're actually out doing something. You're socialising with other people, you're doing the sport that you want to do, you're learning a new skill."

Another student described how a project to design the Toffee Lady's dress for Everton Football Club allowed her to feel a part of the Everton community: "I felt we was part of something... we had a reason to come to school... you felt you were worth something. It was a good opportunity, it was something new, you gained new skills."

*This environment of opportunity and participation encouraged agency in some students interviewed.*

A male school leaver described how he knew he had to 'get my head down' and do his school work in order to be able to get involved in community activities. A female former student described how students were able to ask for subjects to be added to the curriculum, in order for them to pursue their interests: "We never used to do Art [here], until we asked for it... they opened a new course for us, and that used to make me go to lessons all the time."

Participation in the wider Everton in the Community projects beyond their time at EFS was recognised by some students, which again suggests the potential for increasing agency and inclusion in the community for EFS school leavers. A female student described her involvement with the Breathing Space programme: "If I'm having a bad day, I still go there." A male school leaver saw the Everton network as an important source for potential jobs, and he felt that school staff would help him to make the most of these opportunities: "It's happened to my mate in here. He wanted to work in the railway offices, they put him onto the right people and he's now working." However, a teacher reflects that, while these are positive examples of connecting EFS to EitC and Football Club projects, there are challenges in integrating

EFS students into a professional environment: "I just want more of our kids to get that opportunity, but it's not for everybody."

## Small class sizes

Small class sizes were cited by almost every interviewee as foundational to creating a good learning experience.

*Positives related to this included increased focus, being able to have more attention and help from teachers and teaching assistants, avoiding disruption and creating a more relaxed learning environment.*

This is in stark contrast to the students' descriptions of their mainstream school experiences. Some students highlighted being able to focus much better in a class of eight or ten students, with two teachers present: "There'd be no distractions really," and, "I could concentrate more." While being able to have more direct one-to-one supervision by the teacher was also seen as very beneficial: "The teacher could really give me attention." "The kids who need more help can get that off the teachers," and, "There's more time for the teacher to go over to you... you feel like you're getting more attention; help with the work."

The smaller class size and attention of teachers enabled a male school leaver to focus more and avoid previous disruptive behaviour: "I couldn't deal with big class sizes because I used to mess about too much and I used to get pulled in by certain people [to misbehave]." He also cited flexibility in learning as important in the smaller group: "We could have a laugh, but once it got to lesson time, that's where I could get my head down and my work done as well... we could go to different rooms. We could have a bit of music on in the class 'cause it was a relaxed environment."

## Recognising learning difficulties and mental health problems

Some interviewees were prepared to discuss how attending EFS had helped them to recognise and begin to understand their particular learning difficulties and mental health problems. There was a sense of frustration for one female school leaver who described being in and out of different schools before EFS due to her behaviour, and how, "It took my mum and dad about four years to get me diagnosed with ADHD and ADD." Another female school leaver recalled a life changing moment when she was diagnosed as having dyslexia and dyscalculas while an EFS student:

"I only got diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculas when I was 16 and I had the test done here... I understood that I weren't just thick, and I got made to feel like I was thick in mainstream school... as soon as they said, 'she's dyslexic and she's got dyscalculas.' I was like, 'oh, I'm not just thick, I don't understand.' It made me realise that I could push myself... when I first started here, I was a little shit. I was naughty. I was defiant as anything. I wouldn't do anything that anyone asked me. But then as soon as I got diagnosed with that, that's when I stood up and I become captain of the school... I then done a Sports Science degree, I done a Dance degree... now that I'm a gym instructor, even though I'm going to have two kids, it doesn't take away the fact that they made me believe that I could do everything... before, I was walking around with a shadow on my head."

The time and care taken to understand the above student's particular learning difficulties produced a transformative moment. A teacher also described being aware of the problems that some students face with ADHD, when they haven't slept at night: 'That's not necessarily their fault... but they can be tough to handle or they're hard to get to focus.' This care and attention to the specific circumstances is also reflected in how one male former student dealt with mental health issues:

*"The free school helped me a lot with my home life, 'cause obviously I had a lot of issues with my family and I had anxiety because I had problems at home. So, I was a lot more anxious and they could notice that straight away, so they helped me a lot with speaking to psychiatrists, getting me involved with CAMHS, which helped me a lot."*

## Social conditions at EFS

The care taken by teaching staff towards students' learning difficulties and mental health problems reflects a broader teaching approach that is rooted in the care and support offered to students throughout their time at EFS. This section considers how the school requires flexible and adaptable teaching in a structured and supportive environment, how the role of restorative justice and de-escalation provides a crucial backbone to building trust and a safe environment. These are underpinned by a relational approach and a strong sense of collective identity.

## Flexible teaching in a structured and supportive environment

Using the skills discussed above requires staff to take a flexible and adaptable approach to teaching. Flexibility is evidenced in the curriculum, which is tailored to giving the students experience of the real world, along with academic knowledge. This can involve personalised learning. As a female former student pointed out: "Here they done Preparation for Work and Life... you learn about the real world when you come out, because you don't expect it to be that hard... money and situations." Students could take their pick from a range of activities on Fridays, including PE, 'Inside the City', and the Duke of Edinburgh and Prince's Trust schemes. Flexibility of choice within the different options helped one male former student: "I

was doing the modules of PE, but I was doing the practical of Duke of Edinburgh... it was a bit of both."

