

Participation in and impact of the DofE on young people with additional needs

Research report for the DofE charity

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INTRODUCTION

Background and context

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) is a programme for young people aged 14-24 which aims to equip them 'with the skills, experience and confidence to successfully navigate adult life' (the DofE website). The programme is implemented and overseen by the DofE charity, which licenses other organisations that work with young people, including schools, colleges and youth groups, to run the DofE across the UK.

The DofE charity is committed to making sure that every young person in the UK can access the programme and that an Award is achievable by any participant who chooses to take up its challenge, regardless of ability, gender, background or location.

For more than 10 years, the DofE has been working with special schools¹ and centres, to enable young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)² to access the DofE. The number of special schools which make the DofE available and accessible to their students has been growing steadily over the years, with the current numbers exceeding 600 settings across the UK. This work has been kindly supported by the MariaMarina Foundation³.

Research carried out by Prof J. Campbell and colleagues from the University of Northampton showed that taking part in the DofE can lead to multiple – short and long-term – benefits for young people. These can include improvements to participating young people's physical and mental wellbeing, and positive changes to their social and personal development⁴.

¹ Throughout this report, we use the term 'special schools' to refer to a wide variety of local authority maintained and independent settings working with young people with SEND.

² We used the term Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) throughout the report, because the majority of special schools and our research participants are in England, where this is a commonly used term. In the other home nations, the same groups of young people are commonly referred to as having additional needs, additional support needs or learning difficulties and this report and its findings in equal measure apply to them.

³ To find out more about the MariaMarina Foundation and its work of supporting organisations which offer young people the opportunity to 'transform their lives in a positive way and foster their access to education, vocational training, employment, social care and the arts', please visit its website: <https://www.mmf.li/>.

⁴ Campbell, J., Bell, V., Armstrong, S.C., Horton, J., Mansukhani, N., Matthews, H. & Pilkington, A. (2009) The Impact of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award on Young People: Final Report. – The University of Northampton.

Yet, apart from individual stories and anecdotal evidence, little was known about SEND young people's experiences of taking part in the DofE and the impact of their engagement and completing an Award. Chrysalis Research was commissioned to fill in this gap.

Research methods and evidence for this report

Research approach

The research started in 2018. During the initial phase, the research team completed analysis of the existing programme evidence and carried out exploratory qualitative research with two special schools, to develop an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences of the programme, how they are supported by their teachers and others in their schools and other settings to enable them to access the DofE, and the impact of their experiences.

Following this work, the research design was refined, and research instruments developed. These were shared and discussed with the DofE and its SEND network and then tested and piloted with two more special schools.

The bulk of the quantitative data collection was carried out during the Autumn term 2019 and beginning of the Spring term 2020. The main activities were surveys of SEND students and staff in special schools and other settings, with some additional, smaller scale evidence being gathered through surveys of parents and former special school students. Surveys aimed at SEND young people were distributed via special schools, accompanied by requests to staff to support their students' involvement in the research and some additional guidance about access arrangements. Where requested, paper copies of the student surveys were made available and distributed by the DofE regional offices.

Qualitative data collection, to explore the survey findings in greater depth, started in early 2020, with the view of completing it by the end of the 2019-20 academic year, but was disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, the data collection window was extended into the following (2020-21) academic year and evidence gathering was carried out through virtual and other remote methods such as phone interviews. This phase of the research was heavily supported not only by the participating special schools but also parents of the SEND students who were or had been involved in the DofE.



Evidence for this report

This report synthesises evidence that has been captured through quantitative and qualitative methods, between 2018-2021, as well as drawing on the programme documents and data for the past 10 years.

Quantitative evidence

The two main quantitative data sources for this report were:

- **Staff survey.** The research team received **321 responses** to the survey.
 - The vast majority (75%) of these were from special schools, colleges and similar centres. The remainder was comprised by respondents from mainstream schools and colleges (15%) as well as charities, community groups and specialist organisations (10%), all involved in delivering or facilitating delivery of the DofE to young people with SEND.
 - Schools and other centres across the UK took part in the research. The majority of respondents were from England (78%), followed by Scotland (10%), Wales (7%), and finally Northern Ireland (4%).
 - The majority of respondents were teaching and support staff (46% and 23% respectively), followed by senior leaders (17%) and those in other roles (14%).
- **SEND student survey.** Overall, **377 young people with SEND** provided their feedback about their DofE experience, of which **52 were former students** who had left their schools and colleges that supported them to complete their Award.
 - The majority of respondents were under 18 years old (32% were 14-15 year-olds and 36% were 16-17 year-olds) with the remainder (32%) being over 18.
 - There were slightly more male than female respondents amongst the survey participants (55% males vs 43% females; 2% stated 'other' or 'prefer not to say').
 - The majority of respondents (63%) have completed or were in the final stages of their Bronze Award; the remainder completed or were working towards Silver and Gold Awards (22% and 12% respectively). A small proportion (3% did) not include the information about their Award level.

In addition, responses to an electronic survey were received from 37 parents. These were analysed qualitatively, alongside the interview data (see below).

Qualitative evidence

Wherever possible, a case study approach was used within qualitative data collection, to enable a 360-degree exploration of young people's experiences and what makes them possible, by involving

multiple stakeholders in the research. Alongside case studies, we interviewed individual teachers, SEND young people's parents as well as current and former students. In total interviews were held with:

- **21 special school teachers and leaders.** In addition, we interviewed representatives from two specialist organisations facilitating outdoor adventures and similar experiences for people with disabilities, which provide support and expertise to some special schools delivering the DofE.
- **42 current and 24 former students,** all of them young people with SEND. Some of these students were accompanied by either a member of their school staff or their parent, to enable them to take part in this research. This was particularly relevant for the young people with complex needs, including those who communicated by signing or using symbol cards.
- **18 parents of young people with SEND** whose children completed their DofE Award.

Acknowledgments

The research team would like to thank the DofE charity and their SEND network for their guidance and support throughout the entire research project, both of which have been invaluable.

We want to express our sincere gratitude to all special schools and other settings working with young people with SEND that took part in this research, not only sharing their own feedback and observations, but also supporting their students to get involved and have their say and reaching out to parents and former students. A separate huge thank you to the schools that supported us in developing our research approach and instruments during Phase 1 of this project.

We are really grateful to all young people and their parents who contributed to this research by sharing their experiences and thoughts with us.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to the MariaMarina Foundation for providing funding for this piece of research and making it possible for us to expand the evidence base about the impact of the DofE on young people with SEND.

Reporting notes

Throughout this report we present percentages rounded to the nearest whole number. This sometimes means that totals can appear to be one or two percentage points out. In charts the text for small percentages (generally less than 3%) is not shown so that the chart can be read more easily.



PARTICIPATION IN THE DOFE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND

The DofE programme attracts young people with very different support needs, types of learning difficulties and disabilities. This includes language and communication or social and emotional difficulties, Autism or Asperger's Syndrome, visual or hearing or physical impairments, including restricted mobility, Down syndrome and development delays, Cerebral Palsy and many others.

Whilst involvement of young people with profound and multiple learning difficulties was rare, schools involved in this research spoke about encouraging all their students, able to perform basic personal care tasks, even where they required full-time care and supervision, to take part in the programme.

In many cases, special schools and other centres made adaptations and offered high levels of support (outlined in the next section of this report) to enable their students to access the programme, but this did not affect the Award requirements and criteria. Similar to their mainstream peers, SEND students had to complete four sections (Volunteering, Skills, Physical and Expedition) and submit evidence of their efforts and achievements, in order to achieve their Award. Similar to their mainstream peers, SEND students had to show commitment and dedication, completing their chosen activities over a period of 3-12 months, and face significant challenges as they worked towards their Award.

Below, we explore why young with SEND chose to take part in the DofE and what their experiences were like.

Why SEND young people choose to take part in the DofE

There were many reasons prompting SEND students to take part in the DofE programme. Expecting an enjoyable and exciting experience, different from what they normally do, was mentioned most often, alongside looking for an opportunity to challenge themselves (see Figure 1). Having an Award that would be recognised by employers and other organisations (such as colleges) was also appealing to a noticeable proportion of SEND students.

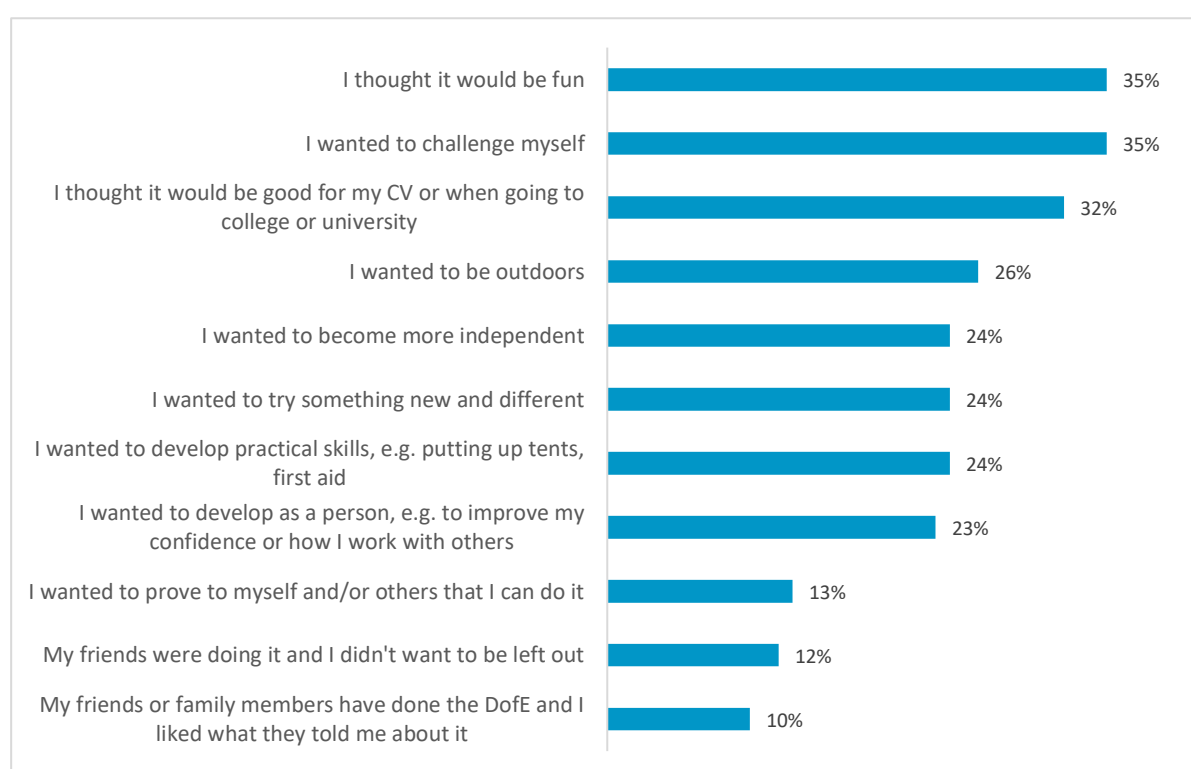
I wanted to start the award because I've heard from other friends who had done it that it's a really good experience and once we've done our Gold it looks really good on our CV. I [also] wanted to improve all my teamwork skills...

SEND student, completed their Silver DofE and working towards Gold

Whilst mentioned slightly less often, being able to be outdoors and learn skills that would enable them to 'survive in the wild' and be independent were highly important to many SEND young people involved in this research.

