

The Opportunities and Challenges offered by Character Education. Results from a Round Table

White Paper: July 2018

There has been growing interest in character development over the last decade. This has often focused on the ability of character traits to enhance the life chances of some of the most disadvantaged young people in our society.

As a result, successive governments have actively promoted the role that character education can play in enabling young people to achieve positive health, education, employment and social outcomes.

Despite a growing evidence-base to support the case for greater investment into character development, there have been some challenges. These have centred on defining a clear process for character development and measuring outcomes against a common framework. This has led to difficulties in charities, educational institutions and other youth service organisations presenting a compelling offer to funders.

This white paper looks at how we define character and the practical barriers that exist to agreeing a consistent sector-wide approach to measurement. Indeed, this includes a debate about whether or not this is even feasible.

Despite some references to academic and secondary research, this contribution predominately explores the subject matter from a bottom-up stakeholder perspective. Its contents are the result of two national and three regional roundtable discussions, with the ambition to present a consensus position and recommendations.

This paper should therefore not be viewed as a comprehensive review of character development. Instead it represents a contemporary insight into the views and experiences of leaders from across education, government, business and the youth sector in the UK.

Due to the diverse range of individuals and organisations involved in the development of this report, the findings present a rounded insight into the benefits of developing positive character traits in young people across a range of key policy areas.

Contributors

Dame Kelly Holmes Trust would like to thank the following individuals and organisations who contributed to this paper through our roundtable events:

Barry Williams	Ambition	Aidan Thompson	Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtues
Nick Gandon	Aureus	Ruth Jennings	Kings Langley School
Andrew Reay	King's Leadership Academy	Dan Jolley	League Football Education
Margaret Way	Birmingham City Council	Mike Ridler	Learn By Design
Samantha Gunnarsson	Bridgend College	Carole Kitching	Lewisham Southwark College
Tracey Morgan	Bridgend College	Andrew Slade	London South East Colleges
Andrew Thomas	Bridgend County Borough Council	Lucy Cooney	Moat House School
Mark Lewis	Bridgend County Borough Council	Rita Waters	National Youth Advocacy Service
Clr Dhanisha Patel	Bridgend County Borough Council & Cabinet Member: Wellbeing and Future Generations	Eleanor Vesey-Thompson	NCS Trust
Alastair Falk	Careers & Enterprise Company	Jonathan Osborn	NHS Bath & NE Somerset CCG
Siriol Burford	Central South Consortium Joint Education Service	Rachel Smith	Nourish me Now
Lizzie Crowley	Chartered Institute of Personal Development	Henry Cofie Squire	Oakwood Prison
Jonathan Hopkins	Citadel Communications	Natalie Harding	Outward Bound Trust
Clr Huw David	Bridgend County Borough Council	Laura Flannery	People Plus
Bridgend		Paul Oginsky	Personal Development Point
Ian Boyd	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Sianette Owens	Personal Development Point
Gail Scott-Spicer	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Sian Rees	Police & Crime Commissioner's Office South Wales
Rob Philips	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Oliver Williams	Premiership Rugby
Richard Faulkner	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Kirsty Beeston	Rathbone Training
Ben Hilton	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Helen Northmore	Remploy
Grant Turner	Dame Kelly Holmes Trust	Alison Critchley	RSA Academies
Catherine Fayers	Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport	Rachel Millar	Social Mobility Commission
Baroness Gillian Shephard	Department for Education	Halo Garrity	Sport 4 Life
Elaine Townshend	Department for Work and Pensions	Charlotte Hill	Step up to Serve
Helen Tomlinson	Department for Work and Pensions	Chloe Donovan	Step up to Serve
Jonathan Feild	Department for Work and Pensions	Sandy Lindsay MBE	Tangerine
Diane Modahl	Diane Modahl Foundation	Danielle Tobin	Teach First
Katharine McKenna	Ecorys UK	Pippa Knott	The Centre for Youth Impact
Chris Podszus	Fixers	Tom Haigh	The Challenge
Lin Proctor	Future Academies	Grant Rowley	The Jockey Club
Helen Ridout	Ysgol Bryn Castell	Vikki Russell-Robbins	United Learning
Anastacia Selby	HMP Styal	Bec Tighe	University of Birmingham School
Andrea Steele	HMP Styal	Dr Shirley-Ann Paul	University of Leeds
Seamus Nevin	Institute of Directors	David Rosser	Welsh Government
Claire Ebrey	Institute of Directors	Simon Hall	West Midlands Combined Authority
Sian Fretwell	ITEC Training Solutions Ltd	Karen Whitelaw	Youth Access
Julie Dyer	ITEC Training Solutions Ltd	Lauren Mistry	Youth Employment UK
		Poppy Harrison	Youth Justice Board



Round Tables

A total of five round tables were held during 2017, two in London and further events in Bridgend, Manchester and Birmingham.