A teacher argued that because, "The needs and abilities are different... you've got one class full of top, middle, and bottom [level of ability], so you need to get to know them quite quickly and try and work out where they fit." This concern with the needs and abilities of students relates also to their life experience. One teacher learned that:

*"Working here over time, you get to understand a bit more about the children's backgrounds, where they've been, what they've been up to and obviously you hear similar stories over and over again. So I'm a lot more empathetic."*

Past absences from parts of a student's education can make planning lessons and ensuring that the students are well prepared for their GCSEs a particular challenge, requiring flexible approaches in the classroom: "If they've missed what you've already taught... it is messy... [sometimes] to try to get them through a two year GCSE course, very often in less than a year, is one of the biggest challenges." Dialogue within the teaching team helps to understand each student's particular needs, abilities, and challenges: "If you work together and communicate as best you can. If you find out something about somebody, like a certain child works better with a clipboard, just sharing that kind of information with your colleagues and your team means that you're going to do the best for the child and for the staff." Another teacher added: "We'll differentiate like you wouldn't believe; drama, role play, music, video, differentiate by task, differentiate by outcome... our differentiation has got to be incredible in a school like ours... kids don't like it if you're too strict, but if you're too soft, you're a walkover." A lot of planning goes into lesson structure and

content, one way is to tailor the subjects to the interests of the students: "Tuning into things that they're good at, tuning them into things that they can do... I've tried to teach on topics about bulldogs, boxing and motorbikes."

For the students, this does not allow them to do whatever they like, and some interviewees recognised the partnership pledge; the requirement that students must engage with their work, but are granted some flexibility and treated as individuals, with the caveat, as one teacher puts it: "Don't mistake my kindness for weakness." This avoids the need for a disciplinarian approach to the students. For example, one female student explained that: "They're not telling you what to do. If you want to go and have a ciggie and miss half an hour of maths, go and do that, but when the school period's finished at three o'clock, you're back in for another hour to finish the maths." Smoking is recognised as commonplace among pupils and the importance of carefully managing it is widely recognised by staff. Smoking is a risky behaviour that many adolescents engage in and it is important to ask more fundamental questions about the social causes that lead to young people to take up the addictive habit.

Another female student noted that, "They might have rules and regulations... it's disciplined but it's not disciplined." This reflects the flexible approach to students, their behaviour and their needs, and is underpinned by restorative justice and de-escalation. As a factor in ensuring they engage with school, students also recognised the importance of achieving GCSE qualifications and the idea that EFS is a last chance for them. A male school leaver pointed out that, "You need your GCSEs for everything now, you need them for a job, and you don't want to be not working."



## Restorative justice

The school has adopted the policy of restorative justice and the use of de-escalation techniques for dealing with incidents. This is distinct from the more disciplinarian experience in the students' former schools – there is no detention at EFS – or the use of restraints, as in other AP schools described by students. This approach is based around talking and 'wrap around care'. This applies to differences between students, students and staff, students and their parents, and between staff members as well. A teacher describes how sitting people together and talking through the issues that led to an argument, or fight, for example, can help to de-escalate the tension:

"It was challenging at first... but I was always like, 'come on, what are you doing, you're no tough guy... you're one of the nicest kids I ever taught.' On their own, our students are great, but when they're firmed up, two or three, they give it the front... I'm always able to de-escalate the situation and say, 'come on, be nice please'."

Wrap around care can require the involvement of the student's family, wider agencies and advice. This approach was considered beneficial by some interviewees. As a male former student explained: "They'll sit you down, talk to each other, get you back talking

to each other... find out what went on, find out why it went on, who was involved, what can be done, and then just talk things through." This can sometimes involve parents and family members as well. A female school leaver described her experience:

"I've had tantrums where I've pushed people out of the way, threw chairs at teachers, but because I have got a learning difficulty, they have seen past that and listened to what was frustrating me. I don't get on with my mum neither. She's hard work. So, I'd come in here and go, 'f- this and f- that, she's doing my head in.' So, then they'd get me and my mum in here. They'd sort it out."

There also have been instances when disruptive behaviour has affected the whole school, but again, as described by a former student, the emphasis on de-escalation and talk helps to manage these situations: "There were days where the school would just go AWOL, where the kids would go off [disruptive behaviour]... but then [the Principals] would just get it back to calm again, and then it would stay like that. The next day, we'd have an assembly and then they'd say that behaviour wasn't right."

Challenges that teachers face in this context involve the need for emotional and mental strength, and a reflective approach requiring



intervention beyond the requirements of teaching classes. The Deputy Principal described her reflective approach:

"I've had to back down. There was a... really difficult [student] for a good 18 months. Parents were difficult... in the end, I had to look inwardly and say, 'No, this approach I'm taking isn't working.' So that re-evaluation and dare I say, re-skilling yourself, or redirecting yourself to work with a child and the family... one size doesn't fit all."

As one teacher pointed out: "There's a lot more emotion involved than in some mainstream schools; emotional coping... you've got to be able to pick yourself back up if you've had a disappointing lesson... you've got to build emotional resilience." This mental strength is crucial in EFS, as the Deputy Principal added that, "You're working with very difficult, challenging students... it can drain you... and you can become volatile and react. You've got to be in a very good place yourself to be able to come in here every day." One teacher added: "There have been days where I've locked myself in the prep room and cried and then other days when I've laughed and walked out feeling, 'I've done my job today.'" This suggests that the complex issues and problems that the students face place a strong set of demands on teaching staff.

## Relational approach

The relational approach implies dialogue between staff and students, rather than interactions based on discipline or control. The School Principal stated that: "We're intensely relational. The staff are on first name terms with the students and vice versa... relationships are incredibly important. Empathy, and the ability to engage with these young people... the ability to recognise [their frustrations], to support them, and scaffold them."

*Both talking and listening are important here, along with*

*care for the students, and relationships based on respect.*

The students interviewed suggested that open and approachable teaching staff was an important part of their lives at EFS, compared with mainstream education. As a female school leaver put it:

*"A teacher in a mainstream school has been taught to teach, whereas [a teacher here] has been taught to teach and listen."*

Students described experiencing the teachers as, "A friend who you can go and speak to... but you knew there was a line," (male former student); "If you told a teacher a problem you were having... They take notice of you," (male former student). A male school leaver described how vital being able to talk with the teachers was for him:

"It was just a totally different take on education to the education that I knew... you feel like you're working with [teaching] staff and not against them, as you would in a mainstream school... we got to know the teachers personally and they'd take time to speak to us on a personal level and I just think the fact of how intimate and small it was enabled me to progress through. It worked wonders for me. I feel like I owe a massive debt to them."

