

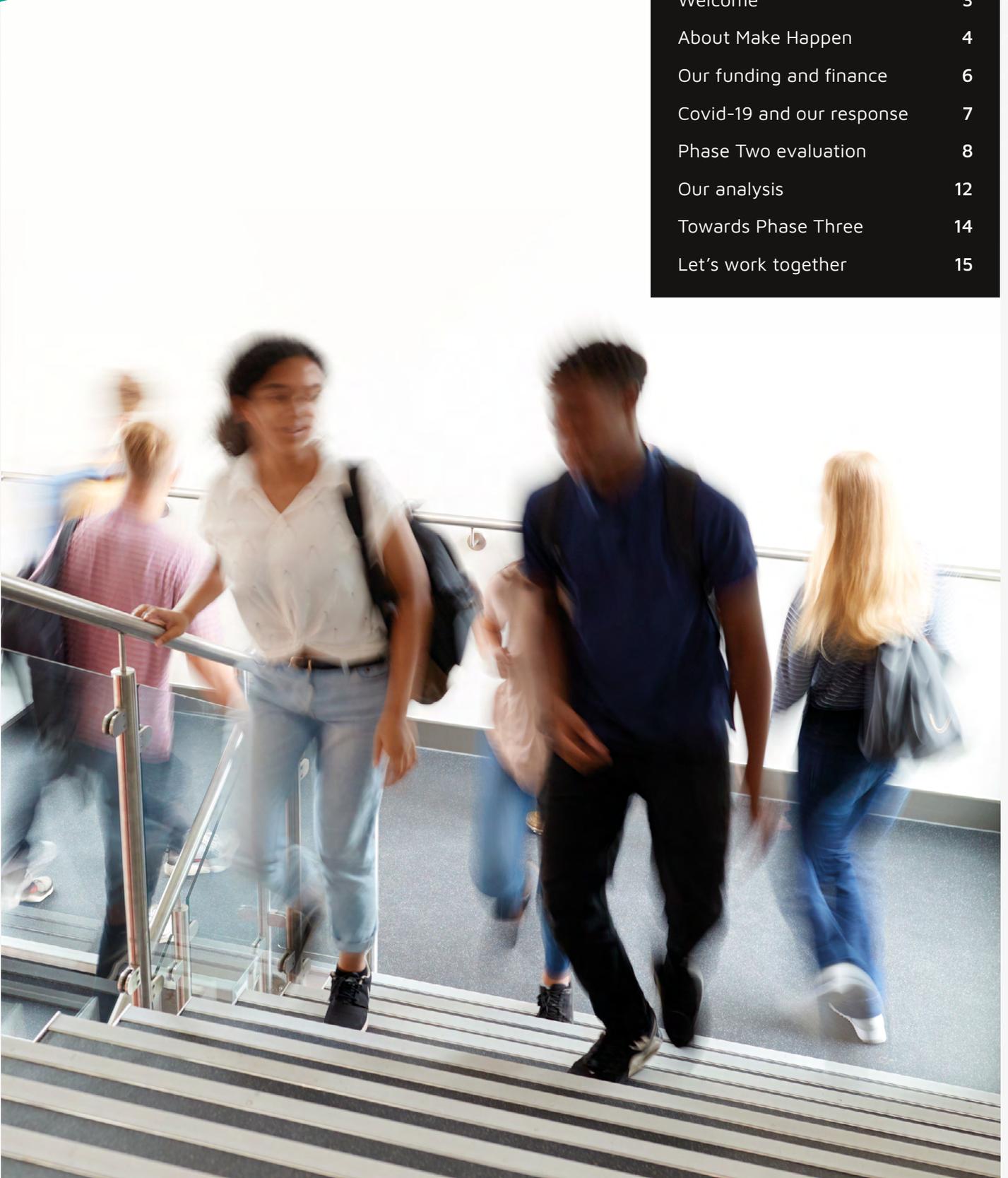
**MAKE**  
—  
**HAPPEN**

**UNI CONNECT:  
MAKE HAPPEN  
PHASE TWO REPORT**



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# WELCOME

**Make Happen, part of the Uni Connect programme and funded by the Office for Students, has enabled thousands of students across Essex to consider their futures and raise their aspirations. It has also helped to ensure that students from underrepresented groups have equal access to higher education (HE).**

As Head of the programme, I am delighted to introduce our Phase Two report. Uni Connect, formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Project (NCOP), started in January 2017, with the collective aim to:

1. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
2. Equip young people and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.
3. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for under-represented groups.
4. Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach, and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

Whilst the aims of the overall Uni Connect programme have evolved over the past four years, the core ethos has remained the same. The Make Happen team, remain committed to supporting young people from Essex. I am very fortunate to lead a team of 20 staff with a passion for supporting young people to make impartial and informed decisions about their future.