Figure 1 Reasons why SEND young people get involved in the DofE

Source: SEND student survey. Base: 377 respondents.



Further analysis of the evidence about the reasons why they chose to take part in the DofE, revealed that there were noticeable differences between SEND young people working at the different Award levels. For the Bronze level participants, their experience being fun, learning practical skills related to the Expedition component (such as putting up tents, navigation or cooking while camping) and being more independent were highly important. These things mattered considerably less to those young people who were working towards or have completed their Silver and particularly Gold Award. These young people were explicitly seeking a personal challenge.

I wanted to challenge myself. I wanted to do something that'll make me go, 'Yeah, this is going to be hard'.

SEND Student, completed their Silver DofE and working towards Gold



The Gold Award level participants were almost four times more likely than those working at the Bronze level to take part because they wanted to prove to themselves and/or others that they could achieve it. They were approximately twice as likely to take part for personal development and self-improvement reasons.

SEND young people's experiences of the DofE

With young people having high expectations of the DofE, we wanted to explore what they thought about their actual experiences. Encouragingly, the vast majority of SEND students described their DofE journeys as highly positive experiences.

Whilst the most common way of describing their experience was 'challenging' (noted by 50 per cent of our SEND survey respondents), very similar numbers of young people referred to it as also 'enjoyable' and 'exciting' (48 and 42 per cent of the survey respondents respectively).



Interestingly, this pattern was consistent at all levels of the DofE Award, with there being virtually no differences between those working at the lower or higher Award levels.

Good fun. Enjoyed being with friends outdoors.

SEND student with complex needs, completed his Bronze DofE

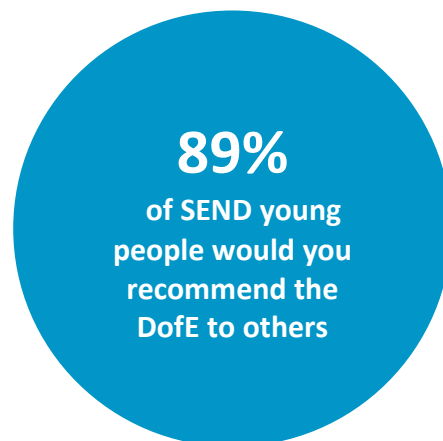
More young people working at the higher Award levels, particularly Gold, said that their experience was 'rewarding.' They were also more likely to describe it as 'tiring'.

It was an amazing experience, and I am so glad that I did it.

Fantastic, life-changing.

SEND students, completed their DofE Gold

Importantly, even though there was a very small proportion (4 per cent) of SEND students who described their experience of the DofE as 'too hard', the vast majority of young people would recommend it to others.



SUPPORTING AND ENABLING PARTICIPATION IN THE DOFE OF YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND

Evidence gathered as part of this research was clear: to enable SEND young people's engagement in the programme, two things had to be in place:

- The programme had to be designed in a way that make such participation possible for students with extremely diverse difficulties and disabilities, yet be relevant, meaningful and valuable to them, and
- They needed a lot of support from those around them, to remove multiple barriers to their participation.

Some of such support came from their parents, but this was rarely sufficient. The role of special schools and other settings emerged as crucial in enabling SEND students to take part in the DofE. In turn, special schools and centres themselves needed support – in the form of training, advice and funding amongst other things – particularly in the early stages of setting up their DofE delivery. This was provided and facilitated by the DofE charity, either directly or by bringing in other resources, such as external funding.

In this section, we consider each of these four fundamental elements enabling SEND young people's participation in the programme:

- The programme design and features
- Special schools and other organisations' work to enable SEND students to take part in the DofE
- Training and other support made available to schools by the DofE charity
- Additional funding.

The programme features

Evidence captured for this research contained a lot of feedback from teachers and others working with SEND young people, highlighting that the programme design and its guiding principles were crucial in making it possible for their students to access it and truly benefit from their experience.



The programme's focus on the individual and making sure that each participant's DofE journey is personalised and is a challenge unique to them was the principle that was highlighted most often. The resulting flexibility of the programme as well as its openness to adaptations, to maximise its inclusivity, were mentioned equally often.

It's amazing that the DofE award can be adapted so that our students can achieve a recognised Award. They may not be able to complete the expeditions in the same way as mainstream students, but we provide the Awards in a way that they can learn, experience and achieve.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

Our pupils do not have many opportunities to take part in activities that will provide them with an award that their mainstream school peers would gain. The DofE award is a chance for them to gain an award that is the same as their peers'. The DofE is a challenge to each individual and it has been amazing that because of this each participant gains an award for completing something that is a unique challenge to them as an individual.

DofE Leader, Special school, Northern Ireland

For many SEND students, but even more so for their teachers and parents, it was really important to know that despite the difficulties and additional barriers they might be facing, young people received the same award as their mainstream peers, one which was respected by employers, educational establishments and generally well known in the society.

Equally, opportunities for progression within DofE and ways in which the programme could be integrated into schools' curricula and programmes of study meant that it could become a real journey of learning and development, rather than a short one-off experience which – however powerful – is rarely sufficient to instil profound, long-term changes.

Many special schools and other organisations working with SEND young people highlighted that the DofE was a unique programme, summed up by one of the teachers:

I love the whole learning programme...Being creative to differentiate each area to meet the pupils' individual needs. Giving pupils opportunities not yet experienced, being part of a recognised award scheme, developing progression into the Silver and Gold... Making links across the curriculum so [other qualifications and certificates from the awarding bodies like SQA] could be also achieved from it... Seeing the inclusion of all our senior pupils... Raising expectations and seeing pupils meet and exceed them, seeing their determination to succeed... No barriers, no limits to potential!

DofE Leader, Special school, Scotland

DofE programme principles:

- Non-competitive
- Achievable by all
- Voluntary
- Personal development
- Personalised
- Balanced
- Achievement-focused
- Demand commitment
- Enjoyable

Special schools and other organisations' work to enable SEND students to take part in the DofE

Despite the flexible and empowering design of the programme, it is important to acknowledge that the nature of some participating students' learning difficulties, disabilities and additional needs is such that it would have been impossible for them to take part in the DofE without the support of those around them.

Calum is sixteen years of age and he was born with a condition which means partial brain damage. He has low muscle tone, is non-verbal and needs 24/7 care.

He needs everything either him told to do it, or helped to do it, or done for him. For him to be asked to participate in the Duke of Edinburgh was just amazing, because my daughter [who does not have additional support needs] has done it right up to her Gold, so to think that Jamie was even going to be part of the Bronze was just something that, as he was growing up, I never thought that it would even have been part of his world. So, when the school came forward to say that, 'We're going to put Calum forward for it,' I was like, 'Are you sure?'

The teachers at Calum's school, their passion is amazing. They think, 'Why, just because a child has additional needs, can't they take part in something like the DofE?' And that's an awful responsibility to take on, because a boy who did his DofE with Calum has epilepsy, he needs all his medication, and a girl that has done it with him, she is a diabetic, so therefore you must make sure that she eats at the proper times and takes her medication... So, you have a vast amount of ability, all the different medical needs and all different additional needs, from somebody like Calum who is non-verbal, to somebody who maybe has autism but is high-functioning... How [the teachers] did it, I do not know. But they did, they put the time and the effort into it, and Calum has completed his DofE.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed his Bronze DofE

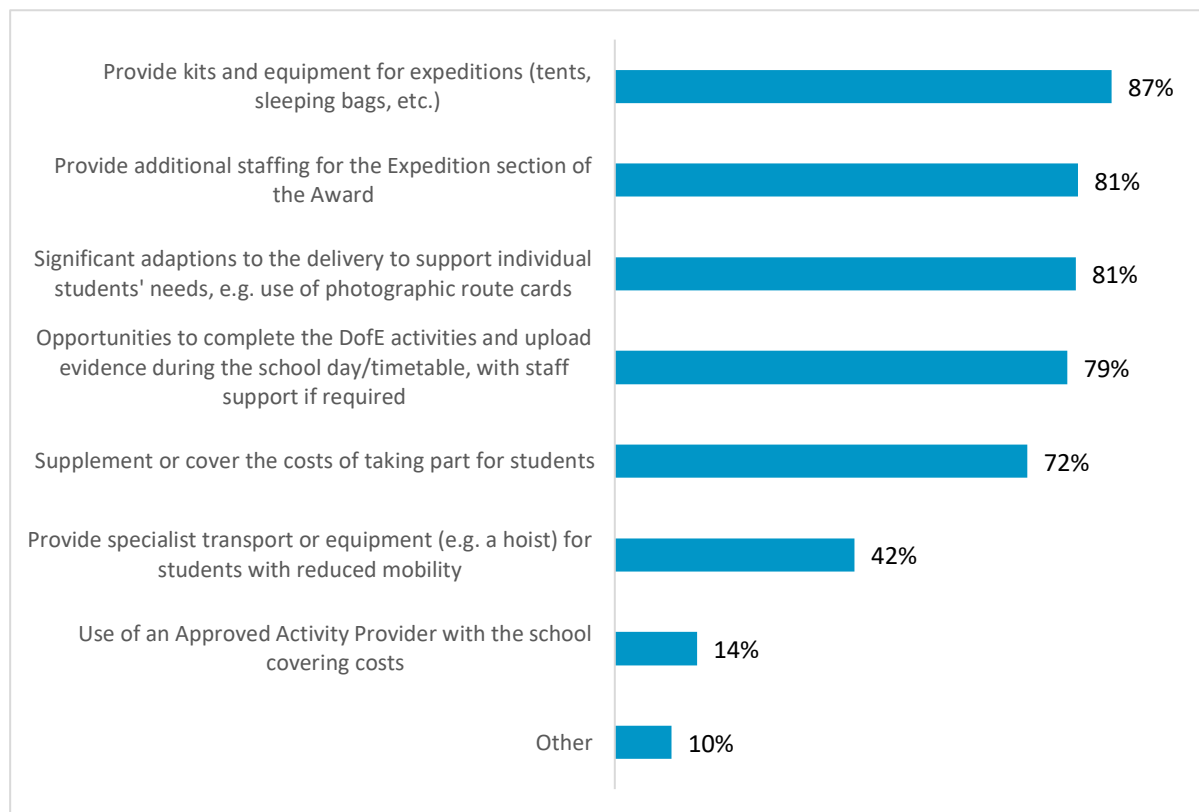
Evidence captured for this research highlights just how extensive and comprehensive the support provided by schools and colleges is. The vast majority of schools (87 per cent) provide **kits and equipment** needed for expeditions and almost three quarters (72 per cent) either **supplement or fully cover all costs** associated with taking part, thus removing all financial and practical barriers for their students, many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Most (81 per cent) of schools provide **additional staffing** to support their DofE delivery. This relates to all components of the Award but particularly the expedition element.



Figure 2 Support offered by special schools and other settings to their students to enable them to do their DofE

Source: Special school staff survey. Base: 321



Special schools involved in our research explained that during expeditions, staff needed to be in close vicinity to young people, to ensure the students are safe, their medical needs are attended to and they are able to participate to the best of their ability. In some cases, this meant several groups of staff members and/or volunteers being a few minutes' walk away from their students. This is because most of their students are taxied between home and school and prior to their DofE expedition, they had never left home or been anywhere on their own.