The ability for students to feel like they can talk with the teaching staff is underpinned by the care that is evidenced in the interactions described by interviewees: "These teachers actually want to listen and want to know you and want to help you... they care," (female former student). Another female school leaver added: "They were actually bothered about how your day's been." A male school leaver described how he was cared for by teachers:

"They've helped me a lot... I'd come in in the morning in school and just cry to a teacher, 'cause that was my way of dealing with it, whereas years before, I'd go into school and smash the class up and get into trouble, have a fight with a kid and

get suspended from the school. Whereas here, you get a chance to talk about your feelings, you get a chance to talk about your home life... everyone was your family here... I'd come in and just offload in the morning, I'd have a two-hour chat and my teachers were fine with that... they knew that something was wrong straight away and I wouldn't concentrate as much [on work], so they knew, I benefited strongly from that."

Dialogue can also help to build respect and trust between the students and staff. A teacher reflected that, "Communication is one of the most important [skills]. They don't really know how to talk, or they've never been taught... so I think being able to communicate to someone in a respectful manner is a massive one." The students saw this as a sense of personalised respect; "They respect you as an individual, they don't see you as a number in a class," (female school leaver). This sense of respect could make students feel, "Like an elder. They don't treat you like a kid. They make you grow up a bit," (female school leaver). This can be in the teaching practices described above, but also allowing students out of the school for lunch and breaks. Another female former student added:

*"[The teachers] used to respect me for the way I was and where I come from. They were interested in me. They used to give me attention... I just feel like they knew me, like they're my family, and I could trust them and they respected me."*

A teacher added: "You get to know the kids... you've just got to judge the situations differently... a lot of them have been through a lot of schools where the teachers have missed things or not cared about them... you just try to reassure them."

This relational approach underpins the structured and supportive environment, and facilitates the opportunities open to students. The Principal described how the caring foundation provides support for the

students: "If you show them kindness... they do recognise it and it does build a bridge... it's probably the one thing lacking in many of their lives, so they're quite surprised." This kindness is a part of the relaxed and friendly atmosphere in the school. A male former student, who had experienced restraints at another AP school, stated that, "When I first came to the school... everyone was sort of connected and everyone was very relaxed and... it wasn't like an institution... It was a good environment to be... the teachers are on your level."

Other school leavers reflected this theme:

"Dead nice... not too big. Schools are massive and there's loads of noise, and [here] it was just nice, calm and mellow and you're allowed to go out for your break and dinner."

(female)

"Teachers had their breaks with you, so we're all sat together, all having chats, having our dinner, all together."

(female former student)

"If you are struggling, they make you come to terms with that. It's alright to struggle."

(female)

The recognition that it is 'alright' to be struggling a bit with school life or home life is important for the student to start to understand their particular problems. Students also reflected on how this support was enacted in day-to-day situations:

"They care that you do your work, but they care how you're feeling in yourself as well... if you are tired and it's just one of them days, they'll notice that right away, as soon as you walk in... just having a little chat, first thing in the morning, getting it out, then you could be fine for the rest of the day." (male school leaver)

*""I could go to a teacher and say, 'I'm having a breakdown.' She'd go, 'Right, give me five minutes and I'll come and see you'."*

(female school leaver)

"I was terrible at maths, but I wanted to go to college when I left here... doing Health and Social Care, but I needed my English and Maths, but [the teacher] would stay behind or do lunch time... she'd sit with me one-to-one and to be fair, that's how I passed my maths... she gave me so much extra time, she gave me work to do at home... she was doing that with other pupils [as well]."

(female school leaver)

Sometimes these bonds can be with individual teachers who will be spoken to 'like a friend', without judgement, or whose care and support would extend beyond the student's time at EFS: "[The teacher] was always there, if I was having a problem or I was feeling low... he still helps me now... I know that he's always around for me," (female school leaver). Finally, this supportive environment can enhance a sense of belonging, as a male school leaver pointed out: "I was coming from Broad Green, and [I felt that, at EFS,] you belong to a school where you just felt welcomed and accepted... 'we'll help you to be who you want to be'... that can only be beneficial to people'.

## Collective identity

The last point relates to the final theme in this section around collective identity, including belonging, family and community. The connection to Everton FC, and having the club badge on the school uniform is only one factor in creating a sense of collective identity. The term 'family' was used to describe the social relations at the school by most interviewees.

*More than just 'the badge' or football club identification, the sense of family and wider community connected to EFS and EitC have established a feeling of belonging for the students.*

Students emphasised the school uniform as a source of identity:

"I used to love wearing the trackie because it was comfier for a start... [but] people used to stop you and think you actually work for Everton... you just felt you were a part of Everton... that's what the football players wear, for some of the training, they wear the same what we wear."

(female school leaver)

"You've got to respect the badge... you can't be doing nothing stupid and then it gets reported back to the club... it makes the school look bad."

(male school leaver)

"It's better than wearing a shirt and tie... I feel proud to wear it."

(male school leaver)

*"It used to make me feel important... you sort of stand out. I'd walk through town to get the bus and people would just stop me, asking for pictures because the uniform wasn't like an Everton kit what a fan would wear, it was like a training kit."*

*(male school leaver)*

However, the uniform and badge is only one aspect of collective identity. The teachers described how they see the students as often needing the support of a family, which EFS, and the wider EitC schemes attempt to provide:

"The idea of family is very important... it is missing in lots of these young people's lives. [EitC has] a programme called Breathing Space, which is for young people who perhaps have suffered bereavement or some other form of trauma."