I took over this role in March 2020, a month that will be taught in history lessons for decades to come. Make Happen worked tirelessly to convert the programme into a virtual offering for young people to ensure they were supported during the unprecedented times caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Whilst there were inevitably challenges, I am incredibly proud of the team's achievements since March 2020. We delivered more than 1,000 separate outreach activities over two years, and supported more than 20,000 students in 2020-21 alone.

As we slowly begin to return to deliver normal, face-to-face sessions in schools and colleges, we look forward to the new phase of the Uni Connect programme. We will be learning from the past 18 months, combining our new virtual activity with our previous in-person offering to allow an even greater range of stakeholders to benefit from our programme of activity.

Not only will we be supporting young people in Years 9 to 13, but we will also be offering some opportunities to students in Years 7 and 8, as well as introducing an offer for adult learners.

This is an exciting time for Make Happen and the Uni Connect programme, and we are lucky to be supported by a dedicated group of partners and stakeholders. Our work would not be possible without the strong partnerships we have with schools and colleges, local authorities, higher education partners and a wide range of other stakeholders. Thank you for helping us inspire the young people of Essex.

As we move into Phase Three of the programme, this report reflects on the past two years, as well as looking ahead towards the future of Make Happen.



**Stephen Pomfret**

Head of Make Happen

Office for Students

Uni Connect Programme



## ABOUT MAKE HAPPEN

Part of the Uni Connect programme, Make Happen operates as a partnership of institutions working together to support students from areas of low progression to gain access to information about higher education.

Make Happen has been operating with a central team, and a school and college-led model, since the inception of the programme in 2017. As the programme has developed, the team has increased in size to around 20. Our team consists of support staff working on finance and evaluation, alongside outreach officers and assistants who work with schools and colleges to plan and deliver outreach sessions. Throughout Phase Two, our officers and assistants have been located across the county of Essex, in a range of educational institutions.

Central to the Make Happen programme is an understanding of what individual schools need to enable their students to get the most out of engaging with us. All schools that worked with us were linked with one of our outreach officers, enabling them to

form constructive working relationships and to gain a good understanding of the cohort. This enabled the delivery of a bespoke and effective model of activity.

Each of our outreach officers is a point of contact for six to ten schools within a geographic area of Essex, and each school identifies an internal Make Happen co-ordinator to work with them. Together they identify gaps in current provision and put in place activity which meets the aims and objectives of the Uni Connect programme, but that also supports the school's objectives. We have continuously supported more than 70 schools in Essex via a designated outreach officer since 2017.

Throughout Phase Two, our team has also worked to support further education (FE) colleges across Essex. Our FE team work closely with a number of colleges to identify the areas of support for students within their institution. Working with FE colleges presents different challenges to schools and colleges, and therefore we have dedicated resource to ensure activity is tailored appropriately.

## CASE STUDY ENGAGING PARENTS AND CARERS DURING COVID-19

Parents and carers are key influencers when students are facing decisions about the next steps in their career or education. To help inform and inspire this important group, we organised and facilitated two parent and carer webinars. To plan these sessions, we asked parents and carers to complete a survey to let us know what content they'd prefer to know more about, and at what time the webinar would best suit them. For the first half of each webinar, our outreach officers provided information, advice and guidance to the parents and carers who attended, which covered options for students, the Key Stage 4 to 5 transition for Year 11 students and decisions after Key Stage 5. In the second half of each webinar, third-party providers discussed how parents and carers could help their children or teenagers more with their studies and motivation.

Both events achieved very good engagement, with 61 parents and carers attending the first session in December 2020, and 104 attending the second event in February 2021. Survey responses following the event were very positive, with 100% and 86% of the respondents respectively saying they 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that the webinar they attended was helpful. A majority of respondents also indicated that they felt more confident in supporting their young person afterwards.

Phase Two of the Uni Connect programme introduced a new concept; the Outreach Hub. This provides a smaller, additional element for schools and colleges, with a slightly different focus. Whilst the targeted element of the programme focuses on students from Uni Connect 'target' wards, and the schools located within those wards, the Outreach Hub works with all publicly funded schools and colleges across Essex. The Outreach Hub has enabled us to deliver programmes targeted at further under-represented groups, for example, care-experienced young people, and young people from military families.

As part of the Outreach Hub we also developed a website which would act as a reliable source of information for parents and carers, students, and teachers, across the region. Throughout Phase Two we invested heavily in developing our website to provide useful resources and to share information, advice and guidance. As well as sharing Make Happen events and resources, the website is used to showcase other reliable sources of information including our partner institutions.

A partnership with Uni Taster Day, an organisation that promotes different events at local universities online, to allow all partner institutions to showcase their events via our website. Make Happen have also worked with an organisation called UniBuddy, which provides a platform for young people across the region to talk to current students at our HE partners, using their online chat function.

As a partnership of institutions, Make Happen is governed by a structure consisting of two committees. The first of these, which is ultimately accountable for the project, is the Executive Group. This group is chaired by a senior member of staff from the University of Essex, as the lead institution for the partnership, and consists of senior staff from higher education institutions across the region. Alongside this executive group there is also a steering group of senior outreach or educational practitioners from across the region, which includes representation from local authorities and other key stakeholders, such as FE colleges and the Essex Provider Network.

