First Star Scholars Impact Report 2026

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Executive Summary

What we do

First Star Scholars UK empowers care experienced young people to aim higher and achieve more.

We work in partnership with universities, virtual schools and carers to provide life changing residentials, group sessions and one to one support. Our programmes build confidence, raise aspirations and help young people succeed at school and transition confidently into higher education, training or employment. We are committed to long term achievement and personal growth.

Headline outcomes for 2026 for those taking exams, progressing to university, training or employment:

- GCSE English & maths 4+ pass rate: 78%
- Progression to higher education: 49%
- Progression to training or employment: 46%

These results sit on top of improved confidence, attendance, study habits and a stronger sense of belonging.

Context & Need (Children in Care)

Children in care often experience disrupted schooling, placement moves and the impact of trauma. They are less likely to achieve strong GCSEs and to progress to higher education compared with their peers. Transition points (GCSEs, post-16, leaving care) can be 'cliff edges' without stable adult scaffolding. Carers and educators want to help but need time, tools and trusted pathways. First Star's response is a long-term, relationship-centred programme that builds belonging, skills, aspirations and practical access to higher education.

Key findings from this year:

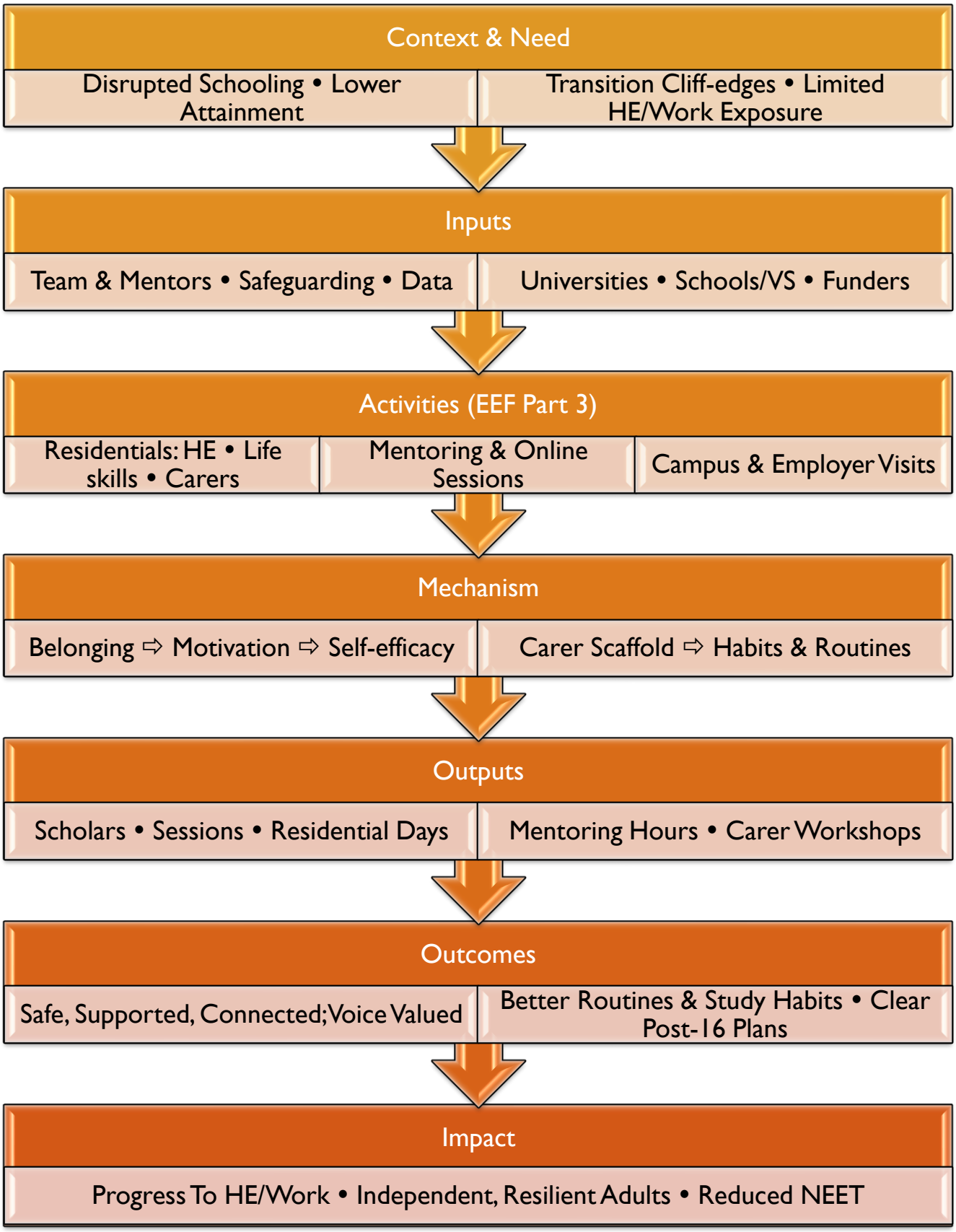
93% Felt at home at university
80% Said they are more likely to want to go to university after the programme