(School Principal)

Another teacher pointed out how the school attempts to provide an alternative to the allure of gangs in these young people's lives:



"That's a big part of many students' lives: to be part of a gang... the offer we make to them is to be in our gang; come to school, we'll look after you, we'll feed you, clothe you, you'll be in a great building, keep you warm, we'll give you great experiences, you can do Duke of Edinburgh, you can do Prince's Trust, you can get your qualifications, we'll work really hard to get you to the next place in your life."

Finally, this role extends to supporting the students outside of EFS, as another teacher stated, regarding job interviews or open days for colleges or courses: "The staff will go with them. It's not really the parents that go... they've helped them find the opportunities, they've helped them fill in the forms... they took time out of their weekend to help."

A strong theme in the interviews with former students was the sense of belonging in a family at the school, and, for some, having a place in the wider Everton community.

*"You're not just a number, you're a student, you're family, you're a part of Everton, you're part of the club, you're part of the community."*

*(male school leaver)*

"We're like a little family... you just felt like a part of it all, and it wasn't just like another number in the school."

*(female school leaver)*

"There's always someone there for you... [if a teacher can't help you] they'll ring someone who can help you and if they can't, they'll get someone over at the football club to find out who can help us."

*(male school leaver)*

"You feel a sense of belonging in here, it's a good place to be, it is. You get made to feel welcome, everyone's friendly to you, so you're going to be friendly to everyone else."

*(male school leaver)*

The supportive environment enhanced the feeling of a family:

"It was like a family feel to it, 'cause everyone knew each other was going through stuff, so it wasn't a nasty environment to be in. It was a nice place to be. I loved being here. I'd come in early. I'd always stay behind late."

*(female)*

"It was like a strong family, it was like a mould, so that's what made Everton Free School a positive experience really, and I knew from straight on... this is somewhere where I want to be for the long run... where I want to do my GCSEs and I want to get involved in... the community stuff and the coaching."

*(male)*

The sense of family also extended to engaging with the other EitC schemes. For one female school leaver, in particular, Breathing Space, 'is like a second home, because I've had stuff going on that I just don't know what to do and I've rang and they'd be like, 'come in, in the morning,' or like when I was struggling with college and friendships... I'll just go to them."

*Collective identity, in particular the notion of 'family', provided a strong theme for many students, to the point that they found it difficult to move on after completing their studies at the School.*

## The societal context for EFS students

As indicated in the above discussion, EFS provides an intervention into the lives of these young people, who may be lacking in family support and care, along with a number of other problems in their lives. This section looks at some of the broader context, which increases risk and vulnerability for EFS students. By providing the relational approach, an engaging curriculum with

opportunities, and a supportive 'family' basis, the potential to reduce the difficulties that the students face in their lives increases the possibilities for a transformative educational experience during their time at EFS. This section highlights chaotic home lives, drug use, gangs and violence, and poverty.

The Principal provided an overview, from his perspective, of the scale of challenges that the students face:

"Criminality is a big problem. Lots of our young people are mixed up with youth offending. We have lots of students who are knife carriers, some who are knife users. Mixed up in drugs... in gangs, we do have child sexual exploitation [and] child criminal exploitation, particularly along the county lines, which is quite a serious matter for our young people... they're vulnerable... therefore they are very susceptible to the allure of a gang... who become a surrogate family, and would feign that they care about that young person, while exploiting them for criminal enterprise."

Part of the sense of family within EFS appears to be an alternative form of belonging, which tries to encourage the young people away from gangs and associated problems. Home life can be problematic for many of these students, which requires the constant application of the relational approach, restorative justice, care and support, and family; as the Deputy Principal pointed out:

"They can just revert back to type a lot of the time, which is quite sad. So we sometimes see it from a Friday to a Monday. They'll leave on a Friday, having gone through a good week, and they'll have had some sort of chaotic weekend, whether it be chaos in the family or they're just leading their own chaotic lives... we sometimes say a mad Monday, but it's the after effects of the weekend. Now, we do see it in half term weeks and we do see it in the summer holidays [as well]... [but] how can you exclude the excluded?... sometimes, there might be an incident... they need to go home. Well, they might

not have a "home" to go to... We've got to keep bringing them in and working with them and working through this."

For one teacher, this requires a pragmatic approach to the issues that the students face: "I know that sometimes we are dealing with kids who are drug addicts, kids who have got major issues at home, kids who have got multiple issues outside with the police... we have to be realistic and say... this is what we can do." The danger of drug use, gangs, and associated criminality is underpinned by the often very deprived backgrounds of students. As the Principal put it:

"We have an attendance and outreach officer... who's an ex-Merseyside Policeman and we send him out to knock on doors... he says he's appalled by what he sees, it's Dickensian poverty the circumstances in which some of these young people live. So for them to get even into school quite often is an amazing feat in its own right... they live in tough environments."

Teachers referred to the daily circumstances of some students:

"Kids that have not eaten... we used to do washing for them... we used to have to take them to get clothes, so the deprivation, that was quite sad, the poverty within families."

"Not eating, not having people around them that are pushing them and not really caring."

"We've got a psychologist, who does work around behaviour management or anger management. Maybe [the student needs] a bus pass, a pair of shoes, or glasses... 'cause they don't have you'd call a recognisable family experience. It's very broken. Nobody will take you to the dentist, or the doctor, the opticians. So, from a wellbeing point of view, they're very disadvantaged."

The students interviewed for this research also reflected on the experiences that they

have had, and people around them have had. For example, one male student reflected on his shock at the death of a class-mate:

“He always used to help me, even when some of the lads were making fun of my English, he was like, ‘come on lads, stop it,’ but I think he was in with the wrong people. We lost him six, eight months after we left school... I was shocked because life can change so fast... he was really good at Maths, he was really good at English. So he had a future. Also maybe back home he didn’t have good examples.”