They pair them up depending on their ability, they put a few pupils together and a teacher behind and a teacher in front, so that it's an independent walk. They've got to follow maps and use a compass, they've got to do that on their own, and they have to cope with being on their own... But it's also safe, because there's always a teacher not far from them.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed their Bronze DofE

With it being the Bronze expedition, they were very nervous: they had never been away from home before, had never camped out, never slept in a sleeping bag before, and then obviously the barrier with communication as well... During the day, we were 5-10 minutes behind them, not in sight, as they were trying to walk and figure out the route. Then, when they were camping, again we were there, but we weren't helping them.... They put the tent up

themselves, and different things like that... We have different ones doing different jobs, like if they find it a bit more difficult to put the pegs in, maybe they've set up the poles for tent. They all have their own set things to do.

DofE Leader, Special school, Northern Ireland

In some cases, where young people's needs were particularly complex, staff stayed with the students, particularly during their first expeditions, gradually stepping back as young people's independence increased.

The expedition, it's just so much support! Some groups might have four students but then have five staff, it just depends on the needs of that group. We'll also have another team, a couple of staff, who slept all day and they they'll come in the evening and stay up all night, so the day team can have a break. Some of our kids don't sleep and others wake up in the night or really early. The night team is there all the time to make sure they're okay when they get up or if they need to go to the toilet, they know they've got staff there. If there's an emergency during the night, it's those staff that deal with it first. All those kind of things that you would never ever think about have to be thought about...

DofE leader, Special school, England

Adaptations to delivery and fully bespoke and differentiated level of support was another common approach, noted by 81 per cent of the staff survey respondents. This also emerged as a strong theme in the qualitative research. In fact, in special schools, it was more appropriate to speak about multiple, completely personalised student experiences, rather than simply adaptations to a single delivery model. Even in mainstream schools, involving young people with SEND meant exceptionally high levels of personalisation, to suit young people's needs. Where schools showed great levels of creativity was in uniting those individual experiences into a joint one, when it came to the Expedition component of the programme.

It's totally differentiated, because some of the students have physical issues which obviously render them unable to do some of the mountainous terrain that would be associated with Gold, so we had to adapt the route to suit them. Others struggle with literacy, so map reading or reading a route card is really hard, so they're adapted to suit them. So we had to pick a route and come up with an expedition plan that was suitable but also challenging for all.

DofE leader, Mainstream comprehensive school, England

Creating opportunities for SEND students to complete the DofE activities and upload evidence during the school day and timetable, with staff support if required, was another common way of removing barriers to participation for students. Examples of this included making it possible for students to do their Physical, Skills or Volunteering sections on the school premises, by for example helping in the school canteen or the school office or mentoring younger pupils in the school. This became particularly relevant in 2020 and 2021 when Covid-19-related restrictions placed limitations on most community-based activity.



Whilst **providing specialist transport or equipment for students with reduced mobility** was mentioned less often, this tended to be not because schools did not offer this kind of support but because it was required less often. Some schools working with students with restricted mobility worked with expedition providers specialising in enabling access to outdoor activities for young people and adults with special needs, by for example, providing all-terrain wheelchairs.

Parental feedback about support received by their child from their school

With a single exception, all parents involved in this research were highly positive about the level of support their children received when working towards their DofE Award. Many said that the level of support ‘above and beyond’ their expectations, explaining that without school staff support it would have been impossible for their child to take part in the DofE.

Support was fantastic.

DofE was the highlight of secondary school [for our son]. It has been really great for him. We are grateful to the staff and volunteers who made it possible, and genuinely seemed to enjoy [our son] being part of the programme.

The heart that [the school staff] have for the young people in their care is above and beyond. That was evident in the support they provided beforehand and the feedback after.

Parents of young people with SEND, speaking about their children’s DofE experience

Parents appreciated being informed ‘every step of the way’ and all the guidance and reassurance they received. Most importantly, they noticed and were incredibly grateful for all the adaptations and support that were put in place for their children, such as help in insulin control for a student with Type 1 Diabetes or having sign language support in attendance for a young person who is non-verbal. There were also additional issues to deal with during the expedition, arising as a result of young people being physically, emotionally and mentally challenged and away from home.

My son had extra support for the weekend away due to anxieties around sleeping in a tent. He was able to choose who was in the tent and talked through strategies and scenarios before they went then after the practice. It helped so much, he loved spending the night away.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed their Bronze DofE Award

Parents spoke of the schools helping organise and put in place ‘whatever was missing’, in order for their children to be able to take part in the DofE and achieve their Awards.

There were also notable comments in our research, highlighting incredibly valuable inputs from specialist charities and other organisations working with special schools, making it clear that enabling SEND young people’s DofE experiences is often a collaborative effort between multiple people and organisations.

My son has severe autism and was fully supported to complete his Bronze Award by a fantastic organisation called [organisation's name]. They helped him with EVERYTHING and managed the risk whilst stretching him within his capabilities. This ensured he learned new skills, felt incredibly proud and motivated to do his Silver, and also had a great time!

Parent of a student with SEND who completed their Silver DofE Award

Why schools take part in the DofE

Evidence gathered for this research suggests that special schools are aware of the crucial role that they play in enabling their students to take part in the DofE.

For many special schools, this – enabling access and offering the same opportunities to their students as are available to young people not affected by disabilities and learning difficulties – was one of the main reasons to get involved in the DofE delivery.

A lot of our students would never get the opportunity to do DofE outside of school because they wouldn't have access to it into the community, they wouldn't have the support to do it. The second reason is how much it brings to our students and how much it complements the academic qualifications that we have to offer. We're a school, that's what we get reviewed on, but at the end of the day that's not everything. The DofE has got the status so that we can offer it and it looks worthy to an outside agency. [When doing their DofE, our students know that they] are working towards something that's really important'.

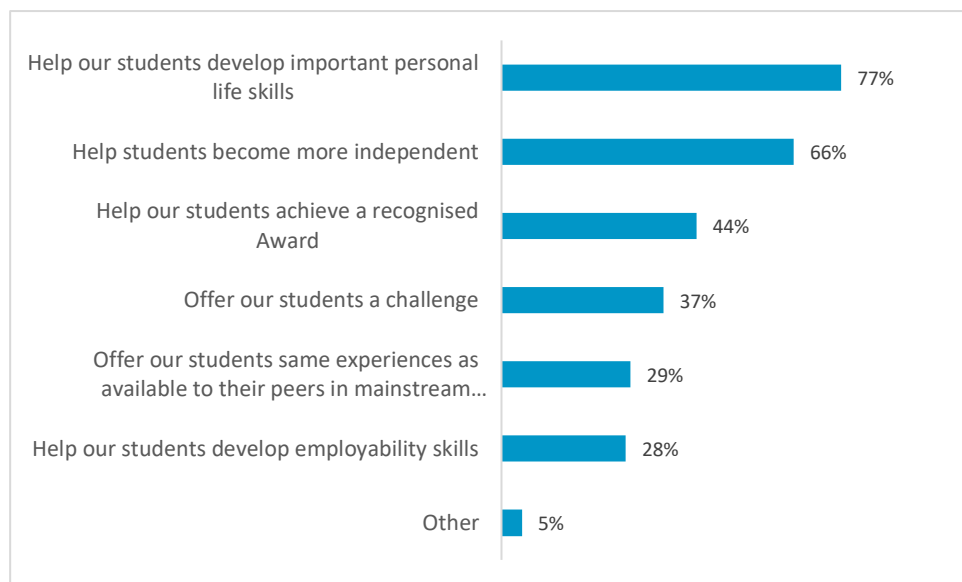
DofE Leader, Special school, England

Offering their students an opportunity to develop important personal and life skills was the most commonly noted reason for doing the DofE delivery, highlighted by 77 per cent of the special school staff survey respondents (Figure 3). This was followed by schools wanting to help students to become more independent and enable them to achieve a recognised Award, highlighted by 66 and 44 per cent of teachers and other staff respectively.



Figure 3 Main reasons special schools and settings deliver the DofE

Source: Special school staff survey. Base: 321



In their additional comments and during the interviews, teachers also spoke about their passion for the DofE, explaining that they were so committed to it because they had witnessed how transformative the experience was for their students and how much their students enjoyed it.

The fact that the kids enjoy it so much is probably the biggest one [reason to be involved], they talk about it for years after. That's been the way before I [started] and then when I took over... Just all the kids loved doing it.

DofE leader, Special school, Northern Ireland

Training and other support from the DofE charity for schools and centres

Two thirds (65 per cent) of the survey respondents stated that they had attended training run by the DofE charity, to support them in their work of delivering the programme, including for young people with SEND.

The vast majority of people who attended the training (95 per cent) were extremely positive about it, with almost 60 per cent of those who took part saying that the training was 'very good'.

Commenting on the content of the training, teachers and others working with young people with SEND highlighted that it included anything from values and purpose of the Award, through to information related to its specific components (use of the eDofE portal or expedition skills), through

95%
of staff rated
the DofE training
as 'good' or 'very
good'

to how to adapt delivery to suit the needs of students. People thought that the training ‘told [them] everything [they] need to know’ and commented that it was essential in order to know how to set up the Award delivery in their institution.

What the training does is it gives you an understanding of how the Award works...Some people think it's a walk in the park and it's easy to do. And it isn't really, and it's got to be done properly so it's not diluted, and I think some people think they can sign up, do the bare minimum, and still get their Award. And it isn't like that, it's supposed to be setting individual challenges for students, and that comes across in the training, that this has to be earned, it's not given.

DofE leader, England

Teachers and leaders were also highly positive about the training approach and delivery model, describing it as ‘informative’, ‘practical’, ‘well-paced’ and ‘well-organised’, ‘supportive’ and ‘friendly’. They were also highly appreciative of the peer-networking and sharing practice opportunities provided by the DofE training events and conferences. Many people, including very experienced DofE leaders, said that they would welcome more training and opportunities to learn from others, particularly with regards to how to organise and offer support for young people with SEND undertaking their DofE.

In their additional comments and during research interviews, teachers and other staff from special schools and other institutions working with young people with special needs, were also highly appreciative about the ongoing ‘excellent’ and ‘incredible’ support that they received from the regional DofE offices and operations managers in their area.

The DofE staff in [region] are an incredible free resource to us. They continue to support, adapt and enable us to offer the Bronze award to our students.

[DofE] have just been really supportive of us... even in situations where, in my first year of doing expeditions I didn't have an assessor the week of a Bronze expedition – mad panic – and they were really supportive. The DofE has always been supportive about flexibility to our students to get through the Award and still making it a challenging, still applying all the principles but allowing our students to have that support at the same time.

DofE leaders, Special schools

Additional funding

Additional funding and support through grants provided by organisations like the MariaMarina Foundation has played a vital role in making the DofE accessible to young people with special needs and disabilities.

The funding and support it received from the MariaMarina Foundation has helped the DofE charity to:



- Significantly increase the numbers of special schools and centres running the DofE across the UK and the number of SEND students taking part and completing their DofE Awards
- Strengthen its internal knowledge and best practice of working with young people with SEND
- Provide volunteer training for DofE centres that work with young people with SEND
- Offer bursaries for equipment and expeditions for these young people

The support at the level of individual schools and centres has been equally important.

Many special schools and other settings try to fundraise, through for example their PTAs⁵, or access grant and similar funding to make it possible for them to support their SEND students take part in the DofE.

We have used several routes to funding over the years to help students with equipment, travel expenses and expedition costs.