4.4/5 Overall enjoyment of the programme, rated out of 5
4.2/5 How fun and interesting were activities, rated out of 5
4.5/5 Would recommend the experience to others, rated out of 5

100% Felt welcomed and part of First Star
100% Made new friends
100% Want to attend another university residential
100% Felt supported by staff whilst away
100% Said they always had someone available to help

Theory of Change

Our theory of change connects the needs of care-experienced young people with the activities and outcomes of our programme. We create a strong sense of belonging, which builds intrinsic motivation and leads to behavioural alignment with high aspirations. Through consistent support, mentoring, and enriching experiences, young people gain confidence, resilience, and the skills needed to succeed. This results in improved engagement and attainment, with long-term impact seen in higher education access, independence, and breaking cycles of disadvantage.


Context & Need
Disrupted Schooling • Lower Attainment
Transition Cliff-edges • Limited HE/Work Exposure
Inputs
Team & Mentors • Safeguarding • Data
Universities • Schools/VS • Funders
Activities (EEF Part 3)
Residentials: HE • Life skills • Carers
Mentoring & Online Sessions
Campus & Employer Visits
Mechanism
Belonging ⇨ Motivation ⇨ Self-efficacy
Carer Scaffold ⇨ Habits & Routines
Outputs
Scholars • Sessions • Residential Days
Mentoring Hours • Carer Workshops
Outcomes
Safe, Supported, Connected; Voice Valued
Better Routines & Study Habits • Clear Post-16 Plans
Impact
Progress To HE/Work • Independent, Resilient Adults • Reduced NEET

Programme Model & Delivery

We deliver a four-year programme using an insight-led model aligned to the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Pupil Premium 'Wider Strategies' category (Part 3).

- Residentials at an aspirational university to live like a student for a week
- A residential at the national STEM centre in York for hands on experience and careers development
- Monthly online sessions: academic and study skills, mentoring check-ins, goal setting
- 1:1 mentoring and coaching; individual progress plans; attendance and wellbeing support
- Carer/adult workshops to strengthen home learning and transition scaffolding
- Campus exposure and university visits to build belonging and raise aspirations

Residential aims (delivered annually)

1. Provide scholars with the resources and support needed to successfully transition to higher education
2. Ensure scholars have the life skills and access to resources needed for independence and adulthood
3. Engage carers and other adults who can provide long-term support to scholars through transition and beyond

Reach & Outputs (2025–26)

The table below summarises participation and delivery.

Metric	Target	Actual
Scholars enrolled	120	108
Residential days delivered	300	261
1:1 academic & mentoring sessions	90	78
Online group sessions held	48	48

Individual academic and mentoring support is available to all scholars throughout the programme, providing targeted help with learning, attainment and personal progression.

Scholars take part in hands-on STEM learning at the National STEM Learning Centre in York, putting scientific skills into practice through practical investigation and experimentation. Here, a scholar records water quality measurements as part of a fieldwork activity, developing confidence in collecting and interpreting real-world data. Experiences like this make STEM learning tangible, encourage curiosity and introduce scholars to the breadth of opportunities available through science and STEM careers.

Outcomes & Impact

Evidence from the previous cohort indicates strong progress across core outcomes:

Outcome	Result (Prev Cohort)	Commentary
GCSE English and maths 4+ pass rate	78%	Significant uplift versus care-experienced average baselines
Progression to Higher Education	49%	Almost half of scholars progressed to HE, reflecting improved belonging and readiness
Training or Employment	46%	A substantial proportion moved into EET pathways aligned to interests and strengths
Wellbeing & Belonging	Qualitative ↑	Scholars report higher confidence and sense of community
Life-skills Milestones	Checklist ↑	Budgeting, time management, communication and self-advocacy gains

Mechanisms observed: increased psychological safety and belonging led to stronger intrinsic motivation and study habits; carer engagement provided the scaffold for sustained behaviour change (attendance, revision routines).