**“ It has encouraged me to make time for things that are important and to have a time to also have fun, to a find a balance between work and play. ”**



# OUR FUNDING AND FINANCE

## How financing works

Each school and college within the programme was allocated a budget based on the number of Uni Connect students at their institution. This budget was then available for activity identified by the school or college to help support their students to make informed choices about their future. Alongside the school and college-led model, we also have a dedicated projects team, who identify a range of activities that could be beneficial to our target learners, and then promote them directly to students or teachers within schools and colleges across the region.

“ *These sessions have enlightened me about higher education and about my future and also these sessions have helped me be able to mentor myself as well as others.* ”



# COVID-19 AND OUR RESPONSE

Like most of the country, we too had to quickly adapt to the challenges of Covid-19. For us, this happened seven months into Phase Two of the Uni Connect programme. Despite schools and colleges closing, and members of staff working from home, the project has continued to operate throughout the pandemic by pivoting our approach to embrace online outreach delivery.

Online delivery of our activities has had its challenges and successes, and we have trialled a number of different approaches to delivering outreach sessions online. We saw various peaks of engagement throughout the earlier pandemic period, with lockdowns leading to substantial fluctuation. Previously, most engagement had been led by schools and colleges with little direct contact with students. Throughout the early stages of the pandemic many schools and colleges struggled to engage due to the substantial difficulties they were facing at the time, such as, staff shortages and the constantly changing environment. Due to this, and the obvious disruption of lockdown, schools and colleges were not consistently able to act as our primary means of

communicating with students, something on which we had previously relied on.

We developed new approaches to promoting our activities to students directly, including an increased use of social media channels and a sharper focus on increasing subscriptions to our three audience-specific newsletters. These approaches, in addition to the development of our website, have strengthened our reach across the county and this work has put in place excellent foundations for our Outreach Hub to keep developing throughout Phase Three.

During 2020, we produced and promoted, via schools and colleges, a good range of pre-recorded sessions and webinars on key topics for students. These were also promoted via social media. Many of these topics, such as study skills, proved to be very popular and we saw a considerable increase in our engagement with parents and carers. The flexible nature of home-working, combined with the ease of accessing online talks, meant that parent and carer facing webinars often had more than 100 people signing up, whereas prior to the pandemic, this level of engagement would have been very difficult to achieve.

## CASE STUDY

## PROVIDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE WORLD OF WORK

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to have professional contacts within their family, or social groups. They may have never had the opportunity to engage directly with people who work in these sectors.

Last year, we filmed interviews with professionals in a range of industries and careers, focusing on the day-to-day life of people in these industries and finding out about their personal journeys to get there. These were broadcast on Wednesdays, with the videos being known as Workplace Wednesday. Although there are talks from familiar professions such as doctors, lawyers, journalists and teachers, lesser known careers are also included, such as planning communications and scientific publishing. There are currently a total of 19 videos available with another eight launching soon.

Workplace Wednesday allows students to hear about the realities of the job, in an informal setting where they feel comfortable asking questions. The events also present authentic stories about how

people get to where they are now, acknowledging that often the route to a great job is not necessarily straightforward or predictable. They emphasise the importance of resilience and creativity as young people consider their futures.

During the pandemic these sessions were some of the most popular within Make Happen's online material with more than 1,300 views. They are pre-recorded and available on demand, with the option of either being viewed by individuals or as a class. In an evaluation carried out, 90% of students responded that they found the activity helpful and 100% learned something new.

This year, we are making the videos available on demand via our website and they will be known as Workplace Insights. Schools, colleges and individuals are able to watch the interviews to find out more about a broad range of careers, from graphic design to architecture, and computer programming to starting your own business.

# PHASE TWO EVALUATION

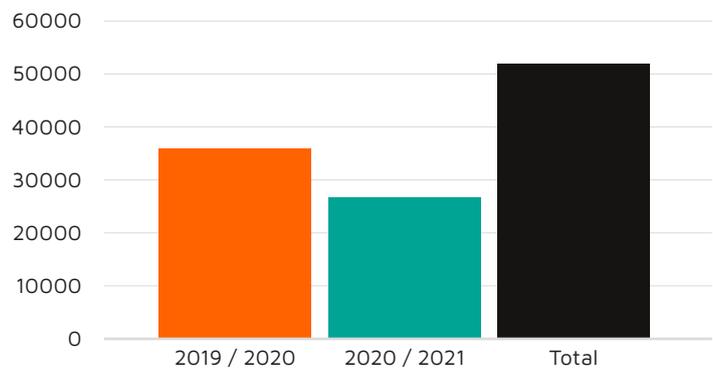
Evaluation is one of the core aims and objectives of the overall Uni Connect programme, with many Uni Connect partnerships investing heavily in evaluation support and research, including Make Happen. Our team has a dedicated evaluation team where evaluation is embedded into all aspects of our delivery.