DofE manager, Special school, England

A number of schools involved in this research which received direct grants from the MariaMarina Foundation used the money to help them set up their DofE delivery, by training staff and purchasing expedition equipment and kit.

We used some grant money to buy an initial bank of equipment that we could loan to students such as tents, sleeping bags and ruck sacks, camping stoves and pans etc. We have also used some money to buy a manual lifting sling for use when we don't have access to a mobile hoist.

DofE supervisor, Special school, England

Purchasing specialist equipment or kit for students with reduced mobility (e.g. an all-terrain wheelchair or a larger tent for wheelchair users) was another common reason to seek additional funding.

There were instances when schools and other settings needed to use help of professionals such as mountain leaders or specialist providers to enable their students to complete their DofE or to expand their provision, e.g. to be able to offer the DofE Gold Award. Additional funding enabled them to do that.

Schools working with large numbers of students from deprived backgrounds also sought additional funding to help them cover ongoing (e.g. enrolment or expedition) costs of participation for their students.

⁵ Parent teacher association (PTA) is usually a charity a charity run by volunteering parents and friends of the school.

IMPACT OF THE DOFE ON YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Overview

The following patterns were clear in all evidence captured for this research:

1. All stakeholders – teachers, parents and young people themselves – noted **multiple positive outcomes, short and long term, for young people with SEND as a result of their DofE experience**. There were multiple cases with progress noted ‘across the board’, i.e. in all outcomes assessed as part of this research.

I would not be the person I am today without DofE. I owe so much to the organisation that helped me achieve it. I am now volunteering as a leader to help others achieve their award. I enjoyed it all. It was hard and I was tired but I found it good and I was pleased with how I was able to cope when things got tough.

Young adult with SEND, who completed their DofE Gold

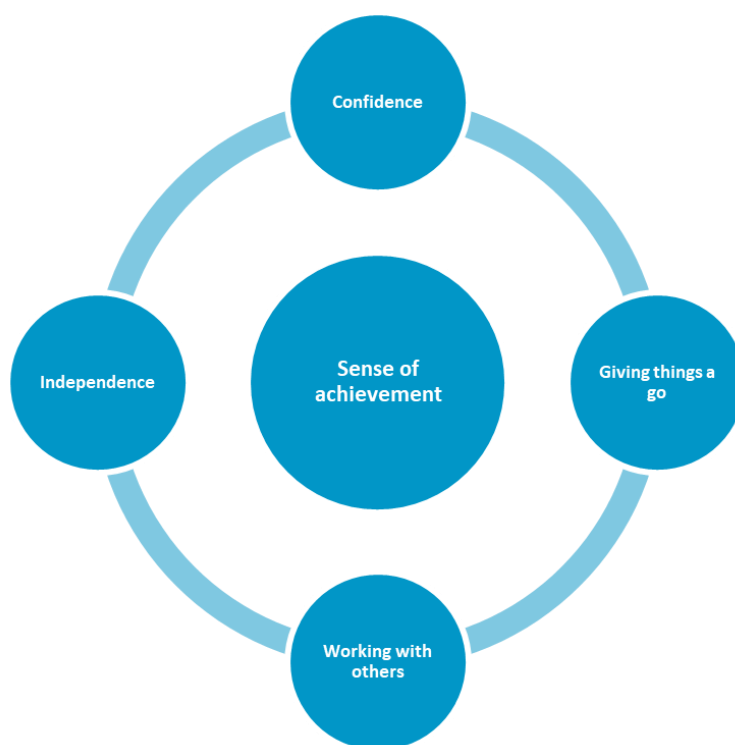
2. The **scale of improvement that was visible in the evidence was remarkably high**. Exceptionally high proportions (in the nineties and even the entire sample, 100 per cent) of teachers reported improvements for their students. The proportions of teachers and other staff who noted significant positive changes when reflecting on their students’ journey and development (‘improved a lot’) were equally impressive and extraordinarily high for an educational enrichment/personal and skills development programme, ranging between 50 and 74 per cent. It is important to highlight here that due to the specifics of supporting young people with SEND, their teachers’ feedback is based on their close and frequent observations of young people, often working with them one-to-one and in very small groups over a long period of time, and routinely capturing notes and evidence of their progress and development.

I've ticked every [outcome in the survey] as 'improved a lot'. We do see significant improvements to our learners who do find DofE (especially the expedition unit) a challenge but it's hugely valuable.

Teacher, Special school, England



3. There was remarkable **consistency** in the feedback from teachers, parents and students **about the areas where SEND students display biggest personal gains** as a result of their DofE experience. These were improved confidence, independence and openness to new opportunities/willing to try things ('giving things a go'). In addition, improved ability to work with others emerged as one of the 'top outcomes' in the teacher and student data, whilst parents highlighted changes to their children's mindset, noting that they and their attitude became more positive.



4. Teacher, parent and student comments in the surveys and all the interviews highlighted that one of the most important outcomes for young people with SEND taking part in the programme, one that triggered many other including longer term attitudinal and personal development changes, was an incredible **sense of achievement**.

As a parent of a child with special needs it made a huge difference, my child felt that he was really achieving something, he was independent and loved every minute. He talks about nothing else but doing Silver and Gold Awards.

Great achievement and inspired [my son] to go further. He really enjoyed.

Parents of a students with SEND, who completed their DofE

Our students have such a sense of achievement once they have completed the award. It is lovely to be part of it.

DofE Manager, Special school, Wales

It has been an amazing experience for our SEN students, who'd never been away from home overnight without parents, completing their expedition. It has been amazing to be a part of, seeing students with limited mobility to do six-hours per day to complete their level. The smiles and tears on completion show how worthwhile the Award is.

DofE Leader and Supervisor, FE college, Northern Ireland

Case study: School A

School A is a special needs school for 3-19 year-olds located in the Brecon Beacons area in Wales. It caters for students with a wide range of disabilities including wheelchair users and those with autism.

The DofE was introduced to the school over 10 years ago and they have now become a DofE centre. All students have the opportunity to take part in the DofE regardless of their needs, and it has now become a very popular choice. The DofE offers pupils the chance to try something different and allows them to gain recognition for their achievements and receive an award.

The school allows two years for students to complete their Bronze Award. They aim to complete Silver in one year, so that they have two years in which to achieve their Gold Award. Numbers tend to decline after the Bronze Award, but this enables teachers to provide more extensive support to the remaining students, enabling them to get the most out of their expeditions.

Impact

According to the school, the impact on participating students is immense. They get a real sense of achievement and pride when completing the expedition and are noticeably more independent and confident with navigating, cooking, and putting up tents.

In addition to the many practical skills they learn, the teachers witness the students' personal growth; they make big gains in self-esteem and really start to believe in themselves.

Teachers see teamwork developing, evidenced by students that don't usually get on well working together to get the tasks completed. Some friendships go on past their DofE experience and social groups develop that wouldn't have formed otherwise. When geocaching with another special needs school, young people displayed excellent people skills and led the way in teaching the other students what they knew.

Importantly, as the students build up their own confidence, they are able to encourage and support younger students coming up behind them.

We went on to do bike maintenance – teaching others to fix bikes. It was nice to see we could teach some of the younger ones our skills.

Students, currently working towards their DofE Gold Award



Personal development – greater confidence and independence

Young people with SEND improving their confidence and self-esteem and becoming more independent were two of the main outcomes from their DofE experience, according to the feedback captured from their teachers, parents and young people themselves.

I've gained a lot of experiences and new skills, more confident and more independent

Gained friendship for life and confidence

Students, completed their Bronze DofE

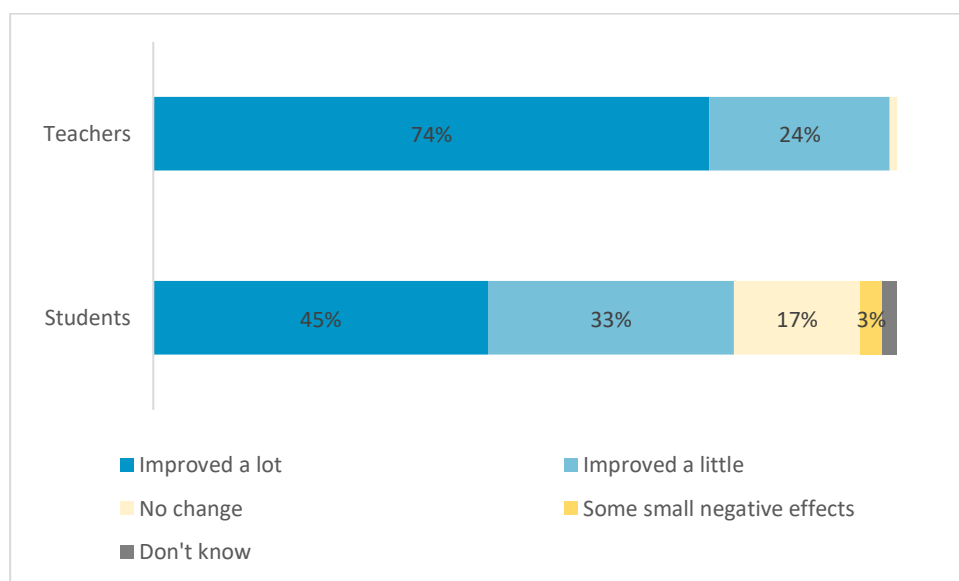
The proportions of teachers and students noting that their **confidence** 'improved a lot' were amongst the highest across all outcomes, with the proportions of teachers (74 per cent) noting big improvements being particularly impressive.

[Taking part in the DofE has] helped some of our most physically disabled students realise that they can push themselves and take part in activities that they thought was out of their reach. The confidence it has given some of them really shows, I can honestly say that at least 70% really feel it has improved their view of themselves and given them a lot more confidence.

DofE Manager, special school, England

Figure 4 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's confidence

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Teacher and student data was consistent with feedback from parents, the vast majority of whom noted positive changes to their children's confidence.

Confidence building was key for our son.

Parents of SEND students who have completed their Bronze DofE

Analysis of patterns in the student survey data suggest that young people's confidence was likely to increase as they progressed with their DofE journey, with the difference between the Bronze and Silver levels being particularly noticeable. Interestingly, this was consistent with teacher observations and feedback.

Our students get a great deal from being involved with D of E. We see a huge improvement in lots of them when they go from Bronze to Silver. Their confidence grows and grows.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

According to all stakeholders, the expedition component of the programme was particularly powerful in supporting developments in young people's confidence, making them realise what they are capable of.

I know more about what I am capable of achieving.

SEND students who completed their Bronze DofE

Doing the DofE Award shows students that are capable of achieving a goal they set. The expedition in particular develops their confidence and self-esteem.

DofE Manager, Special school, England

Many young people used their newly-discovered confidence and self-belief to not only progress to higher DofE Award levels but also to set or firm up more ambitious long-term goals for themselves.

I have one student with ASD, who initially didn't talk to me [or others at school] at all. Through his DofE, he grew in confidence and improved self-esteem. He did his Bronze Award, then Silver and is doing his Gold Award. He has completed all sections except for his skills section which he should finish next year.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

[I am now thinking of] getting a job when I finish the Gold Award.

It got me out the house. It made me feel valued and that life was worth living. It gave me the confidence to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse. I developed in all aspects of my life. It gave me resilience. When things get difficult, I can look back on how I overcame those impossible challenges in DofE and this gives me the strength to keep fighting.

SEND students who completed their DofE, different Award levels



Young people working through their DofE challenges on their own, including ‘surviving in the wilderness’ during their expeditions, played a huge part in developing their confidence and boosting their **independence**.

