



A Way Forward For  
Character Development:  
The missing piece of education...



White Paper  
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## 1.0 Executive Summary

### *The Challenge for Youth Services*

Think-tanks and academic research groups have been studying character and character education for many years and whilst they highlight the importance of 'character' it would be fair to say that they have struggled to define the process of character development in a clear and concise way that enables a common understanding for practitioners, commissioners and policy makers.

Differentiating effective character development from other forms of education, leisure and positive activities, would allow youth services to refine their offer and make a convincing case for funding even in times of austerity.

The UK government is as convinced as everyone else in the importance of character development but in keeping with the policy of local empowerment it will not be taking a lead in this area.

PDP has been refining, defining and delivering effective character development around the UK for over 10 years and in this paper it offers, clarity, recommendations and leadership to enable a more cohesive and fundable approach to character development.

### *Summary of Paper Recommendations:*

#### **General**

1. There is no Holy Grail way of measuring character development. Stop looking.
2. Character development is when people align their actions with their considered values.  
Agree to using single definition
3. Character development only works when people take risks. Develop a risk friendly culture.

#### **Practitioners**

1. The 4 step character development process is the golden thread that tethers your work to other practitioners and allows funders to compare like with like. Provide an array of activities but hold on to the golden thread.
2. The required outcomes may change, the activities may change and the participants will change.  
Adapt your language to your audience. The only constant is the 4 step process.
3. It's not all about young people. You must keep your funders happy.

#### **Commissioners**

1. Your success is reliant on people. Build a learning culture not a blame culture.
2. Highly effective people work in the voluntary, statutory and private sector. Commission for results.
3. Do not micro manage. Allow them to take the lead and say what they need of you.

#### **Policy Makers**

1. No one is the finished article character development helps people to become more effective.  
Don't see character development as only meeting a deficit.
2. Education that does not include character development is lacking.
3. Strengthen the cause by connecting likeminded people. PDP and our partners are your allies.

## Next Steps

If you would like to discuss this paper or the recommendations contained within it then please join with us and together we can ensure that character development takes its rightful place as the beating heart of all education.

## Get in Touch

To have your say about the paper, make comments, show support or arrange to discuss how PDP can help make this paper a realisation for your organisation then please contact us in one of the following ways:

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## 2.0 Introduction

People working in services which are targeted at young people have developed methodologies which should be highly prized by society.

They can engage reluctant people, they can make education enjoyable, they can bring about life long behavioural change and they can do all this without being controlling or manipulative.

For over 100 years the UK has been at the forefront of developing services which help young people to develop their character and it should be rightfully proud of the organisations and people who have contributed to building a legacy.

In recent times however, financial austerity has presented new challenges and requires new thinking or this wealth of knowledge and skills will be lost forever.

Practitioners, commissioners and policy makers share the common aim of supporting young people into becoming 'active and empowered citizens' and yet they do not always share a common language or understanding of what is needed to achieve this.

This paper makes individual and collective recommendations directly to practitioners, commissioners and policy makers so that they can work more effectively together and present a coherent and compelling case for investment in character development opportunities for young people.

### Context

UK society is looking for a diamond; they can't quite define this gem but they will all know it when they see it. Industry has been calling for it for years and everyone agrees that it is the key to success. Government thinks that parents may have it. Parents think that schools should help find it and schools don't know which way to turn.

The reason for producing this paper now is that we have found it! We know what the diamond is and where it can be found.

### The diamond is 'character development'

Every year billions of pounds are spent on the development of knowledge and skills, technology and transport systems but real value for money can be found in the development of character.

Who would want to live in a high tech, knowledge rich society that had no community spirit, no trust and no compassion? The greatest treasure the UK has is the character of its people and character development is the greatest investment we can make as individuals or as a country. This educational approach can help those that are struggling in society as well as enhancing the work and contributions of those who are more fortunate.

So where is it? It is hidden and you have to dig deep to find it.

Your starting point is the broad concept of education. Look beyond schools, HE and FE and you'll come to a small, rundown and almost forgotten area known as 'youth work'. This area has many misleading signs, dubious claims and sugar traps but it is where the diamonds are hidden.

Move the pool table out of the way and start digging. You will eventually come to something hard. It is a heavy chest with a lock on it. Unlock the chest and there are plenty of diamonds for everyone.

So how can we unlock the diamonds?