Creating a Network Around Every Scholar

From Exposure to Opportunity: Building Pathways into Employment

First Star Scholars UK is increasingly focused not only on raising aspirations, but on turning those aspirations into real opportunities. Through partnerships with employers, universities and professional organisations, scholars are beginning to build networks, gain workplace experience and access opportunities that might otherwise be difficult to reach.

Howden – From Employer Visit to Work Experience and Employment Pathways

Our developing partnership with **Howden** demonstrates how an initial employer experience can grow into meaningful progression opportunities for young people.

During the 2026 summer programme, scholars visited Howden and had the opportunity to experience a professional workplace, meet employees and learn about the wide range of careers within the organisation. Feedback from scholars was particularly positive, with young people highlighting the opportunity to understand how the industry operates and to discuss future career opportunities.

The relationship has already progressed beyond careers exposure. Work experience opportunities have been offered to First Star scholars, creating a direct route for young people to build their CVs, develop professional confidence and gain experience within a major employer.

First Star and Howden are now exploring how this partnership can develop further, including apprenticeship pathways with the potential to lead to guaranteed employment.

This represents an important development in our model: moving from simply showing young people what is possible to working with partners to create practical routes into those opportunities.

University of Cambridge Museums – Opening New Networks

Our work with the University of Cambridge Museums is also developing into a broader support partnership.

Following discussions with senior museum leadership, we are exploring opportunities for First Star scholars to access work experience, volunteering and individual support across the museums.

This has the potential to introduce young people to an exceptionally broad range of careers – not only museums and heritage, but administration, communications, education, conservation, science, collections, events and public engagement.

Importantly, the developing relationship is about more than a single visit. There is a shared ambition to provide young people with individual connections, guidance and opportunities that can continue beyond their initial First Star experience.

Tees Law – Professional Support Beyond the Programme

Our partnership with Tees Law is similarly developing beyond one-off engagement. The organisation has expressed a desire to provide further support for First Star scholars, creating opportunities for young people to gain greater insight into professional careers and benefit from the experience, networks and guidance of people working within the sector.

We are now working together to identify how this support can be developed into meaningful opportunities for individual scholars.

These partnerships represent an important next stage in First Star's development.

For care-experienced young people, access to professional networks can be as important as aspiration itself. Many young people do not have the informal connections through family and wider networks that can lead to work experience, mentoring, introductions and first employment opportunities.

First Star is working to help bridge that gap.

Our ambition is to build a growing network of organisations around our scholars that can provide:

- Work experience and workplace exposure
- Volunteering opportunities
- Professional mentoring and one-to-one support
- Apprenticeship pathways
- Introductions to careers and sectors young people may never previously have considered

- Clearer routes from education into sustainable employment

The aim is that a First Star experience does not end when a residential or programme finishes. Instead, the relationships created through the programme become part of a young person's longer-term network of opportunity and support.

Exposure → Relationships → Experience → Opportunity → Employment

Scholar Journeys

Behind the programme data are individual young people developing confidence, independence and clearer plans for their futures. These brief, anonymised snapshots illustrate some of the ways scholars engage with First Star.

Growing in confidence

One scholar initially found engaging with new people and unfamiliar environments difficult. Through residential experiences, group activities and continued support from the First Star team, they became increasingly comfortable participating and building relationships with other scholars. By the end of the residential, they were actively involved in activities, had formed new friendships and spoke positively about feeling part of the group.

Developing independence

For another scholar, residentials provided an important opportunity to practise independence in a supported environment. Staying away from home, navigating a university campus, managing a daily timetable and taking responsibility for practical tasks gave them experience of what life beyond school could look like. These everyday achievements are an important part of preparing young people for further education, employment and adulthood.

Seeing new possibilities

Exposure to universities and employers can change what young people believe is available to them. One scholar particularly valued the opportunity to visit Howden, meet professionals and learn how the industry operates. The experience enabled them to ask questions about careers and opportunities after education, turning an unfamiliar professional environment into somewhere they could begin to imagine themselves working.