At each event, the following lead questions were asked in order to frame the debate

- 1) Where positive character traits can be matched to employability, how can this be embedded and best measured by schools and to determine a universally recognisable approach?
- 2) What challenges prevent schools, academies or colleges from providing young people with a positive character education?
- 3) What particular challenges are businesses in the region facing when trying to recruit young people with the correct soft skills to thrive in workplace?

About Dame Kelly Holmes Trust

Dame Kelly Holmes Trust trains and develops world class athletes to deliver personal, social and emotional development programmes for young people facing disadvantage. Through transformational mentoring, young people become empowered to realise the attitudes and behaviours needed to lead a positive life.

The Trust's programmes are proven to have a lasting impact on the lives of young people and enable them to become healthy, achieve in education, enjoy career success and take part in meaningful activities. Over the past four years the Trust's programmes have contributed £23 million in social value to the UK economy and transformed the lives of thousands of young people facing disadvantage.

Executive Summary – Recommendations

1. It is recommended that the Department for Education takes the lead in defining a clear definition for character development. This should be applied across Government and communicated effectively to education, business, community and youth sector organisations. It is proposed that character development is defined as: *when people align their actions with their considered values.*

4. Improved leadership and coordination is needed around the link between schools and employers. Third sector organisations are well placed to facilitate this, however a strategy is needed to provide a consistent framework at a local level.

2. There needs to be a consistent level of resource allocated to character development in schools, which includes access to additional external training and support.

5. Whilst character should be accessible and embedded for all, specific provisions and programmes are needed for young people facing disadvantages. This requires a more tailored and individual approach, with delivery undertaken by trained professionals.

3. Research should be commissioned to demonstrate a strong business case for industry to further invest in developing character amongst young people within their workforce. This will aim to confirm assumptions about improved productivity, performance, retention and progression.

6. Department for Education need to provide a recommended measurement for character development (which the consensus from this paper suggests focuses on assessment rather than unit measurement). This will provide confidence and clear guidance around outcomes to commissioners and funders.

1. Defining Character

“Character is when people align their actions with their considered values”

- 1.1. Due to the diverse range of contributors to this report there was much debate around the interchangeable nature of the term *character development* – in addition to defining the term itself. For example, are character traits the same as *soft skills*, *life skills* or other such terminologies?
- 1.2. The majority of representatives from industry (both business leaders and related government departments) predominately viewed the terms as interchangeable. Those contributing from an academic, education or youth sector perspective challenged this assumption, with particular reference to the importance of *values* as an integral part of all forms of *character development*.
- 1.3. The most striking example offered to highlight the significance of *values* centred on criminal behaviour. It was argued at two separate roundtables that an individual can be extremely *confident*, *motivated* and *determined*, however without *moral direction* this could be used to the detriment of society. Indeed, several teachers and employers gave examples of individuals who possessed high *performance virtues*, however lacked the correct *moral values* to translate this into academic/workplace achievement or being able to have a positive impact within their local community.
- 1.4. There was universal agreement that there currently exists challenges in finding a common language between schools, businesses and government. It was suggested that there currently exists 38 definitions of what businesses constitute *soft skills* and we should be aiming as sector to agree on a maximum of five (*Youth Employment UK*)
- 1.5. Business leaders argued that the key traits they needed within their workforce were *resilience*, *determination* and *agility*. They supported the introduction of a shared language and clearer definition.
- 1.6. Common words that appeared across different roundtables included: *emotional development*, *emotional intelligence* and *growth mindset*. It was widely agreed that the ability to see opportunities instead of barriers and respond to setbacks should form a core component of any definition.
- 1.7. There was also widespread agreement amongst those outside industry that terms such as *soft skills* were actually diminishing the importance of positive character traits. The use of the word *soft* implies a secondary rank to *hard skills* and is giving the impression that they are easier to develop and master. Furthermore, *soft skills* was largely considered to overlook the range of outcomes and benefits possible outside the workplace e.g. social action