Young people whose typical experiences of the outside world are often limited to their taxi journeys between their home and school, spoke with great pride about the practical skills they developed – cooking, putting up tents, navigation.

It made us a lot better at working independently, because obviously, there were no teachers or adults with us. So, we had to make the decisions by ourselves, and figure out how to sort things.

Students, completed their Silver DofE

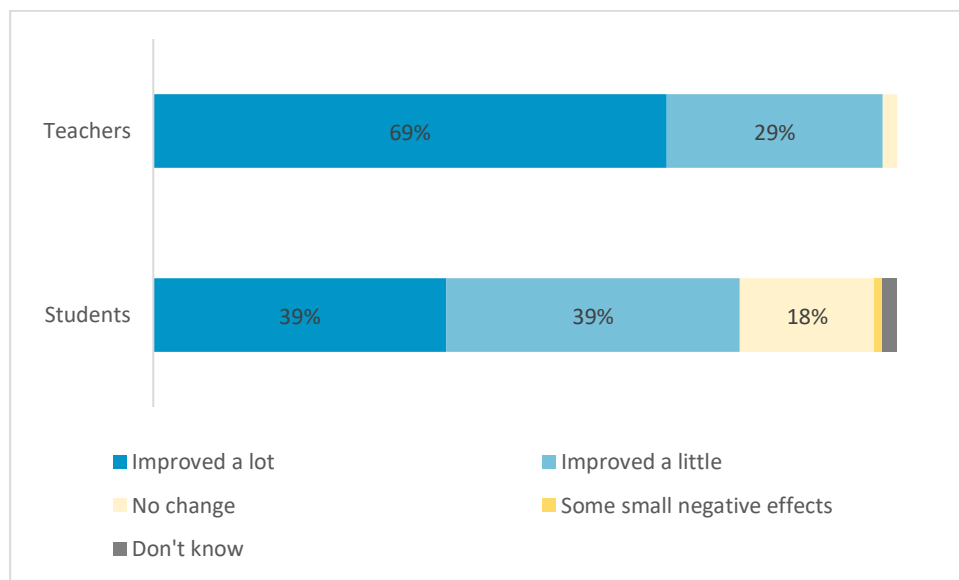
Parents are surprised by how independent the students become during the run up to expedition.

DofE Manager, Special school, Wales

Increased independence was amongst the top three outcomes, where positive changes and developments for the participating young people were particularly noticeable, according to the feedback captured from all stakeholder groups (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people’s independence

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Similar to improvements in confidence, across the quantitative and qualitative datasets, there was evidence about growing and cumulative effects of participation on young people’s independence, as they progressed through the DofE Awards.

I have supported a group of students from their Bronze up to their Gold. The difference in their confidence and independence is massive. They have become a team who are considerate to each other's needs and support one another to achieve their goals. DofE have given them opportunities that will stay with them forever.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

Young people and their DofE leaders alike also noted that those increases in independence as students progress through the Award levels were a result of the deliberate strategy adopted by staff supporting the DofE delivery, who gradually removed support and stepped back as young people's confidence and ability to look after themselves and arrange things for themselves grew.

Importantly, even where they only completed the first – Bronze – Award, there was strong evidence that young people with SEND were able to transfer their greater independence into other aspects of their life.

[I] became more independent, can think more for myself.

It has given me more independence. As a result of this [doing the DofE] I am now allowed to go out of the house a bit more without supervision.

Students with SEND who completed their Bronze DofE

He became more independent and confident in his own ability. Even when it comes to making his own dinner. It might just be a burger that he put in the microwave, but before [his DofE] he wouldn't have tried that. Also, walking from our house to his uncle's house, which is really just round the corner, but he would be more confident in being able to do it himself and navigating the roads and things. [Because of his autism] the awareness of danger isn't always there, but he's now more confident and he's a bit more outspoken... So, he'll give you his opinion more now, and he wouldn't have done that before.

Parent of a student with SEND who is working towards his Silver DofE

Positive attitude and willingness to give things a go

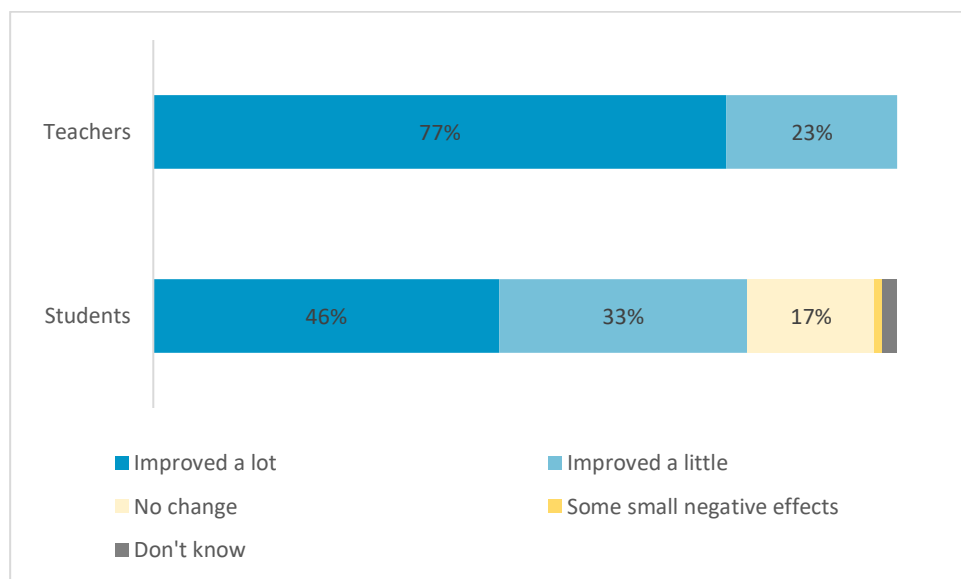
Changes to young people's outlook and attitude, them becoming more positive and willing to try new things, came through very strongly in all the evidence captured for this research.

Specifically, getting better at 'giving new things a go' came up as the top outcome in both teacher and student datasets, including a remarkable 100 per cent of teacher and other staff respondents noting improvements for their students in this area. This was particularly important given that it is often reported that SEND young people grow up in a highly protected (described by some special school staff as 'over-managed') environment, where concerns about their safety often overshadow the need for opportunities with an element of risk and unpredictability, so that they can learn from them.



Figure 6 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's ability to give new things a go

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



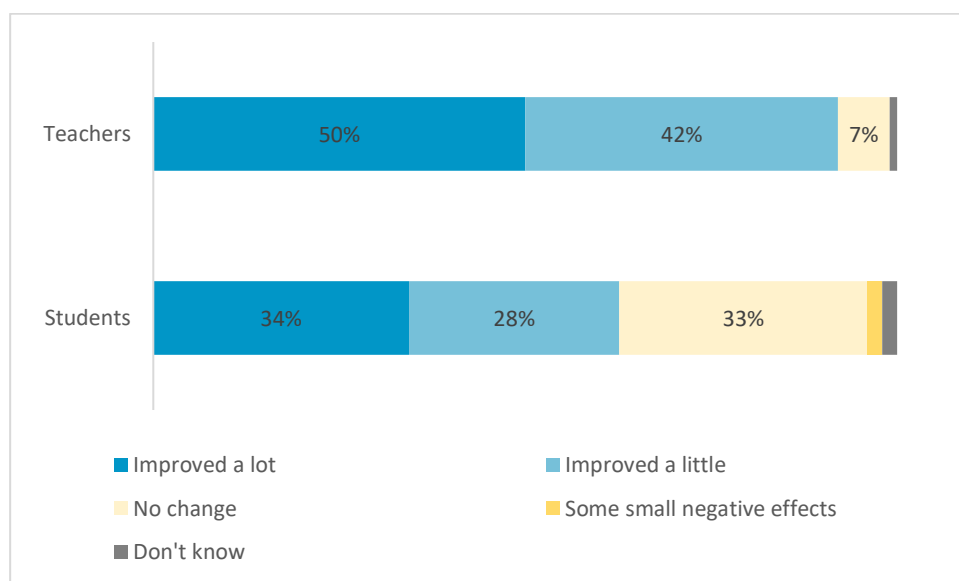
Whilst the proportions of students and teachers reporting young people with SEND becoming more positive in their outlook were slightly lower in comparison (see Figure 7), this outcome emerged as a highly important one in the parental feedback, with more than four in five parents noting it.

It's been amazing watching my son grow as a person, and grow in confidence. It's made his outlook on life more positive and he copes with his Tourette's better day-to-day.

Parents of SEND students who have completed their DofE Bronze Awards

Figure 7 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's ability to be positive in their attitude

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Evidence gathered for this research illustrated that there were instances when positive outcomes, gained by young people through their DofE experience, strengthened and reinforced each other. This was particularly true in relation to SEND young people developing a more positive outlook and their willingness to give things a go: these outcomes were closely linked with greater confidence and self-belief, explored above, but also improved resilience and perseverance.

I give things a try and try not to give up.

Just because plan A didn't work out, there is always a plan B or a plan C.

Students with SEND working towards their Silver DofE

One of my students was going to give up when doing his Bronze Award, but he carried on and is now doing his Gold. His ability to believe in his own abilities has improved greatly and he is more confident at just giving things ago.

DofE Manager, Special school, England

Perseverance and resilience

Compared to the other outcomes, changes related to being better at managing difficulties and frustrations when things got tough were perceived to be smaller (Figure 8), according to the SEND students involved in this research. Nonetheless, these were perceived as very important and increasing as young people progressed from Bronze to Gold.



I am now able to stick with things much easier.

Don't give up when things don't go my way, I have become more resilient and learnt to be more responsible and mature.

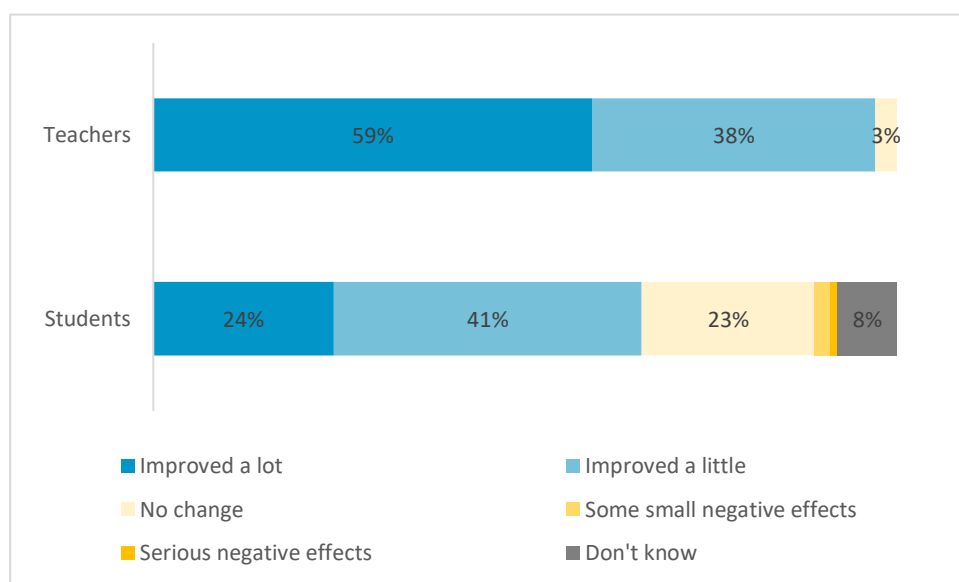
Teachers were a lot more positive, reporting significant improvements to young people's resilience and perseverance during their DofE experience, and noting that these skills might be harder for SEND young people to notice in their own behaviour (Figure 8).