Evaluation is part of the culture of the Make Happen team. As a collaborative project, the Make Happen evaluation team regularly supports partner institutions to develop their evaluation practices.

Across Phase Two of the Uni Connect programme, we have engaged with a total of 51,754 students. Some 26,703 students engaged in activity during 2020-2021, and 35,884 engaged with us during the 2019-20 academic year.

The Office for Students expects partnerships to engage with 20% of Uni Connect learners in any given year. Across Phase Two, 16,368 of learners were from a Uni Connect target ward, meaning that we engaged with 65% of Uni Connect learners in our own region, far exceeding the expectations of the Office for Students. In the 2020-21 academic year, we engaged with 37% of Uni Connect learners.

## NUMBER OF LEARNERS ENGAGED



## CASE STUDY

## 'YOUR LIFE, YOUR FUTURE' RANDOMISED CONTROL TRIAL

As part of our commitment to research, the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) was commissioned to run a randomised control trial. The trial was delivered in 16 schools across Essex to students in Year 10. Individual form groups were identified as control groups and others as treatment. Students in the treatment group received three outreach activities including a campus visit. Those in the control group did not receive any additional support from Make Happen during the period of the trial. All students took part in a pre-activity survey and a post-activity survey, so the treatment and control groups could be compared.

More than 2,000 students completed the pre-activity survey, and more than 600 students completed the post-activity survey. The surveys

highlighted a lack of understanding in many aspects of higher education (HE), especially in student finance. Just over 50% of students understood how to finance a course, and when asked how much tuition fees were there was a huge range of different responses. The students who attended activities showed a number of positive impacts in the post survey compared to those who did not, including:

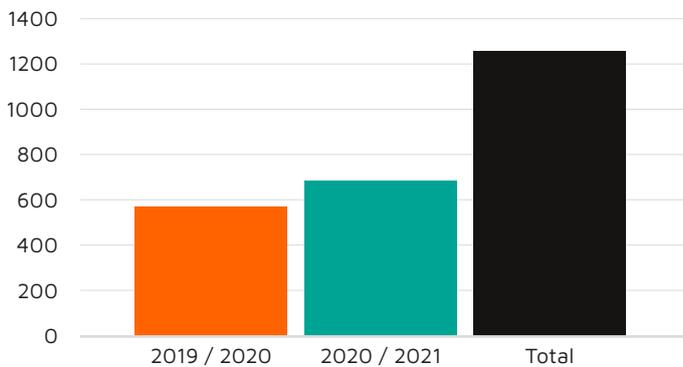
- A better understanding of HE finance
- More likely to apply to HE
- Increased expectations of obtaining A-levels

Following the conclusion of the trial we were able to suggest a range of outreach activities for the participating schools. These activities were specific to them, and designed to support their students based on what needs were identified as part of the trial.

“ The motivational speaker was really helpful, and hearing about the two current uni students’ experiences and their advice was fantastic. ”



### NUMBER OF ACTIVITIES DELIVERED



Despite a fall in the number of students engaging in activity in 2020-21 we increased the number of activities we delivered. Some 707 activities were delivered in 2020-21, compared with a smaller number of 589 in 2019-20.

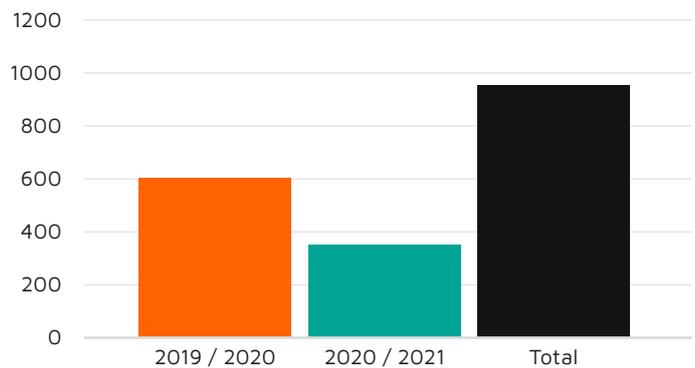
This reflects the concerted effort within the team to focus on smaller-scale, multi-activity programmes, often called progressive projects, as opposed to larger-scale, but lower-impact activities. During Phase Two we have increased our work with parents and carers. In 2019-20 and 2020-21 we have delivered around 35 activities to support almost 1,000 parents and carers, including sessions on helping your child to revise and how to help motivate them.

Engagement with parents and carers dropped slightly in 2020-21 compared with 2019-20, and we believe this is largely due to the success of our parent and carer working group in engaging parents during the first lockdown from March 2020.