- 1.8. A small minority considered these traits were something that people are born with and cannot be taught – something which contradicted the experiences of the majority and also the growing base of academic literature around the subject matter.
- 1.9. Those operating within the education and youth sectors reported that they do not feel confident fully explaining *character development* or exactly what it covers. This was leading to students and young people failing to understand when they were displaying positive character traits or being able to reflect on their own experiences.
- 1.10. Whilst there was support for a common and consistent definition for *character development* there was also concern that this remained ‘top-line’ and there was flexibility allowed in the design, delivery and implementation to account for local needs and audience-specific factors.
- 1.11. This was particularly raised in relation to defining *values*, with strong resistance from a number of speakers about this being determined centrally. Instead, it was recommended that this should be led by an institution (e.g. school), local community or local youth support service. There was however acknowledgement (and indeed high demand) that a best practice framework and guide was available to support with the design of bespoke programmes and activity.
- 1.12. Overall, there was an overwhelming consensus that attempts should be made to establish a consistent definition for *character development* that transcends across sectors. At the Manchester roundtable the following definition was proposed: *character development is when people align their actions with their considered values (Personal Development Point)*
- 1.13. It was raised that additional education and awareness would be needed for business and industry to shift from their current language and terminology. This would need to focus particularly on the importance of values aligning with performance virtues (e.g. *confidence, motivation, determination, focus and resilience*).



Recommendation

- 1. It is recommended that the Department for Education takes the lead in defining a clear definition for character development. This should be applied across Government and communicated effectively to education, business, community and youth sector organisations. It is proposed that character development is defined as: *when people align their actions with their considered values***

2. Value of Character

“The purpose of education should include the development of character and competence of great people”

- 2.1. Due to the current challenging economic and social climate (plus a perceived demise in *community*) the outcomes of *character development* are becoming increasingly recognised within the public agenda. The Department for Education has stated recently that positive character traits can support improved academic attainment, workplace productivity and enable young people to make a positive contribution to British society¹.
- 2.2. A large focus of discussion at the roundtables centred on the significant impact of positive character traits in the workplace. A range of business leaders shared experiences of young people who were considered *non-academic* thriving as the result of their *motivation, determination* and *resilience*.
- 2.3. Despite this, the majority of employers raised concern about a current shortage of young people who possessed these crucial character traits. Results of a survey in Wales with 300 employers across seven sectors was shared. Key findings included 51% of employers in the retail sector saying young people were not *work ready*, with common themes throughout all sectors saying young people needed *better communication, timekeeping, commitment* and *willingness to learn*.
- 2.4. It was argued at two roundtables that the skills needed in the future would resolve increasingly around character traits, with skills being needed that complement technology (and not replaced by technology), such as *social and emotional intelligence* and the *ability to defer immediate gratification*.
- 2.5. It was suggested that the debate echoed the founding principles of the 1944 Act and RA Butler where the purpose of education includes the development of *“character and competence of great people”*
- 2.6. Baroness Gillian Shephard (who kindly acted as a lead contributor at one of our London roundtables) presented eloquently around the link between character development and social mobility, describing it as *“crucial”* to overcome the hurdles that exist for disadvantaged young people throughout school and into employment.
- 2.7. Indeed, with current low levels of unemployment, it was suggested that the core reason for young people being long-term unemployed was a shortage in positive character traits and behaviours, as opposed to *hard* skills or industry qualifications.

¹ Developing Character Skills in Schools (2017), NatCen Social Research & the National Children’s Bureau Research and Policy Team, Department for Education