Belonging in higher education

For some scholars, a First Star residential is their first experience of living and learning within a university. Feedback from this year's programme showed that 93% felt at home at university and 80% said the experience made them more likely to want to go to university. Scholars described the environment as professional, friendly and somewhere they could be themselves. These experiences help make higher education tangible rather than something experienced at a distance.

Scholars get the opportunity to immerse themselves in university life at UCL, exploring academic spaces, engaging with peers, and growing in confidence as they navigate new challenges. Within this dynamic environment, they find community, inspiration, and a sense of belonging that continues to shape their journey. Each experience deepens their connection to higher education and affirms their place within it.

Insights & Learning (What worked / What to improve)

What worked well:

- Residentials + mentoring created momentum and rapid identity shifts ('I belong here')
- Carer engagement increased study time at home and reduced missed sessions
- Early, low-stakes campus exposure normalised HE and reduced anxiety
- Clear goals and check-ins improved revision habits and punctuality

Even better if:

- Attendance barriers (transport, external responsibilities, shifts, caring responsibilities) → expand travel bursaries and flexible scheduling
- Digital access for online sessions → device/Wi-Fi checks each term
- Employer pathways → deepen partnerships for apprenticeships and work experience

Implementation Priorities (Next 12 Months)

1. Strengthen carer/adult engagement (termly workshops; resources pack; SMS nudges)
2. Enhance attendance supports (travel bursaries; flexible session windows; safeguarding-informed follow-up)
3. Expand HE exposure (mini-residentials; student shadowing; subject tasters)
4. Improve data quality (quarterly audits; outcome dashboards; consent refresh)
5. Employer links (STEM and public sector partners; mentor-to-apprentice pipeline)

Key Risks & Mitigations

Risk	Potential Impact	Mitigation
Attendance/engagement dips	Lower outcomes; missed milestones	Travel bursaries; flexible timetabling; carer outreach
Placement moves	Disruption to study/attendance	Rapid re-onboarding protocol; mentor continuity
Safeguarding incidents	Wellbeing risk; programme disruption	DSL escalation; supervision; reflective practice
Data gaps	Weaker evidence; missed reporting	Monthly CRM checks; training; data owner per site
Funding volatility	Programme scale at risk	Diversified fundraising; reserves; multi-year bids

After a full day of activities, scholars return to their accommodation at Emmanuel College — experiencing university life together and building the friendships, confidence and independence that are central to the residential experience.

Targets for 2026–27

Metric	Baseline (2024–25)	Target (2026–27)	Notes
GCSE English and maths 4+ pass rate	78% (prev cohort)	≥80%	Maintain or increase with targeted support
Progression to HE	49% (prev cohort)	≥55%	More mini-residentials; UCAS support
Training/Employment	46% (prev cohort)	≥45%	Employer partnerships; apprenticeships
Attendance (programme sessions)	72%	≥80%	Bursaries; nudges; flexible delivery

Appendix A: Methods & Data

• Data sources: session attendance logs, mentor notes, outcome assessments, GCSE results, destination tracking (HE/FE/apprenticeship/employment) at 3, 6 and 12 months

• Attribution: where multiple supports exist, we describe contribution and triangulate qualitative with quantitative data

• Ethics & safeguarding: consent recorded; data minimised; anonymisation applied for case studies; compliance with GDPR and safeguarding policies

Appendix B: Governance & Safeguarding

• Trustees oversee strategy, risk and compliance; senior leadership manages delivery. Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) monitors incidents and reflective practice

• Policies include safeguarding, data protection, EDI, complaints and whistleblowing; all reviewed annually

• Safer recruitment followed for staff and mentors; enhanced DBS checks in place

Appendix C: Acknowledgements

With thanks to our scholars, carers, mentors, university partners, virtual schools and funders who make this work possible, and to our Ambassador, Martin Blomley, for his continued support and for championing the work of First Star Scholars UK.

What were your favourite parts of the week?

"Socialising with new people, I enjoyed the theatre workshop and I enjoyed the day trip to Howden's Insurance Company."

"The trip to Howdens because I got to see how the industry operates and discuss opportunities after graduation."

What was the atmosphere like during the week?

"Everything was really professional and I felt like I was part of the university."

"It was very friendly and I felt like I could be myself around my fellow peers and the workers"

Your support makes everything possible

Every donation helps us uplift care-experienced young people and build brighter futures.

If you are a carer, teacher or professional working with a young person who could benefit from our programme, we would love to hear from you.

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