[The DofE] develops students' resilience, which prepares them for later life in their local and wider community.

Senior Leader, Special school, Northern Ireland

Figure 8 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's ability to manage difficulties and frustrations

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Importantly, teachers and others involved in the DofE delivery and working with young people on a daily basis, helped them reflect on their DofE experiences and notice both their successes and achievements but also the skills, such as resilience and perseverance, that helped them succeed and apply them in other aspects of their lives.

[We teach them to] capture their success and get them to hold on to it and use it as a jump off point when they find something challenging in the future. At first, they have no strategies of dealing with difficulty and over time you see they can tackle things they find difficult. It's incremental but the change is there, and it comes from them doing their DofE.

DofE leaders, Special school, England

Interacting and working with others and communication skills

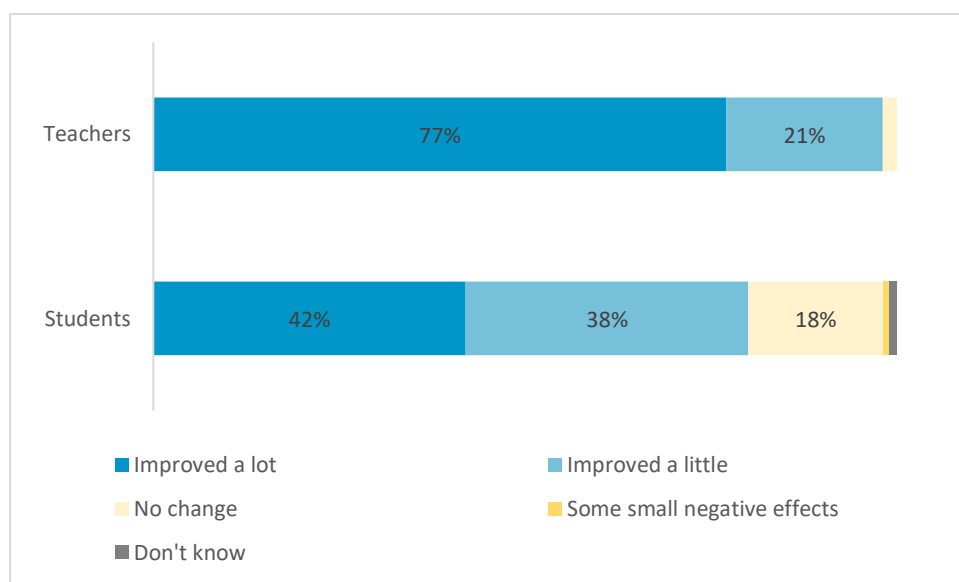
For the SEND students themselves, their improved ability to interact and work with others, was one of the most noticeable areas of development (Figure 9).

Before DofE came into my life, I was not very good at working in a team and that's what has changed about me most.

SEND student who completed his Bronze DofE

Figure 9 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's ability to work with others

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Both teachers and students reflected that the programme was designed in a way that helped young people to develop their ability to interact and work with others, because they had to do it while responding to real-life challenges and where they depended on each other, rather than artificial groupwork situations they often encounter within formal learning environment.

Sometimes students struggle with group work at school because it can be quite an artificial scenario. Whereas when they're out on DofE they've got to work as a group, they've got to negotiate and I think they start developing that independence.

DofE leader, special school, England

When we did the practice [expedition], I struggled, we all struggled...and we had to get help from our instructors, and they had to get in the canoe and paddle with us. Later, they weren't shouting at us or anything, but they were firm with us and said, 'We have to be honest, it wasn't a good performance in the practice and you need to work



together better as a team.’ So, we went home and took that on board and realised that if we want to pass and do really well then, we needed to take on board what they said. We needed to try much harder to work together.

SEND student who completed her DofE Gold

It was also noticeable that everyone having a role to play during their expeditions in particular really helped them succeed but also improved their ability to work with others and respect other people’s contributions.

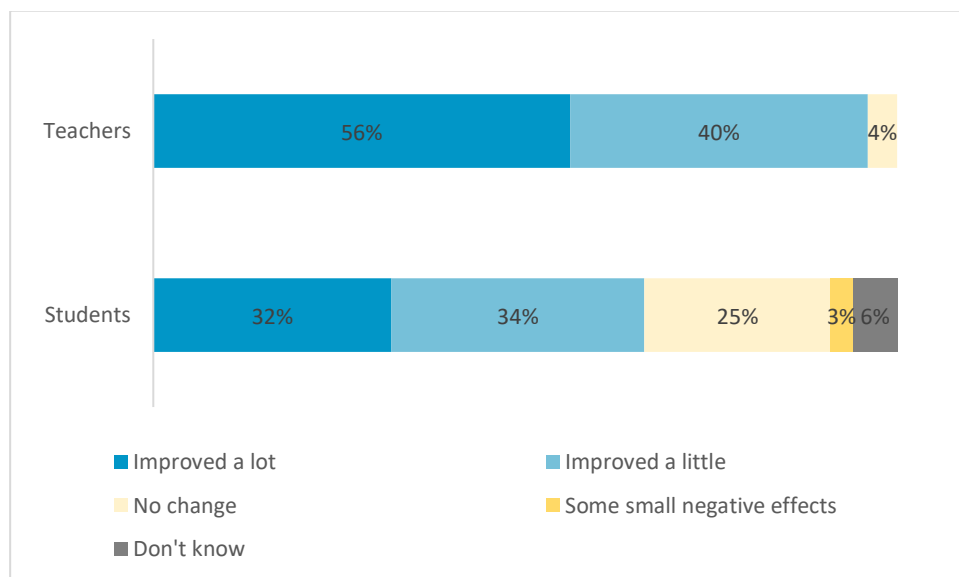
It was amazing to see the students all take on roles within the group. The dynamics developed over the year and they found their natural roles as leaders, motivators etc. Their self-belief was challenged and they were all amazed when they had completed the expedition, fantastic to see.

Senior Leader, Special school, Wales

The development of young people’s ability to work together was linked to their improved communication skills. Whilst improvements in SEND students’ communication skills were perceived by all stakeholders to be smaller compared to their other outcomes (figure 10), these were nonetheless highly important.

Figure 10 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people’s communication skills

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



Specifically, in our qualitative research there was clear evidence that improvements in young people’s communication skills were visible in both their ability to express themselves but also listen to others, helping some of them to overcome the limitations posed on their ability to effectively communicate by their physical and medical conditions.

She’s been able to integrate more. I suppose with Asperger’s this is always going to be a challenge but certainly you could see a definite improvement in confidence and just being able to communicate better and understand more. In

the past, she'd talk to you about what she wanted to talk to you about and not really listen to what you had to say. And that completely changed and a lot of that had to do with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award and the fact that you've got to listen, you've got to do things as part of a team.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed DofE Gold

[Doing the DofE] made me a lot closer with the people in my team. We got on well and learned how to work together. Later, I think it's helped quite a lot at school, because when we do group work and stuff, obviously, you learn how to contribute, but also to listen to other people, and just keep everyone going and joining in.

Student, working towards her DofE Gold

I assessed a group recently from a local special school. One young lady with Down Syndrome had previously appeared passively compliant. During the expedition she walked willingly and eagerly. At the debrief, when asked what she would like to tell me of her experiences she got very excited and animated. I waited for her to speak and with two thumbs up and a huge smile she repeated 'Excellent' three times. Her teachers showed it all in their faces as they heard her: she was showing more communication skills and enjoyment than ever expected.

Independent unit leader and network assessor

There was also a lot of evidence that working with others as part of their DofE experience helped young people to develop empathy and become more caring and tolerant towards others.

I got more mature and helped to cook dinner. I was also helpful to another pupil with complex needs.

SEND student who completed his Bronze DofE

At times our more able participants really rise to the challenge of supporting their less able peers showing patience and understanding that can surprise us as staff who work with them in other situations when these attributes not evident.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

In mainstream schools, where young people with different needs and levels of ability, including those with SEND, completed their DofE together, this was linked with the individuals as well as institutions becoming more inclusive.

We do not have large numbers of SEND students participating but have had a few. Participating in the award has helped their non-SEND peers be more inclusive and empathetic.

DofE Manager, Mainstream secondary school, England

Being more physically active

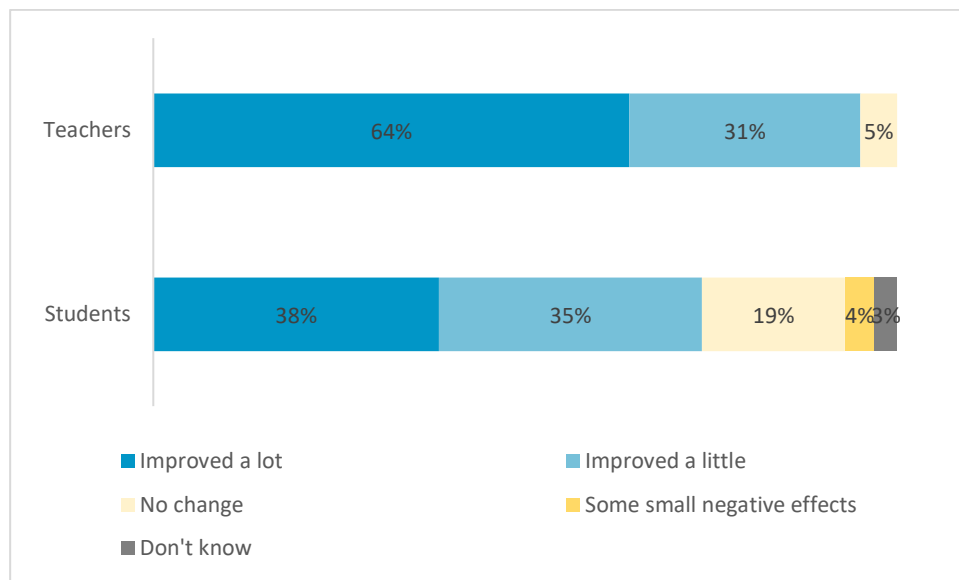
Whilst it rarely featured in teachers' additional comments and feedback, or was highlighted as a key outcome, the quantitative evidence about improvements in young people's levels of physical fitness



and engagement in physical activity was very positive, with 95 per cent of teachers noting positive changes (Figure 11).

Figure 11 Impact of the DofE participation on SEND young people's levels of physical activity

Source: Special school staff and SEND student surveys. Bases: 321 teachers and 377 current and former students.



In contrast, their improved fitness and participation in physical activity was very important to SEND students: many of them, particularly those working towards their Bronze Award, spoke about it during the interviews and noted it in their comments.

I became fitter than I was.

I've developed my endurance, an example of this is how I can walk long distances and up hills better.

I got outside more and took part in a physical activity.

Doing my DofE has made me become more physically active as I have been doing a lot more walking than I usually would.

SEND students, working towards their DofE Bronze

Tyler who is 18 has autism and learning difficulties, particularly with reading and writing. He can also struggle with understanding what people are telling him and needs very clear instructions.

DofE presented a lot of big challenges and really took Tyler out of his comfort zone. Being away from home on his own for the first time gave him a taste of independence and the encouragement from the other teenagers motivated him to try new things.