- 2.8. One of the common themes voiced at each roundtable from Department for Work and Pension representatives (and employers) was young people not turning up to work. It was added that only 30% of young people currently turn up to Job Centre Plus training events, highlighting a need for more engaging programmes.
- 2.9. Despite concern about the shifting attitudes and behaviours of young people, it was argued that businesses also had a responsibility to invest in young people and to support their wider development. The feedback from those in the youth sector was that young people felt an expectation that they turn up to work aged-16 as the 'complete package' and little investment was being made into their professional or personal development.
- 2.10. There was a genuine desire shown by employers to invest in enhancing character traits within young people in their workforce, however suggested there needs to be clearer opportunities for engagement and a more compelling business case readily available for them to justify additional spend. It was also voiced that this process needed to begin within the education system (something that teachers agreed with, however cited the need for additional investment into training and support programmes).
- 2.11. There was a consensus from those within the education sector that currently too much emphasis is being placed on exam results at the expense of *character development*. To change this would involve a wider culture shift around how society views education.
- 2.12. Examples were shared of outcomes achieved by schools who stated that they put *character development* ahead of academic performance, with each presenting a strong correlation between the two aims.
- 2.13. There was agreement that as a society we should be aiming to increase the importance of ensuring our young people have *humility, compassion and kindness*, alongside a traditional education. It was however argued that there currently does not exist enough training, support or resources for many schools to successfully establish a *culture of character*.



Recommendations

2. **There needs to be a consistent level of resource allocated to character development in schools, which includes access to additional external training and support.**
3. **Research should be commissioned to demonstrate a strong business case for industry to further invest in developing character amongst young people within their workforce. This will aim to confirm assumptions about improved productivity, performance, retention and progression.**

3. Unlocking Character

“Education needs a cultural shift”

- 3.1. The roundtable events highlighted the current high amount of activity and focus from across education, business and charities around this issue, which recognises the timely nature of its importance but also the wealth of ideas and practice in this area.
- 3.2. The key themes that were voiced by stakeholders centred on: *building sustainable programmes, focusing on local need and working collaboratively*. Baroness Shephard stated that what is missing (and needed) is: *consistency, continuity and stability*.
- 3.3. There was a concern that currently schools and local businesses are not working closely enough together. Emphasis was placed on the need to: *improve relationships; involve employers in designing programme frameworks; supporting activities; and enhancing experiences*. The general consensus was that charities and youth organisations were well placed to facilitate this gap.
- 3.4. Overall, there was desire from both within and outside education for a cultural shift. It was put forward that character should not just be for gifted or disadvantaged students, but something that is considered for all. Whilst this was agreed, evidence and experiences shared highlighted the need for programmes and interventions to be tailored for young people facing disadvantage, particularly those from care backgrounds or suffering from homelessness. It was agreed this was needed to enhance social mobility.
- 3.5. One government official stated: *“We need to embed the idea of character development into all aspects of education and it should be at the centre of everything that is delivered, to help ensure young people have the best opportunity to achieve, regardless of their starting point in life. We know it is already delivered in many schools and recognised in some areas of industry and business, however it needs to be made easier for schools and organisations to learn from those that are already displaying best practice.”*
- 3.6. Case studies were shared by schools and youth charities considered to display best practice. The importance of culture was emphasised throughout, alongside the principles of *personal responsibility and empowerment* to manage their own behaviours.
- 3.7. The major concern from schools was that Ofsted currently fail to view *character development* as a priority, which is leading to limited resource or focus being attributed to it in the majority of cases. One contributor added: *“How can we give confidence and resilience to young people when the system is geared for them to fail at the hurdle of GCSEs?”*
- 3.8. The Welsh Bacallaureate (equivalent to an A-Level) was highlighted as an example where *character development* has been successfully incorporated into a formal qualification. There was however much debate around the measurement and assessment of this (see *Section 4*).

3.9. Discussion also occurred around the importance of role models as central to positive *character development* (embedded within a wider positive culture). One charity leader (who works in an area that contains 29 of the 34 most deprived wards in the UK) suggested that there exists a critical shortage of positive role models for young people to learn from and who are available to build trust and form meaningful relationships.

3.10. This was particularly highlighted in the cases of young people who experienced an absence (or shortage) of positive support and guidance from parents or family members growing up. This was linked heavily to the aspirations of young people.

3.11. Without role models it was agreed that young people would fail to see what positive behaviours and character traits look like first-hand; leading to difficulty in being able to reflect on their own behaviour and attitudes. A piece of research shared suggested for every inspirational speaker a young person hears in school, they earn an extra £3,000 in their life (*PWC*).

3.12. In addition to role models, social action was highlighted as an effective tool to unlock positive character traits. Evidence was presented that demonstrated its success, however concern was raised about how accessible the opportunities are that currently exist to disadvantaged young people. Some contributors argued initiatives such as *NCS* were currently failing to engage the hardest to reach in our society.