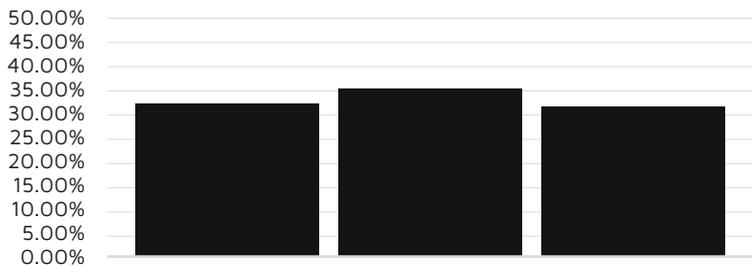
Given the team’s focus on progressive projects and more intensive activity, we saw an increase in the proportion of students from Uni Connect wards engaging in activity during 2020-21.

Throughout the pandemic we have had to adapt to new working practices and opened up many of our online activity to a wider group of students. It is very positive that we have still managed to engage over 15,000 young people from those areas with the lowest progression in the region. With over 30% of our engagements coming from these areas.

### PARENTS/CARERS ENGAGED PER YEAR



## % UNI CONNECT LEARNERS



	2019 / 2020	2020 / 2021	Total
■ % MH	32.14%	35.30%	31.63%
Number Uni Connect learners	11507	8139	15601
Total number of learners	335806	23059	49328

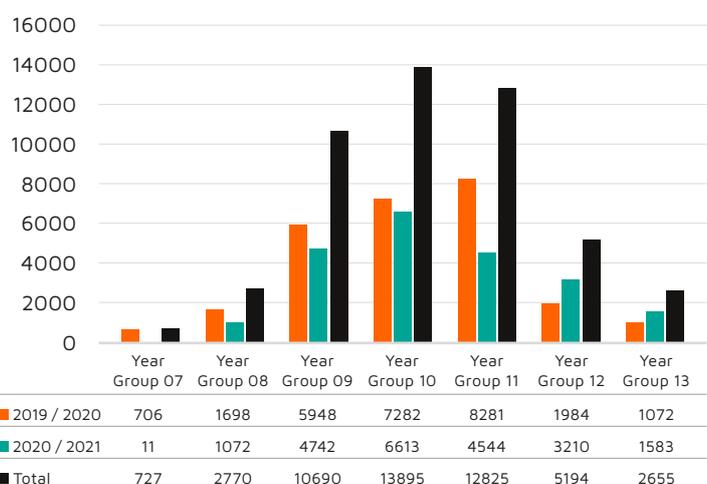
Throughout 2020-21 more than 35% of the students who engaged with our sessions were from Uni Connect target wards, signifying a very promising increase of 3% compared with the previous academic year.

Across the whole of Phase Two, we have worked with every student year group from Year 7 onwards, thanks to activity delivered through the Outreach Hub.

Year 10 was the year group we worked with most, with almost 14,000 students being supported during this phase. Years 9 to 11 saw substantially more engagement than the other year groups, and while Years 7 and 8 could only engage with us via the Outreach Hub, more than 3,000 students across Essex within these year groups benefitted from our sessions over this period. Given the increased focus on FE as we enter Phase Three, we expect to see an increase in the engagement of students in post-16 education.

As part of the data collection requirements of the Uni Connect programme, Make Happen is required to collect data on all of our activities, broken down into different types of activity.

## NUMBER OF STUDENTS BY YEAR GROUP



There are a number of different categories, as described here:

- **Campus visit** – a standard, one-day campus visit with a range of information sessions.
- **Information, advice and guidance (IAG)** – group sessions covering standard topics related to higher education such as student finance or careers interviews, delivered by a trained professional.

- **Masterclass** – this category covers a range of topics including study skills, motivational speakers, and subject-specific content.
- **Mentoring** – these are sustained interactions on a small group or one-to-one basis, designed to support students in a tailored way.

- **Residentials** – either university-based, or activity-based residential sessions, where students stay in a location for a sustained period of time.
- **Parents** – any activity supporting parents and carers.
- **Teacher CPD** – any activity supporting teachers' continuing professional development.

# CASE STUDY

## U CAN UCAS!

'U can UCAS' was a small-scale, five-week programme run in November 2020, which offered personalised support to a cohort of students age 16-plus with their UCAS applications.

Students were required to complete an application to join the programme, including a reason as to why they would be a good candidate. This was to ensure we had buy-in from the students from the outset to commit to the entire programme. Eight students were accepted onto the programme, coming from four different sixth forms or colleges.

Working in groups of four, the programme was delivered over Zoom by our team, alongside Causeway Education and student ambassadors, in five hour-long evening sessions. The content was developed using the NERUPI Framework objectives and covered the following topics:

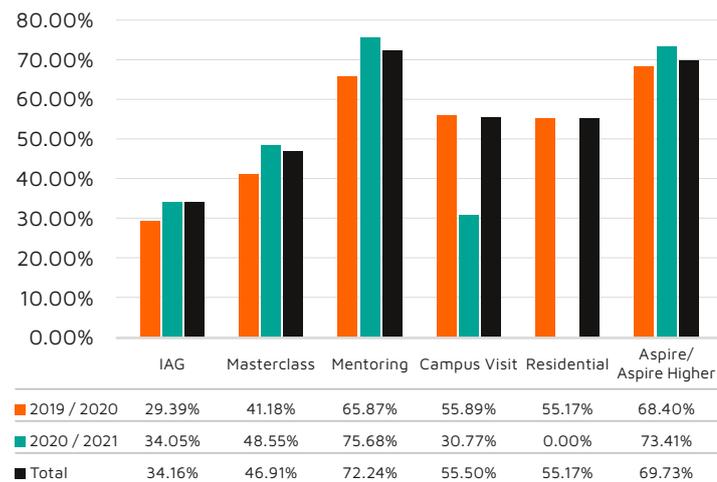
- 1: UCAS during Covid-19
- 2: Navigating UCAS and searching for courses
- 3: The art of crafting a personal statement: workshop delivered by Causeway Education
- 4: How to find bursaries and scholarships
- 5: Discuss university life with University Student Ambassadors

Students completed a survey at the beginning and at the end of the programme so we were able to evidence some really positive evaluation data. Of the students who completed both evaluations, all of them 'strongly agreed' that they now understood the UCAS process and that their knowledge of all aspects of HE had increased, which aligned fully with the aims of the programme. The data also showed a strong correlation between their increased knowledge of university types and financial support with their intention to apply to higher education. U Can UCAS was recognised for its contribution to students' positive post-16 destinations by winning a Levelling-Up award.

*“ I thought the uni talks were very good at alleviating common fears and misconceptions about uni. ”*

The graph below shows the different types of activity broken down by the proportion of the students from a Uni Connect target ward. Parent and CPD sessions are excluded as these activities do not target students.

### % UNI CONNECT BY ACTIVITY TYPE



General information sessions are usually classified as IAG and these will often be open to whole classes or year groups to make it easier for schools and colleges to engage, they are also typically lower cost.

However, sustained and progressive activities are usually highly-targeted. The partnership fund delivered by the University of Essex, called Aspire/Aspire Higher, had the highest targeting, with almost 70% of students coming from Uni Connect wards. Mentoring also had more than 70% of learners coming from these regions of the county.

As well as collecting monitoring data, we also ask students to complete surveys following certain activities.

While many of the surveys contain questions linked to the NERUPI framework<sup>1</sup> and the individual objectives of the activity, we also ask some core questions which are on all of our student surveys conducted after an event has taken place.

These core questions are:

- How likely are you to apply to higher education/university?
- I have learnt something new, that I didn't know before
- I would recommend this event to my friends
- This event was helpful

<sup>1</sup> The NERUPI Framework was created by the University of Bath as a framework for evaluating outreach activity.

# OUR ANALYSIS

Our analysis of these questions has some interesting findings. We are continuously working to further understand our data but the early signs are incredibly encouraging.

In Phase Two, from 3,774 unique students who completed a survey only 2.2% said they would definitely not apply for university after attending a Make Happen activity. Some 25.09% said they definitely would apply, and 54.5% described themselves as likely to apply.

These results show there is a wide majority of students who are considering higher education, and our activities can help to convert these students from 'likely' into 'definite' applicants.

When asked if the event was helpful the majority of participants (85.83%) responded positively, either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement.

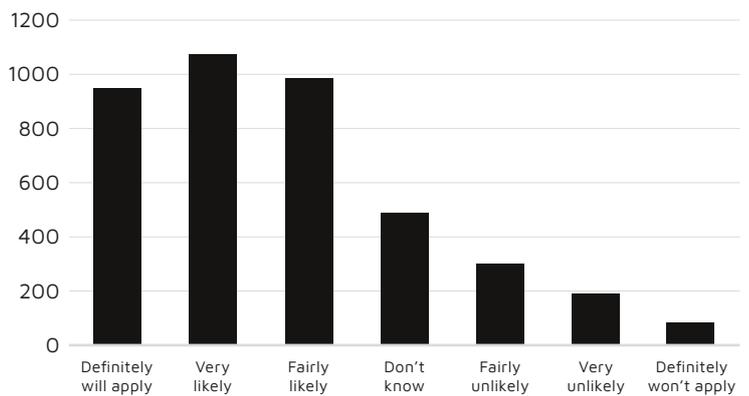
When asked how they agreed to the statement 'This event was helpful' a large majority of 85.38% answered positively (Strongly Agree or Agree). With only 4.81% answering negatively.

This percentage was matched when students were asked the statement 'I have learnt something new, that I didn't before'. 85.39% (n=3245) answered positively to this statement.