While most students were reluctant to go into the details of their own lives, some did express how these wider problems impact on their lives. A male school leaver explained:

“I didn’t use anything [in EFS], now, I use drugs, yeah... I’ve got some issues with that and I feel maybe a lot of the students do have issues with drugs... actually that’s something they should implement actually, some more drug work. I’m not saying schools can fix everything... a lot of it’s down to parents as well, and your environment. But if you do have a school there to inspire something else and make you believe you can do better for yourself, then that’s good.”

The above quotation suggests that the wider context of poverty and crime experienced by many EFS students, despite the intervention that EFS makes, can be pervasive in these young people’s lives. Drug-use during the school day is highlighted by staff in particular as a problem, and by some former students. A female school leaver spoke about the use of cannabis by some students: “I’ve never touched anything except for alcohol... but you’ll be outside and they’ll just be standing there, smoking weed and they’re like 16... dickheads! What are you doing? You’re in school!” A male former student said that he resisted the use of drugs: “There was people who did [drugs]... it only affects the people who do it... it was sorted out by the teachers.” A teacher reflected that the use of cannabis is a problem as, “It just drains them. It numbs the pain.” While another teacher stated that, “Parents [can be] abusing drugs, children

[can be] abusing drugs. Mainly the cannabis, I think, is what I’ve probably seen the most over the years here... these kids are embroiled in it, day to day... it’s definitely survival for some of them... a coping strategy.”

## Transformative experiences

While the wider problems faced by students, such as poverty, drug use, gangs and violence, and chaotic home lives provide a significant challenge, the School appears to take a pragmatic, interventionist approach. This evidences transformative potential.

*The social conditions and good practices in the School provide the context for the interlinked concepts of resilience, self-esteem, confidence, and empowerment, which together provide the chance for a better future for school leavers.*

However, there are limits to this because EFS is only an intervention for, at the most, two years of the young people’s lives.

The emphasis on building resilience is apparent from the beginning of the students’ lives at the school. As a teacher pointed out: “These kids don’t know how to be resilient with their emotions... but you don’t have to label yourself and be the person who makes bad choices all the time because that’s who you think you are... it’s okay to make mistakes... we do encourage a fresh start.” Building up the self-esteem and confidence of students is part of the strategy of increasing their resilience. While acknowledging that the students, “are not innocent,” a teacher reflects how self-esteem is important to these young people:

*“Caring about something... is making yourself vulnerable... they have so many defence mechanisms, armour, that they’ve had to put on to cope with all the difficult situations*

*they've been in... the labels that have been put on them... it shows them that it is okay to care... they don't think they're worth caring about, so building their self-esteem is massive."*

This is the challenge of the first few weeks of working with a new student:

"You could be with a child who you've seen who's shut off from the world and you can't get through to them. Within a couple of weeks, you can break down a few barriers and then you can see somebody maybe come out of their shell... that's been very rewarding, when you can see them making some form of progress."

*"It's unbelievable what some of them are worth and they just can't see."*

Most of the students interviewed in this research described how being at EFS had improved their confidence, and made them feel more responsible. Students stated that:

*"I had bad social anxiety. I didn't want to speak to any students. I had to have a teacher sat with me... so I knew I was safe. I'd have to walk out of the classroom sometimes, but then over my time here, I grew in confidence... it did help me grow a lot."*  
(female school leaver)

"What [EFS] did for me and my personality... it enabled me to become me. It really did allow me to look at myself and be like, 'Who am I? What do I like?' and discover interests."  
(male school leaver)

"I learned so much and gained so much responsibility. I became a more mature person. It opened my eyes to the world. How much can you learn? How much is there for you? How many people can help you out?"  
(female school leaver)

*"I'd been kicked out so I weren't a perfect child, but I grew up a lot when I started here. It made me grow up and realise you can't mess about no more... this school has made me."*  
(male school leaver)

"'Cause we didn't go mainstream [school] doesn't mean that that defines us... it doesn't need to stop you."  
(female school leaver)

Offering opportunities for diverse learning experiences and outside school activities based on giving the students a chance to develop skills and interests is a key part of the transformative experiences that have occurred. As one teacher pointed out:

"We value the practical skills, the apprenticeships and don't belittle it... Prince's Trust is a brilliant thing... it's outdoor activities, learning interpersonal skills and self-management, life skills and presentation skills... we will be directing [a particular student] to go down paths [such as] bike mechanics, gardening and stuff. He's really good at it and that's what his passion is... maybe there's a little flame that's nearly been blown out. Hopefully we've fanned that flame a bit."

Part of 'fanning the flame' is to get the students involved with activities, such as the Friday 'In the City' option, including going to museums, art galleries and so on, to see another side to Liverpool than the one they may normally experience, with the risk of violence and drug use present. A male school leaver spoke about a friend he knew at EFS:

*"He used to do drugs. He used to walk with knives and this year he applied to go to college to do electrical engineering... he was going on a bad pathway, but it changed so much his life."*

A female former student described her neighbour's experience:

"My next door neighbour's son moved here. He had loads of trouble with school in the past with bullying and stuff... he come here and he's a different person. He's so much happier... he's a lot more confident. He absolutely loves the school... he peddles to school now, where he wouldn't have used to do that. You can see it in himself."

A teacher described the change she had witnessed in one student:

"This kid, he was a nightmare for ages and then by the time he left here after two years, he was an amazing kid, he completely changed. There was a difference in him... [before] he was argumentative, wouldn't sit down, wouldn't listen, actively went out of his way to distract other people... it took a lot of time and a lot of patience. Now, you wouldn't think it was the same kid."

The Principal reflected:

"We've got another lad this year... he started working with the ground staff up at Goodison Park... they were blown away by him, part of it is the grounds, working on the pitch, but there's all the Everton properties, so he'd be outside here picking up litter... his mates would see him and say, 'You're doing community service,' and he was saying, 'I might get a job out of this,' so he had a maturity, and was able to detach himself and recognise that he was moving on. I think the others then saw that as well."