3.13. Overall, there exists a high amount of activity and shared aims, however the consensus was that too many organisations are focusing on short term objectives. For example, Government strategy was considered to change too frequently and schools were being driven by five year exam targets. Employers were also focused on meeting immediate staffing needs and many charities were being steered by commissioners and funders in order to survive and remain sustainable.



Recommendations

- 4. Improved leadership and coordination is needed around the link between schools and employers. Third sector organisations are well placed to facilitate this, however a strategy is needed to support delivery at a local level.**
- 5. Whilst character should be accessible and embedded for all, specific provisions and programmes are needed for young people facing disadvantages. This requires a more tailored and individual approach, with delivery undertaken by trained professionals.**

4. Measuring Character

“It is not necessarily desirable to measure character”

- 5.1. The debate around measuring character (and aiming to establish a common framework) attracted a broad range of responses and viewpoints.
- 5.2. The general consensus was that character is *challenging* and *difficult* to measure, however there was a difference in opinion about whether we should be striving to establish a *unit measurement*.
- 5.3. The core argument around the need for a *unit measurement* focused on being able to demonstrate impact and present a tangible case to funders (particularly with a growing movement towards *payment by result* contracts and *social impact bonds*).
- 5.4. Other contributors pointed towards *assessment* as the most feasible and effective method. This would take on the form of a *constant factor* or *definition* that can be used to determine the significance of activities or outcomes on development.
- 5.5. Several tools that currently exist were discussed (notably *NPC* and *Impetus PEF*), with the ambition from some for these to be rolled out across the sector. Within schools and colleges there were other examples of tools used for assessment, including *student-attitudes* and *self-learning*.
- 5.6. Dame Kelly Holmes Trust shared its Theory of Change and the 17 behaviours used within the design of its programmes, as an example of demonstrating to funders a robust approach towards programme delivery.
- 6.1. Overall, a slight majority sided against becoming *too granular* in how we measure character at an individual level. Instead it was proposed that focus should be placed on assessing how successful institutions or programmes are at nurturing and developing positive character traits.
- 6.2. Despite this recommended approach, several contributors felt strongly against *“giving up”* in trying to develop a *unit measurement*. One stated: *“We need to recognise that outcomes are the most important thing – funders always want to see hard facts.”*
- 6.3. One consensus that was reached is that *character development* does not occur overnight, which is a further challenge with funders who are increasingly demanding *“fast track”* results. There exists a need to further educate funders around *character development* and the importance of long-term interventions and delivery to produce sustainable benefits to the lives of young people and wider communities.
- 6.4. On this note, *aftercare* was cited as an important area too, which is often neglected (although examples were provided from charities, including Dame Kelly Holmes Trust, where young people are supported up to 14-months after the initial intervention).

- 5.7. An additional gap was highlighted around the need for increased support and training for employers to continue this development in the workplace (particularly for care leavers and young people facing disadvantage).
- 5.8. Furthermore, there were proposals around the need to embed character and soft skills within teaching (and teacher training). One individual stated: *“This is crucial, however it needs be given time to take root for schools, employers, parents and commissioners to understand and see the impact.”*
- 5.9. Finally, the need for *reflection* was a consistent theme – providing the opportunity for young people to reflect on the skills learnt through programmes. This would support demonstrating impact throughout *qualitative* assessment, with young people more informed and able to talk about the transition they have undergone.



Recommendation

- 6. Department for Education need to provide a recommended measurement for character development (which the consensus from this paper suggests focuses on assessment rather than unit measurement). This will provide confidence and clear guidance around outcomes to commissioners and funders.**

Conclusion

Overall, the feedback from stakeholders is one of overwhelming agreement around the importance of *character development*, however also concern about their limited knowledge on how to implement or measure this across a range of different contexts. This stems from a lack of clarity around the definition of *character* and also the challenges to quantify impact or robustly demonstrate progressive development.

Despite these concerns (that need addressing) there exists an encouraging growth in knowledge and expertise around the subject area (at both an academic and practical level). Therefore, it suggests the real problem lies in effective communication, awareness and investment, which requires co-ordination and strong leadership at a central level.

Through effective consultation with expert delivery organisations and academic practitioners, a clear framework and sign posting service (to proven programmes and support bodies recommended at a local level) can be established, which is easily accessible to schools and businesses. This will provide a much needed best practice and cost effective guide on how to establish a culture of character within their institution and the particular measures needed to support the most disadvantaged.