He has a bit of a fear of heights, but during DofE he was climbing, he was going across ropes. He was jumping in the water - something else he used to have a fear of doing. – Parent

Following his Bronze DofE, there was a notable difference in Tyler's confidence in himself, he developed friendships and become more positive in his outlook. Tyler faces many limitations in life and is very aware that there are certain things that won't be possible for him in the future. He can feel low when he sees other teenagers doing things that he can't but DofE gave him the opportunity to see himself the same as everyone else and look into his future with hope.

Being able to do things with his peer group was massive. Tyler can struggle to interact with people his own age but the DofE experience really helped. I think going away together, brought them together – they had a shared experience. I think he was a lot more tolerant of others when he came back and he developed a few friendships as well. – Parent

Home life and his health, particularly the eating disorder he was struggling with at the time, also improved following a very difficult period. Along with support from other professionals (a dietitian and a counsellor) and medication, according to his mum, DofE also played a part and contributed in helping Tyler to feel supported and able to move on.

That year he did his DofE, he had a certain pride in himself and I think that lifted his mind in combination with other interventions we were doing. It made things a lot easier at home. – Parent

Plans after Tyler leaves school are still unclear at present. He has an interest in the environmental issues and recycling and has volunteered for the local council in the past as part of his DofE. He hopes to continue with this after the pandemic and also to do some part-time work. Tyler now has aspirations to earn money and live on his own in the future.

It links back to DofE where he feels he needs to be busy, to contribute and have that independence and feel like a man. We would like him to keep that mindset to help with mental stability. – Parent



Longer term impact

The following themes emerged during our analysis of the evidence related to longer term impact of SEND young people's involvement in the DofE:

- Impact on their achievement and development while still at school
- Transition into the next phase of their education or employment
- Impact on their identity and quality of life

Impact development and achievement while still at school

It is important to note that many SEND young people take part and complete their (first) DofE Award when they are 15-16 and they tend to remain in their school for a few more years. Therefore, schools often are able to observe how changes and developments triggered by the initial DofE engagement tend to further grow, get applied and transferred into other parts of young people's lives, including their learning at school.

Many changes reported in the previous sections, such as those related to improved confidence and independence, ability to work and communicate with others and so on, did not all happen during the initial – Bronze – DofE Award journey. They were in fact medium term outcomes, developed gradually, over time, often through several progressive DofE experiences and the special school staff (and families) building on them in subsequent months and years.

Our evidence and feedback, from senior school leaders in particular, suggest that having done their DofE, young people tend to display a more mature attitude to their learning, improved confidence and soft skills, all of which help improve their engagement, attendance and achievement at school.

Great to see the older pupils achieving and taking more responsibility for their learning.

Our students enjoy the DofE programme that we offer. Often, we have too many students that would like to complete the award. We've had some students with poor attendance that because of DofE they have attended more of school and this has positively impacted their other subject grades.

Senior Leaders, two different special schools, England

SEND students involved in this research also reported that their DofE helped them do better at school, especially when doing teamwork activities and 'in lessons' more generally.

Transition into the next phase of their education or employment

There were several dimensions where their DofE Award was reported to be really helpful to young people's transitions into the next phase of their education or employment.

First of all, they had an award that was widely recognised. The experience of completing their DofE journey was valuable in its own right: it provided SEND young people with an opportunity to try themselves outside of the often very sheltered and protected environment where they grew up – their home and special school.

Our students gain a great deal from this Award as completing and taking part in experiences outside of their comfort zone and having opportunities to be involved in activities that they will otherwise not get the opportunity to take part in, is crucial to their future beyond a special needs school environment.

Senior Leader, special school, England

Not only that, but it was an experience that they could talk about, and do so with visible passion and enthusiasm, which made them stand out and be noticed amongst other candidates, often making a difference to their ability to secure the education or employment place they were seeking.

Transitioning into other settings, e.g. further education college, the DofE gave the students a valuable experience to talk about at the interview stage.

DofE Leader, special school, England

There is a clear relationship between the skills they develop through the DofE with the applications for training and work. For example, one of the youngsters has applied for the Coastal Navy, and the feedback was that the most interesting and lively the young lad became in his interviews was when he was talking about the DofE, and it was at that point, despite his natural shyness, that he was there coming alight and talk about the things he'd learnt, the skills he'd learnt, the things he'd done, that would help him secure a place in the Navy.

DofE Leader, special school, England

It was also the skills that they acquired through the DofE that were reported as crucial to SEND young people's ability to successfully move into further or higher education or employment, and be successful within it.

Our students have gained many valuable experiences and skills through participation in the DofE award. I feel for our pupils it is one of the most important awards that many of them will leave school with, as many will not complete National 4/5, Higher level SQA courses. Therefore, the skills gained through doing the DofE award will be influential in helping them gain employment or a place a college once they leave the school.

DofE Leader, special school, Scotland

Because of the DofE, I have been able to communicate with strangers more confidently. I worked in the uni shop as part of my DofE Bronze Award which required me to communicate with strangers.

Young adult with SEND, recent university graduate



There were numerous examples, shared by special schools about their former students but also provided by SEND young people themselves (now young adults), directly attributing their employment to their DofE experience.

I got a part-time job out of it [the DofE]!

DofE really has changed my life and I am working, which I never thought I would be able to do. I am now a DofE leader for a deaf charity, so I was able to use my experiences from the past and apply that to the current students whom I am helping with.

Young adults with SEND, working part time, both completed their Gold DofE

One participant managed to gain employment through volunteering for the DofE. She and her family are really pleased!

DofE Leader, Youth Service, England

One pupil did their DofE in the first year [the school ran it. He struggled to communicate with others, and work with others. He completed his Bronze, and now 3 years later is working at the school as an apprentice site manager. He works independently with contractors and is looking after the school. This is a huge change for this young man, and the DofE award was an importance step for him in gaining confidence, resilience and independence.

Teacher, Special school, England

Impact on SEND young people's identities and quality of life in adulthood

Whilst there were numerous wonderful success stories, linking participation in the DofE with further and higher education and employment for young people with SEND after they left their special school, this unfortunately was not everyone's experience. In some cases, young people's disabilities and learning difficulties were too complex for them to be able to cope with a job, even a part-time one. In other cases, as special schools involved in this research put it, 'the problem isn't with our young people, the problem is with the society'.

Nonetheless, evidence gathered as part of this research highlighted that there were many ways in which their DofE experience enriched SEND young people's lives as they moved into adulthood.

They continued to use the independent living skills (such as cooking) that they have acquired and they discovered many new hobbies, interests and activities, some of which turned into the passions they continued to enjoy long after their DofE experiences.

[I am] walking more and enjoying it.

I didn't know anything about camping in the wilderness before doing my DofE. I do now. [Sometimes I just put] up my own tent, [so I can spend some time] away from town to appreciate the great outdoors.

Young adults with SEND, both completed Bronze DofE

DofE gave me the chance to talk to new people which has helped my confidence meeting new people since DofE. It gave me the chance to try something new outdoors and I learnt lots of transferable and valuable skills such as first aid, cooking, camping and teamwork. The DofE sections also allowed me to try new sports and activities I might not have otherwise, as a result I will continue to look for new things and experiences I may enjoy.

Young adult, currently training for a job, completed her Silver DofE

Young people formed relationships and friendships which they were able to maintain over time. Some of the participants involved in this research remained in contact and supported each other for more than 10 years after leaving their special school and completing their DofE Gold. As highlighted earlier in the report, for SEND young people struggling to build relationships with peers, this was invaluable.

This group of young people came together purely for DofE and didn't all know each other before. They are now good friends and meet outside of their DofE.

DofE Leader, Open Group - SEND specific, Scotland

One of the most important dimensions in which the DofE enriched their lives after they left schools and became adults was SEND young people's love of volunteering. Discovered during their DofE journey, many retained this as part of their lives. Volunteering made their lives meaningful, helping them feel valued and useful.

During my residential [as part of my Gold DofE] I was working with a group of 16-year-olds doing their NCS award, and now I volunteer with a group of young people.

The main thing I learnt through my DofE was that I wanted to work with people. I now volunteer with several groups, working with people with special needs, the elderly and partially sighted. [Without my DofE], I think my life would be dramatically different, I certainly wouldn't be volunteering with people.

Young adults, both volunteering, both completed their DofE Gold

Young adults involved in this research, reflecting on their DofE experience, said that through their DofE they have developed their sense of identity and that it should not be defined through their special needs and disabilities.

My DofE pushed me to learn new things, and I've realised that because of my condition I actually had to try harder and I have learnt more, and that my [condition] doesn't limit me. DofE pushed me to try new things no matter how hard they are which was really good.

Young adult, completed her Gold DofE



Case study: School B

School B is a small special needs school for 5-19 year-olds, based in Derbyshire in England. All of its students have a primary diagnosis of autism but alongside this they may have concomitant conditions such as ADHD⁶, eating disorders, dyspraxia, and PTSD⁷ amongst others.

Many students come to the school having attended a mainstream setting; they often arrive with a sense of failure regarding education. The school strongly supports the DofE because it offers something that is altogether different to academic qualifications. It is personal to each student and they can choose to do it and have some control over it and experience a sense of achievement. Another reason is that options for extracurricular activities are generally very limited for their students and DofE helps to redress this balance.

A lot of our students would never get the opportunity to do DofE outside of school because they wouldn't have access to it into the community, they wouldn't have the support to do it.

DofE leader

Many students come from very deprived backgrounds and the school covers the costs of their DofE Awards for all participating students, as well as providing the kit and equipment for the expeditions. The school offers a great deal of other support to its students doing their DofE. Expeditions have very high staffing ratios, including night staff to keep students safe; they run several training sessions and all camping equipment is provided. Physical, Skills and Volunteering sections can all be completed in school. This has meant that students were able to continue their work towards their Awards during the months of the Covid-19. Teachers appreciate the flexibility that allows them to tailor opportunities to each individual.

Impact

The sense of achievement and validation that comes from completing a DofE Award is tremendous for their students; it gives them the feeling that 'Yes I can do this, I am worthy'. Many have never had a night away from home before, and a lot have never camped. The DofE gives them their first real taste of independence, and this gives them the confidence to achieve their goals in other areas of their life. One student, able academically, was extremely anxious about failing when he joined the school and refused to sit any exams. He started his DofE and finished his Bronze, went on to Silver and then Gold. Whilst working towards his Gold Award, he agreed to take his GCSEs, first with his mother sitting outside, and the following year doing them on his own. He went on to college and is now completing a computing course at university.

The school had received some grant funding from the MariaMarina Foundation when their DofE delivery was first set up. Some of it was used to buy kit for students' expeditions and some of it was to train staff.

⁶ Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

⁷ Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

WIDER IMPACT

Our research has surfaced evidence that as well as offering powerful and often life-changing experiences to SEND students, the DofE also brings benefits to those around them, their schools and families, and even entire local communities.

The rich evidence about wider benefits of the DofE captured as part of this research, suggests that there are multiple dimensions where impact beyond SEND students themselves is visible. This includes:

- Positive outcomes for staff involved in delivering the DofE
- Improved relationships
- School curriculum development and other positive changes at whole school level
- Positive impact on parents and families



Positive outcomes for staff involved in delivering the DofE

Benefits for staff involved in supporting young people with SEND to achieve their DofE Awards were almost as wide-ranging and numerous as for their students.

It's a great opportunity both personally and professionally to be a part of.