Some students reflected personally on just how much their lives had been turned around while attending EFS, as one male school leaver described:

"It was a negative spiral and it was something that I didn't want to be involved in, in the long run really, 'cause that could have eventually led on to drug dealing and stuff like that and lads that have grew up doing, like the petty anti-social behaviour stuff, they do drug dealing, they're involved with Police, they're in big cases now, so it's

mad really, how in a short space of time, things have changed."

Another male school leaver reflected on his experience:

"I developed so much skills, I became a better person... you can do the small things that makes such an impact on someone's life. They gave us so much opportunities, and still now. A few minutes ago, a member of the staff of the Free School just said, 'Oh are you looking for a part time job?'... opportunities come so much from Everton in the Community... they are such a big family which is always looking to help you out."

For a female former student, her transformative experience was traced to the effort that the EFS staff put into understanding her learning disabilities: "When I found out that I'm not thick... the day that I found out [about my dyslexia and dyscalculas]... it changed me, as well as it changed my family life, 'cause I was coming home miserable but... I was willing to do my homework." Another female school lever reflected:

*"I felt like I was appreciated more and like, respected more... it was a godsend that I was kicked out of mainstream to come here because honestly, I wouldn't be where I am now."*

Some of the students interviewed recognised that along with the opportunities and resources that EFS draws on to support and encourage them, individual students also need to use their agency to be empowered by these conditions. As one female school leaver pointed out: "You need to help yourself before you're expecting help from anyone else. You need to take the advice and take the help... you need to want it." Similarly, for a male school leaver: "If you show you're interested in school, then they'll help you in every way that they can." For this student, it involved taking part in sixth form trips and coaching outside of classes. Another female school leaver:



*"A few kids that I was at school with didn't want it, but I reckon if you want it and you do want to change your life a bit, this is the perfect place, if you want to do it."*

## Leaving EFS

While the evidence above suggests that EFS has made a huge difference to some of our interviewees' lives, it is necessary to acknowledge the challenging context in which the school operates. Teachers reflected on the difficult transitions that students can face during the summer break, or at Christmas or Easter holidays, as the Principal discussed:

"As we come towards the end of the year, there's almost a bit of grieving, in that they're not going to be with us for six weeks... a lot of them find it very difficult. They come from very impoverished backgrounds, family circumstances, dysfunctional families. There's a lot of neglect, possibly abuse in some cases, and they're going to be cut loose for six weeks."

For some students this transition is immediate, and very successful. A female school leaver described her experience:

"Since I left school, the next day I was in the gym... I got an apprenticeship with Derry doing boxing, done my coaching courses, my boxing level one, my personal training... I work there Monday to Saturday... I work in the Hub next door as well, Tuesday and Thursday nights, on Youth Zone, like a youth club. We do football, arts and crafts, anything really, cooking, trips out."

The School Principal reflected on another successful transition:

"We had a young man... his behaviour was erratic [he found it difficult to be in a classroom]... he took up the Prince's Trust, really enjoyed it... building planters, bird boxes, benches... we recognised that he had a really in-depth knowledge of

planting... he had a genuine enthusiasm... We sent him up to Finch Farm. He worked with ground staff there and just blossomed. He had incredible respect for the guys who worked there, for their knowledge... he started an apprenticeship with them. So, he found his element."

For some former students, such as those described above, there is a strong sense of direction and purpose, while the opportunity to remain involved with EitC activities is there. However, not all students experienced such a relatively seamless transition. For example, "It was a huge jump to then go and do college... so I ended up leaving, and then I done a traineeship [at Everton Football Club]... then I went to Liverpool Community College and I found that I preferred that college a lot more." In some cases, EFS broadened horizons, as one female student who went to college stated: "I didn't think I'd go to college or nothing. I thought I'd just go and get a job straight away." While another student added that, "I did walk out of here with no qualifications, but that's on my behalf... [the teachers] tried their hardest to help me... [but] I've got my level two Beauty... I'm a hairdresser now."

A female former student said:

"I had a breakdown when I first went to college... I could not find my classes... then one day I seen a girl that used to go [to EFS]... she was in my year, doing Hair and Beauty in Duke Street. So because I'd seen a familiar face from this school, I was alright... it was comforting. Seeing that she'd come from the same background as me."

This suggests that the resilience built up in this school leaver was, to some extent, limited in the sense that she still needed to see an EFS link in order to cope with the early part of her transition to college life. A male school leaver similarly emphasised the need for, "Aftercare... the free school babied us, which can sometimes be good and sometimes be very bad; to feel like that and then to just be gone, you're done now, you've done your test."

A teacher reflected on this aspect:

“When they do leave, some of them do flounder... [EitC] could put a safety net programme in place for some of our students, just to get them through ‘till September, because I think we put so much into our students and then it stops... that routine, the structure, the care... all the hard work could be undone... we’ve given the kids good times and good memories of school, whatever happened prior to that... equally, on the other hand, the harsh realities of going into a college say, with another thousand learners, you’re just a face in the crowd.”

Another female school leaver struggled with leaving EFS:

“They mollycoddled me into this close-knit family, and then going into the big wide world again... I think Everton Free School should prepare kids that everywhere’s not like Everton. You don’t get your breakfast, and there’s not a one-to-one person sitting there, you’ve got to find your own way.”

This quotation reflects a sense of struggle with adapting to life after EFS, despite the care and support that was provided during the student’s time there. It could be argued that this is a part of growing up. However, given the challenging life experiences that many EFS students face and their specific needs, some forms of support for school leavers may help to build on the excellent work that the school does in providing an intervention that offers opportunities, personalised learning and encouragement. All of which are based on the social conditions of relationality, restorative justice, the sense of collective identity, care and support. In a challenging context this goes some way to providing a basis for resilience, through self-esteem, confidence, and feeling empowered, which creates possibilities for post-school transitions which can change these young people’s lives.