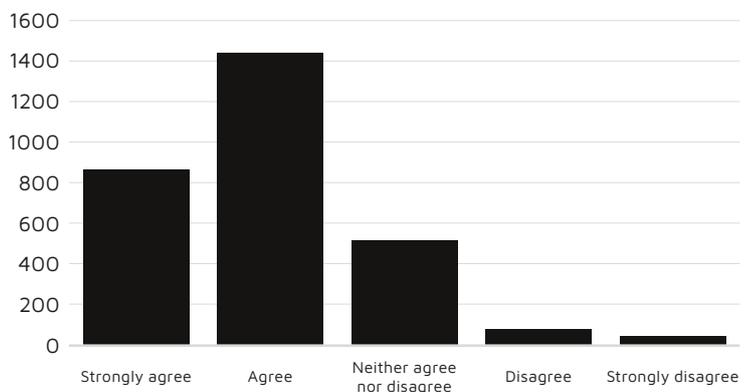
The impact of Make Happen is clear with a high proportion of students finding activities helpful, especially with such a small proportion providing a negative response. These positive responses indicate that we are providing students with new information which can inform their decision making throughout their journeys.

These surveys were administered over a wide range of events, showing students were learning something new across the full variety of activities offered.

## HOW LIKELY ARE YOU TO APPLY TO HIGH EDUCATION/UNIVERSITY?



## THIS EVENT WAS HELPFUL



The final statement asked students to choose their agreement to the statement 'I would recommend this event to my friends'. The number of positive agreements was lower than the other statements, although still a wide majority agreed. Some 71.26% (n=2608) answered positively.

Whilst the proportion of those recommending the activity to a friend is lower than the other two post activity statements it is still incredibly positive that a high percentage would. Given the subject matter may focus on study skills or applying to university we would not necessarily expect all students to recommend it to a friend.

# CASE STUDY

## CFE LEARNER SURVEY

CFE Research was commissioned by the Office for Students to run part of the national evaluation of the Uni Connect programme. Part of this involves running a national survey for young people across the various Uni Connect regions. Make Happen has engaged with this survey every year and has a large dataset as a result. In 2019-20, we had the largest response rate of any Uni Connect partnership for the CFE survey. By asking the same questions each year we have been able to build up a clear picture of how student attitudes are changing over time, and how attending Make Happen activity has a positive impact on this.

From our internal analysis we have seen that those students who take part in Make Happen activity increased their knowledge of:

- Subjects available at HE level
- The types of courses that can be studied at HE level
- How to apply to HE
- Where to find information about applying
- The costs of study
- The financial support available

“ *The sessions taught me how to revise properly and stay on track.* ”



# TOWARDS PHASE THREE

Phase Three of the Uni Connect programme started in August 2021. This new phase has come with some changes, and the first year of the programme will be a transition year prior to other, currently unknown, changes to the targeting of the programme.

The largest change for Phase Three has been a 37% cut in funding for Make Happen, a reduction of £1.1 million per year to our budget. Alongside this reduction in funding, there has also been an increased focus on the need to support further education (FE) learners, as well as engaging adult learners. Due to this funding cut and new areas of focus, we have had to make a number of changes to the Make Happen programme.

There will be three priority areas for the programme, Phase Three:

## 1. FE colleges

The progression rates of students from FE colleges have consistently been lower than their counterparts in sixth form colleges. A 2015 analysis found that in 2011-12, around 28% of FE students progressed directly onto HE, compared with 53% of those in sixth form colleges<sup>2</sup>.

Given this significant differential outcome, the OfS guidance highlighted the need for an increased focus on FE colleges as part of the Uni Connect programme. This will include greater representation in the governance of the programme as well as directing a greater proportion of the programme towards this group. We will also work more closely with our FE partners to engage them as delivery partners to support schools across the region.

## 2. Adult learners

Strongly linked to the focus on FE colleges is also a new target demographic for the programme, adult learners. The OfS has defined this as 'any learner on a level 3 qualification who is aged over 19'. Previously, the project has only worked with 13- to 18-year-olds so this will be a new strand of the programme which will be developed over the coming year.

Our FE team will be piloting some work for this group in 2021-22, working alongside our partners including HEIs and local authorities.

## 3. Collaborative working

Historically, the programme has always sought to collaborate with our partners, providing funding to enable partner institutions to support Uni Connect learners through targeted activity. Since 2017 we have run a number of these partnership funds with different partners across the region. Due to the funding cut for Phase Three, partnership funds will no longer be available, and we will work with partners directly to develop activity.

This is a model we started to develop during 2020-21, with projects such as Future Stars, a collaborative project to support care experienced young people across Essex. Care-experienced young people were a key target group for many of our partner institutions too, as well as the three local authorities in Essex. As a result, Future Stars ran six events across 2020-21, delivered by our team in partnerships with local authorities and partner institutions.

We intend to continue to run Future Stars alongside our partners in the 2021-22 academic year, expanding it to include more partner institutions and a greater range of activities. This work will be led by our newly-created projects team. The projects team will be leading on the collaborative elements of the programme, moving forwards and seeking to engage partner institutions throughout their activity. This will include campus visits at different institutions as well as long-term projects and standalone activity, based on specific areas of support or regions of the county.

As part of this new approach to collaboration, we will have a team of staff based at Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford to ensure that our work is fully embedded and that we are working as closely as possible with them. This will be one of three 'hubs' of staff, with the other two based at the University of Essex in Southend and at Colchester. By having staff based across the county, we are able to engage with our partner institutions more closely, whilst ensuring that we are easily able to support schools and colleges across the region without geographical barriers.