DofE Leader, Special school, Wales

Personal sense of achievement and pride in nurturing our students through the award. Satisfying to witness students rising to challenges with determination and enjoyment. Pleasure in giving students real life skills. Giving our students the opportunity to perform on an equal basis alongside mainstream students. It has been an opportunity to build positive relationships with parents. Personal enjoyment of taking part in the expedition section. Pleasure in being part of an effective staff team, which extends into social activities.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

As can be immediately seen from the comments above, the positive outcomes for staff span a large number of areas and included personal and professional development, greater job satisfaction, feeling of self-worth and enhanced physical and mental wellbeing.



Personal development

Many teachers and other staff involved in this research highlighted that being involved in the DofE delivery, and specifically supporting SEND students through their SEND journey, provided them with opportunities for personal development. Most often, people spoke about improvements to their confidence, adopting a more positive mindset, particularly when responding to challenge, and developing many transferrable skills and attitudes such as perseverance.

Encouraged me to continue to develop my own skills knowledge and experience, to continue to persevere and try new things outside of my comfort zone.

DofE Leader, Special school, Wales

Professional development

Positive changes related to their professional development were highlighted by even higher numbers of teachers and other staff involved in this research. Most often, they noted their improved understanding of their students' abilities and capabilities, recognising that their students could achieve more than what they ever thought possible, with the right level of challenge and support.

Delivering DofE has made me realise that if I provide the right support my students can achieve everything.

DofE leader, Special school, England

There is no ceiling on potential, no barriers to success, no limits on achievement.

Teacher, Special school, Scotland

Realising that young people need to be challenged and giving them confidence in their abilities and boosting self-esteem.

DofE leader, Special school, England

Participating teachers and leaders also commented that staff involved in the DofE delivery got better at challenging their students in other contexts too, including in the classroom. In some cases, learning from the DofE delivery and experiences, particularly in relation to effectively challenging all students penetrated not only individual teachers' practice but entire schools' curricula and approaches to teaching and learning (see respective section below).

In addition, there were teachers and leaders who reported that they improved their management and organisational skills, as well as their ability to work with and lead colleagues.

Job satisfaction, sense of self-worth and fulfilment

Teachers and other staff as well as volunteers working with SEND students and supporting them through their DofE journeys reported feeling great joy and an immense sense of satisfaction from seeing how much young people gain from their experiences. Many said how proud they felt to be part of the transformation they could see unfolding in front of them as well as further positive changes and developments, triggered by their students' DofE experience.

I have greatly enjoyed being a part of the DofE Award in my centre. My favourite part is seeing how it impacts each participant. We get to see the participants outside of a formal/official setting, and can see the impact the Award has on their personal skills, confidence, teamwork skills, etc. It has been a great pleasure getting to be a part of it all and I hope to continue to help out in the years to come.

DofE Leader, Special school, Northern Ireland

Personally, I love delivering DofE to our students. Apart from the hard work, it's so much fun. To see our groups working together to overcome problems and see the joy when they've completed a task, such as the expeditions, is worth all the effort.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

...DofE has changed me, it gives me that lightbulb moment when you know you have helped one young person, that everything is right in the world. You leave the group with a smile knowing you have tried in some way to support that young person in their life's journey. That they can believe in themselves.

Community group volunteer, Scotland

A number of teachers commented that the joy and passion that they gained from their work with SEND students whilst completing their DofE extended to their feelings about the rest of their work and teaching practice, leading to greater overall job satisfaction.

[Being involved in the DofE delivery] made me more passionate about my job.

Teacher, Special school England, England

I have been solely responsible for setting up and delivering the Duke of Edinburgh's Award at [my school]. I have been teaching for three years and I can say that helping the 20 students to achieve their Bronze Award is what I am most proud of doing in my career so far.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

Wellbeing

Greater sense of self-worth resulting from being able to positively affect SEND young people's lives and development, as well as improved relationships with people at school (explored in greater detail



below), all contributed to participating teachers' and others' mental and emotional wellbeing. This was further enhanced by being able to spend time outdoors and improved physical fitness, reported by many people involved in the DofE delivery.

My own mental wellbeing has improved as a result of weekly DOE. I see students who struggle in a curricular setting, shine.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

I have enjoyed the countryside and walking. [The DofE] has encouraged me to do this more in my personal life. I also enjoy this time with the young people and watching them learn and grow.

DofE Leader, Youth service charity, England

It has personally improved my fitness level regenerated my love for the outdoors. I have learned new skills and it has had a positive impact on my teaching methods.

DofE Manager, Special school, Wales

Improved relationships

Improved relationships with students was a common theme in the feedback from special schools' and other organisations' staff, captured as part of this research. Teachers and students being able to see each other in a different environment, going through emotional experiences together and being able to relate to each other as people and develop trust as a result, were all highlighted as the factors contributing to better relationships between staff and students.

A different kind of relationship built up with students working in a less structured environment using a common format for a focused gain. As staff supporting the pupils gain the Award, we supported the pupils through tough times, challenging times, sometimes physically painful times and joyous times as they achieved each area of the award.

DofE Leader, Special School, England

Getting to know the students more away from the classroom has helped develop better relationships between staff and students - it's also great for students to see staff enthusiastic about something that's not academically driven. As the school SENCo, it has also allowed me to encourage students with SEND to get involved more.

DofE Leader, Mainstream secondary school, England

As well as improved relationships with their students, many teachers and other staff involved in the DofE delivery commented that it helped them improve their relationships with colleagues, making their teams stronger. The latter was also noted by senior leaders involved in this research, noticing higher morale amongst staff and a greater sense of community in their entire institutions.

I have increased my own confidence and as a team we have become closer which improves the working environment.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

It has brought the staff team together. They benefited from working in new environments outside of school setting.

Senior leader, Special school, England

It has improved staff morale to see these young people achieve Duke of Edinburgh's Awards, and given a boost to the service as a whole.

DofE Manager, Local authority education service, Wales

[DofE] brings all staff together. Students always talk about their own DofE, a large number of students are now still volunteering after 2/3 year. The school community has come together more.

Senior leader, Special school, England

School curriculum development and other positive changes at whole school level

As already noted earlier in this report, realising how much SEND students can achieve and what they are capable of, with the right level of challenge and support, was one of the main learnings from their DofE delivery experience for individual teachers. In many cases, particularly where the DofE is delivered at scale, so large numbers and proportions of students get involved, this was something that was noticed at the level of entire institutions.

It has raised expectations, among students, staff and the local community, of what our students are capable of. The programme teaches staff and helpers to stand back and let the students work things out for themselves, to organise and co-operate.

Teacher, Special school, England

{DofE} proves to us that some of our students, albeit with some help, can achieve qualifications in line with their mainstream peers.

DofE Manager, Special school, England

For a number of special schools, their DofE experience has prompted them to develop their curriculum and offered them a framework for shaping but also recognising and assessing non-core curriculum learning opportunities, such as sport, crafts, cooking and technology.



The school setting now has a structure to experiential learning and of course an accreditation to go with it. It also commits at least 20% of the timetabled curriculum to DofE. This is due to the huge impact it has had on our learners and staff team, who use this time to build rapport and relationships with challenging learners.

DofE Manager, Special school, England

Helped change our curriculum to be more suited towards our students. I have shared the life changing experience the students have gained on expedition.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

[Through the DofE] we all learn to think out of the box more and don't allow ourselves to become retrained by the constructs of ablest environment. Since becoming involved in the DofE over 40 years ago we have developed a totally accessible outdoor centre which allows everyone to take part in all activities with no physical boundaries.

Senior Leader, Special school, England

Many of the positive changes for students as well as the wider impact described above were also visible in the mainstream schools that involve the SEND students in the DofE, alongside their non-SEND peers. In addition, in these schools the programme was credited with making their institutions more inclusive. Such schools noted that helping their SEND students to take part in and achieve a DofE Award often worked well as the first step of involving their SEND students in other activities, effectively becoming a trigger of their engagement more generally. It also had really positive influence on their peers and everyone in the school.

It has brought inclusivity to our school.

DofE Manager, Mainstream secondary school, England

Including SEND students in DofE has increased inclusion at school, increased non-SEND peer empathy towards SEND students. The fact that one autistic student had successfully completed DofE expeditions at Bronze meant he was then included in other school trips - where this had proved challenging before. As DofE Manager, I now have more confidence in making the adaptations needed for participation of SEND students and the value of this for the [entire] year group.

DofE Manager, Mainstream secondary school, England

Schools also noted that taking part in the DofE had helped them improve relationships with parents and their local communities.

[Doing the DofE] has also gained the school a lot of support from the local community.

DofE Manager, Secondary school, Scotland

Positive impact on parents and families

Discovering what their children can do and are capable of was something that was also immensely important to the parents and families of SEND pupils who took part in the DofE, filling them with joy, pride and hope.

DofE has meant our students have been able to see that they are more capable than they thought they were in the outside world and their parent/carers are happily surprised with the independence their children show on DofE. Some of our parents can't believe how independent and self-sufficient their child is until they do a DofE expedition. It makes both students and parent/carers more confident about their futures.

DofE Assessor, Special school, England

I'm learning all the time to find ways to make [the DofE] as accessible as possible in every way, so that everyone in the school can take part - from those that have physical difficulties to those that struggle with everyday life skill activities including reading and writing. It has had a massive impact on the students and staff and parents alike. Many of our parents were told that their youngsters wouldn't be able to walk, talk, etc and they see the progress that they make. It's been amazing.

DofE Leader, Special school, England

Please continue to support young people with SEN to complete DofE awards in whatever way they can access, it makes a huge difference to families and individuals to feel they can achieve something to share with family and friends which is truly recognised and a source of pride.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed their Bronze DofE

When speaking to families, it was clear that after SEND young people gained experiences and awards through their DofE which were the same as their siblings who were in mainstream schools, it positively influenced the relationships and dynamic in the family.

My daughter loved the entire experience and was very proud to have achieved something that her siblings have completed as well. As she has special needs there are not many opportunities for her to feel that she is the same as they are. For instance, she is not able to pursue the same path in terms of academic, athletic or social pursuits.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed their Bronze Award

There were instances when SEND young people started playing a more active role in their family, for example leading family walks or camping trips.

There was also evidence that young people with SEND completing their DofE prompted their parents to be less protective and encourage them to be more independent in their daily life.



The DofE allows parents to see their sons/daughters in a different light and allows them to become more relaxed around allowing them to participate in different opportunities. This often results in greater independence and self-reliance and improved confidence.

Senior leader, Special school, England

Parents involved in this research also shared how important it was for them to not only see their child's achievements, them enjoying themselves and new opportunities opening up for the young people as they went on their DofE journey, they also spoke about how much it mattered to them that staff in special schools and other settings deeply cared about their children, investing huge amounts of energy and often personal time into supporting them through their DofE.

When you're starting the journey of that special needs child, as a parent, it can be very daunting. That's because [when they are tiny] you look ahead and think, 'Well, he's not going to be able to go out and kick a football with mates, he's not going to be able to go out and go to the cinema or go to the KFC and McDonald's with mates.' So, it can all look 'doom and gloom'. You try to look at the positives, but it can be hard. So, whenever somebody, who isn't a family and has nothing to do with your child, actually has the passion, puts their energy into it, into supporting your child to succeed, then you know that it's not all that doom and gloom.... There are all the positives, and the rewards are just amazing.

Parent of a student with SEND who completed his DofE Bronze



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