## 7. CONCLUSION: REFLECTIONS ON GOOD PRACTICE

This report has examined the work that EFS does, through the accounts provided by former students and current teaching staff. The research involved using student data collected by EFS, a survey, non-participant observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to elaborate a discussion around the students' experiences prior to coming to EFS, while a student there, and since leaving.

EFS can be described as a school that is also a social intervention into the young peoples' lives which provides, for up to two years, a potentially transformative experience at an important stage in the life of students who have been excluded from mainstream schools. It provides education, but also serves a crucial function as a broadly defined social work intervention and provides a sense of collective identity with a 'family' and wider community for the students. The findings have described the social conditions of the school: collective identity, a relational approach, a structured and supportive learning environment, and restorative justice. These principles in practice provide a secure foundation for the good practice that occurs in the day to day running of the school; higher levels of attendance than previously, personalised learning and opportunities to develop interests, small class sizes, and care and attention to learning difficulties, social problems, and mental health problems. This suggests the presence of social quality at EFS. There is a focus on how the social conditions within the School provide a grounding for opportunities for social empowerment. This is always in relation to the wider societal conditions that prevail, however, which also shape, enable, and constrain the lives, actions, and potential of the students. This report argues that EFS provides a significant social intervention, in the context of very challenging lives for these young people.

This sense of collective identity, expressed through a feeling of belonging, the concept of 'family' and being part of a wider community is a central strength to the work that EFS does and is integral to the social conditions for the success of the organisation in its aims. The research findings suggest that the notion of collective identity within the school extends beyond fan identification with EFC as a football club, or a brand. There is a deeper connection between the teachers and students at the school for our interviewees. While the uniform and power of the badge provides an obvious identification, and some students described their pride at wearing the tracksuit, this did confer a sense that they were valued by others for being a part of Everton, and may contribute to improved self-esteem. But, in the day-to-day life of being a student at EFS, the sense of belonging to this school is important for students that have been excluded and marginalised in their other experiences of education. Key to this belonging, in relation to both school and home life, is the concept of 'family'. This can help to provide an alternative source of belonging to the temptation of gangs. The school recognises however, that the time that students spend away from EFS increases the risk that they may become involved with dangerous elements. In addition, on leaving the school, there is a sense of loss for some of the students interviewed.

The relational approach to life at the school builds on this sense of collective identity. This emphasizes dialogue over discipline or control. Being able to relate to the teachers is cited by many interviewees as a significant difference between EFS and their experiences of education elsewhere. This facilitates talk, respect and the recognition of problems that the young people might be facing on a one-to-one basis, so that teachers have the best chance to provide support for the students. This in turn allows the structured and

supportive learning environment to function, with the acknowledgement and understanding of individual problems and preferences of the students. Students interviewed appeared to recognise that they are allowed more freedoms, such as going out at lunch or taking a short break from classes, with the proviso that they make an effort to participate in their education. This is a balancing act, and while our sample were very enthusiastic about relating to the School staff, we were unable to speak to young people for whom EFS had been more difficult. Related to the supportive environment, restorative justice and de-escalation are cited as approaches that treat the students with respect and help them to learn about the problems that they face. That said, these social conditions require a great deal of emotional labour on the behalf of the staff, and require highly developed interpersonal skills and an ability to deal with very complex and potentially distressing situations.

Given the social conditions described above a number of good practices are evidenced. Taken together, the social conditions and good practices appear to inculcate in the students some of the qualities necessary for them to have a better chance of a decent life after leaving EFS, in particular; some resilience, self-esteem, confidence and feelings of empowerment. Increased level of attendance is seen as a basic requirement for EFS to begin working with the students. The accounts provided by most interviewees suggest that the social conditions make EFS a desirable place to be. In addition, being able to personalise their learning and being encouraged to 'find their element' are factors in encouraging greater levels of attendance, including the use of small class sizes with a teacher and teaching assistant. EFS now works with local universities and offers student placements to trainee teachers to give them experience of alternative provision.

Personalisation and developing interests help to facilitate meaning in the lives of the students, to give them a sense of purpose, to feel valued and to value their education, and to recognise that a life other than the one they may have had is possible. While

the flexibility of the curriculum (for example, adding art classes, or Spanish language classes) is a strength derived from the Free School status, wider opportunities are shaped through EFS's connections to EitC and EFC. Wherever these connections can be deepened or expanded, are likely to increase the 'offer' that EFS can make to the students in terms of enhancing their learning and personal development at the School. In addition, large class sizes in mainstream schools were cited by almost all interviewees as a problem for them, whether due to learning difficulties, mental health problems, or a breakdown in relationships with teachers and other students. Clearly, the small classes are highly valued by the interviewees and should remain a core part of EFS's approach to teaching. Given the relational approach, in smaller classes it becomes possible for teachers to identify learning difficulties and mental health problems, and to be reflexive and to connect daily interactions to wider social problems that the students face. Again, this serves to enhance the approach to education that the School takes, and offer greater opportunities for students to have a transformative education.

That said, there are challenges for EFS, given that its role extends to two years at the most for these young people, in an intensive and deeply relational way for staff and students. Some staff described burnout, and the difficulties of dealing with very troubling young lives, and some students felt that it was difficult to transition to life after EFS, such was the prominent role that the School had played in their lives. With recognition of the work evidenced above that is already being done at the School, the report concludes with four key recommendations that aim to support and enhance the School's work, with a recognition of the broader societal context. In a city that has suffered under austerity cuts and generally higher levels of relative deprivations, EFS can only be seen as an intervention in a very challenging context. While it may increase the life chances of the young people who attend the school, wider societal changes are also needed to address poverty, crime and violence among young people in Merseyside.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Social work training for staff or employing trained social workers among the team**

This may help to support staff and students in relation to some of the more challenging problems that students face. Given the complex challenges faced daily by teaching staff and having access to Everton Football Clubs health and wellbeing support team, opportunities for training in social work skills might help to avoid burnout and offer additional sources of resilience for teaching staff. Similarly, employment of a social worker or social workers, who are able to adopt the relational approach that EFS has developed may form an additional source of support for both staff and students.