<sup>2</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/460394/BIS-15-531-progression-of-college-students-in-england-to-higher-education.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/460394/BIS-15-531-progression-of-college-students-in-england-to-higher-education.pdf)

# LET'S WORK TOGETHER

Phase 3 provides a lot of opportunities to keep extending the impact that Make Happen is having on the young people of Essex. We are very excited about the opportunities which the next phase of the programme will bring, and we look forward to working with you as part of that.

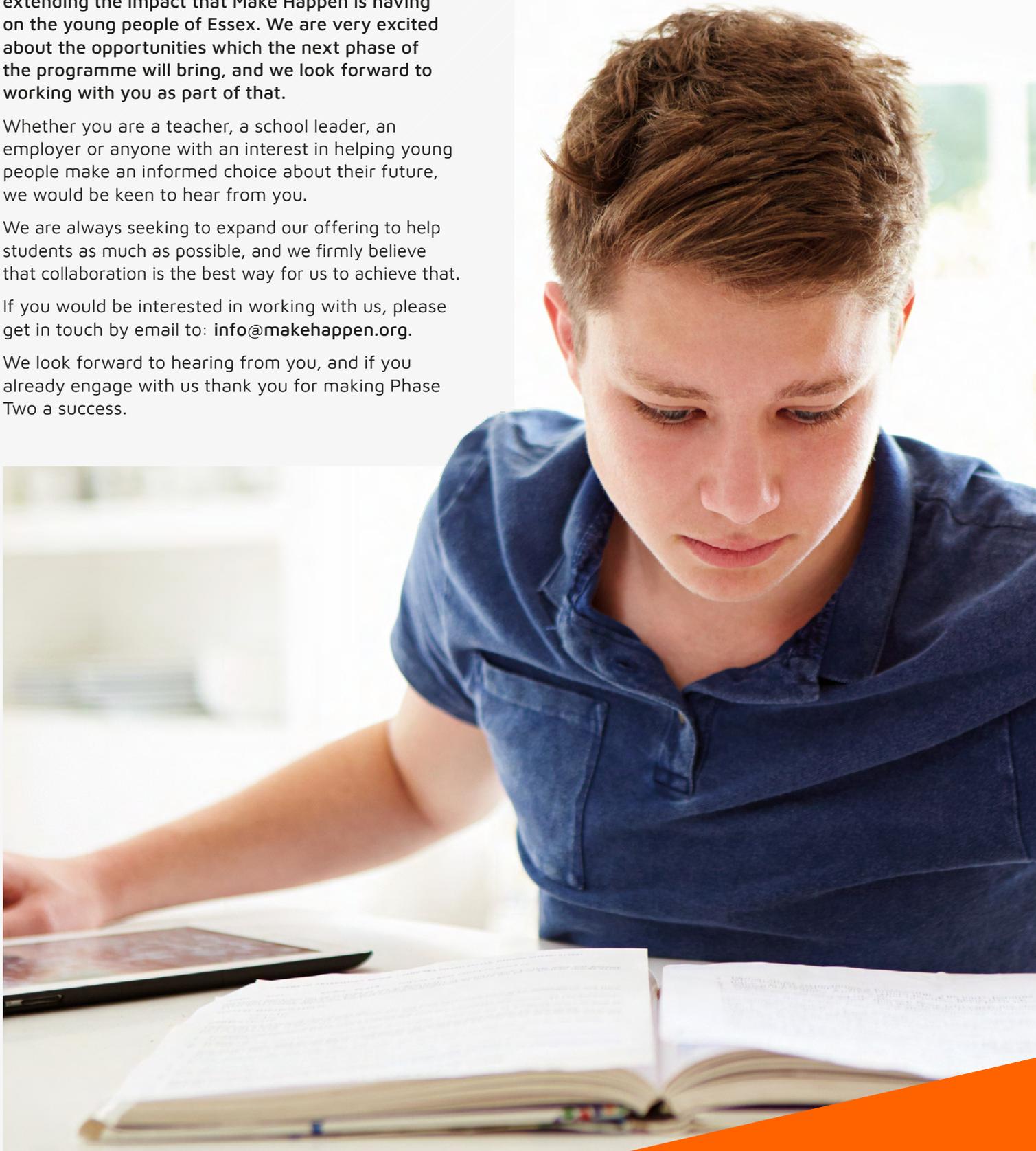
Whether you are a teacher, a school leader, an employer or anyone with an interest in helping young people make an informed choice about their future, we would be keen to hear from you.

We are always seeking to expand our offering to help students as much as possible, and we firmly believe that collaboration is the best way for us to achieve that.

If you would be interested in working with us, please get in touch by email to: [info@makehappen.org](mailto:info@makehappen.org).

We look forward to hearing from you, and if you already engage with us thank you for making Phase Two a success.

“ The people were lovely and made me feel very comfortable about my decisions. ”



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