### **Alumni links**

The School has applied for AP innovation funds to offer some follow-on care, for the period between leaving school and starting a job, training or college. This is likely to be a good source of support, for example, the case of the student who felt lost attending college until seeing someone else with an EFS link. In addition, it could be possible to integrate the EFS academic calendar with activities and support that EitC offers to young people, especially during the weekends and Christmas and Easter breaks, and 'alumni'-style links could be developed with school leavers. This may help them with the transition from being an EFS student to adulthood.

The challenge is to balance follow-on care with allowing the students to make the transition to work or further study for themselves. EFS is a unique institution, which has had a significant impact on the lives of the young people interviewed for this project, but at some point the students require the resilience to be able to leave the EFS family. An alumni-type organisation or EFS club, could provide a clear way for all students to keep in touch with the School,

and the wider EitC schemes, and with other former students, after they leave the 'family'. Interviewees talked about other students and what they went on to do in their lives. This suggests that they are interested in the lives of their former classmates and this type of endeavour could allow them to maintain some of these links more. Overall, at the risk of their transition to work or further study undoing the work done at EFS, the purpose of such a venture could be to provide a looser form of connection that is there when former students need it.

### **Further integration into EitC activities and EFC events**

Related to the previous point greater access to other EitC schemes for students and former students (including during summer and holidays) could enhance the sense of collective identity that the students are able to develop. This could require asking the students how they would like to participate in other EitC schemes and what new ones could be developed. More involvement of EFC players in daily activities and opportunities for work experience within EitC are likely to be useful. In addition, social activities and getting the students involved with EFC, especially when the move to the new stadium is complete could also be useful. This relates also to the positive aspects of wrap around care where students have very difficult home lives and providing alternative sources of family and community.

### **Further research**

This research is limited in terms of what it can say about the broader population of EFS school leavers, due to the difficulty of contacting students who may not have had a good time at EFS, for any number of reasons. Further, the survey was unable to capture enough responses in order to derive any meaningful data. So ways of tracking the destinations and keeping in touch with former



students would provide EFS with a clearer picture of where students end up, and allow for reflection on approaches to all students at the School.

Further research into the career destinations of school leavers could help EFS to gain more understanding of its social impact. The survey

instrument designed for this research project could form part of future research, if a way to keep in touch with successive cohorts of school leavers is developed.

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# APPENDIX



## Everton Free School Leavers Survey

**About this survey:** Everton Free School are working with researchers, Steve Corbett and Dave Neary, from Liverpool Hope University to explore the impact that attending the school has had on the lives of former pupils. We would be very grateful if you would take the time to complete this questionnaire as fully as you can – it should only take about 10-15minutes – and return it in the envelope provided to the researchers at Liverpool Hope University. If you would prefer to complete the questionnaire then an online version can be completed here [www.surveymonkey.com/evertonfreeschoolliverpoolhopeuniversity](http://www.surveymonkey.com/evertonfreeschoolliverpoolhopeuniversity) If you have any questions about the research then please contact Steve Corbett at [corbets@hope.ac.uk](mailto:corbets@hope.ac.uk) or Dave Neary at [nearyd@hope.ac.uk](mailto:nearyd@hope.ac.uk)

All of your answers will be confidential and all respondents will be entered into a **prize draw for £100 of shopping vouchers.**

Please write your postcode here (this is for inclusion in the prize draw): .....

### ABOUT YOU

What is your gender? (please tick): Male ☐ Female ☐ Other ☐

Please tick your age: 16 ☐ 17 ☐ 18 ☐ 19 ☐ 20 ☐ 21 ☐ 22 ☐ 23 ☐

Please tick which category best describes your ethnic background?

White ☐ Asian ☐ Black ☐ Chinese ☐ Mixed ☐ Other ☐

Which of the following have you achieved so far (tick all that apply):

University educated ☐ A level, BTEC or equivalent ☐

GCSEs or equivalent ☐ Apprenticeship ☐

Other qualifications (Please state) ☐ ..... No qualifications ☐

### ABOUT YOUR POST-SCHOOL LIFE

What are you doing now? (tick all that apply):

Employed ☐ In education ☐ In training ☐

Caring responsibilities ☐ Unemployed ☐ Other ☐

Please tell us a bit more about this:

What type of work have you done since leaving school? (please describe):

What type of employment contracts have you had? (please tick all that apply):

Permanent ☐ Part-time ☐ Temporary ☐ Zero hours ☐ Cash in hand ☐

Other (please indicate) ☐ .....

## ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

How would you describe your general health?

Very good ☐ Good ☐ Moderate ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐

How would you describe your physical health?

Very good ☐ Good ☐ Moderate ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐

How would you describe your mental health?

Very good ☐ Good ☐ Moderate ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor ☐

Please tell us in a few sentences the reasons for your answers above:



## YOUR EXPERIENCE OF EVERTON FREE SCHOOL

How would you describe your experience of Everton Free School?

Positive ☐ Negative ☐ Neither ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

To what extent has your experience of Everton Free School helped you in later life?

To a great extent ☐ To some extent ☐ Not at all ☐ Don't know ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

To what extent did you feel a part of the community at Everton Free School?

To a great extent ☐ To some extent ☐ Not at all ☐ Don't know ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

**Do you still feel a part of the Everton Free School community?**

To a great extent ☐ To some extent ☐ Not at all ☐ Don't know ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

**Do you feel connected to the local community where you live?**

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

**Do you volunteer in your local community?**

Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know ☐

Please tell us the reasons for your answer above:

Please tell us anything important about your experience of Everton Free School that has not been covered in the questionnaire:

Please tell us anything that you think is important about your experience of life since leaving Everton Free School that has not been covered in the questionnaire:

Thank you for the time you have taken to complete this questionnaire.





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