## 3.0 Recommendations for Everyone

### 1. Forget the Holy Grail

For many years, people in the youth sector have been looking for a definitive and universally accepted way of measuring the impact of their work. So many people have tried and so many methods have been proposed that this quest has become known as the 'Holy Grail' of youth work.

Let us kill this myth now (spoiler alert), there is no holy grail. There is no way of measuring impact on people that is definitive and universally accepted. In order to measure anything a 'unit' has to be established. Once this has been achieved then we can measure using multiples and/or subunits. E.g. 8.4 pints, meters, pounds etc. There is no such thing as a unit of confidence, loyalty, honesty, motivation or any of the characteristics which this kind of work seeks to impact.

It can however be assessed. The 360 assessment approach has been used by industry for years. It involves people assessing themselves but it also includes the experience and opinions of people who know and work with them to assess their personal effectiveness.

Forget measurement, psychometric testing, pre and post course tick boxes, the best way of assessing the impact of this kind of work is to ask the person themselves to describe if and how they have changed and then to ask for witnesses verification by those who know them.

Being assessed is not as reliable or replicable as being measured but it is the best approach for this kind of work. It provides strong evidence of change and development in young people and can be conducted in ways which are rigorous. Some funders may still insist on measurable evidence for a wider impact – such as all young people having full and happy lives. This is a waste of everyone's time. Far more effective is to ensure programmes include robust methods to assess the progress made by young people, as evidenced by them and witnessed by others.

**Recommendation 1. Programme evaluation should be via young people's self-assessment and witness verification.**

### 2. Clarity = Survival

It is astonishing how little definition there is in the youth sector. Even the term 'youth sector' lacks definition. People refer to methodologies by what they are 'not' such as 'non-formal education' and to people by what they are not doing such as 'Not in Employment, Education or Training'. It is difficult to allocate funds to an ill-defined sector for 'not' doing formal education to people who are 'not' in formal education! Government does not want to impose terms and the grassroots is waiting for leadership. Let us define and utilise some key terms to address the Who? What? How? Why?

**Who?** For the purposes of this work children are up to and including 12 years of age, young people are 13 to 17 and young adults are 18 to 25 years of age.

**What?** Character Development: Character is how a person lives their values. Character development allows people to consider if their values and their actions are aligned. Character development is therefore a distinct form of education. Youth work, soft skills training, informal education and alternative education may well include character development but they are broader approaches and the impact of these is often much harder to quantify and therefore fund.

**How?** Facilitation – The skill set needed to develop someone's character is facilitation. Character cannot be taught, it cannot be forced, and it cannot be drilled into someone. It needs skilled facilitation. It is crucial to understand that character development is not the outcome; it is a process that can lead to positive outcomes.

**Why?** By ensuring staff can deliver character development in this way, it can allow organisations to access new markets and broaden their existing offer.

**Recommendation 2. Define character development as when people align their actions with their considered values.**

### 3. Map but don't eliminate risk

As nothing is 100% efficient you will always get less out than you put in unless you take a calculated risk. Charities and public bodies are entrusted to make the most of public money but being trusted and being trustworthy does not require risk elimination. In fact the pursuit of a 'risk free' approach can be one of the most wasteful undertakings of all. It promotes bureaucracy, a lack of learning and a blame culture.

Accountability and prudence are important but knowing how and when to take a risk is equally important. When designing policy, commissioning services or as a practitioner with young people it is crucial to map where the risks lie and prepare a response in case a risk becomes an actuality. It is important to consider the benefits to taking an identified risk. This is sometimes referred to as 'risk and benefit analysis'.

Identifying and sharing risks between stakeholders builds trust, strengthens relationships and promotes a sense of ownership to a project or initiative.

Young people's lives can be blighted by the taking of reckless risks but many young people can also be unfulfilled and stagnant by living their lives in a no risk comfort zone. We need to create an environment in which young people are supported and trusted to take calculated risks. In order to achieve this, we must be willing to support one another to take calculated risks and continually asking ourselves: are we taking the risks we need to succeed? Or are we being too risk averse around, health and safety, finance and the media etc.?

**Recommendation 3. Take calculated risks, allow your partners to take calculated risks and encourage young people to take calculated risks.**

## 4.0 Specific Recommendations for Practitioners

### 1. Utilise a four step process

A key issue is that character development can happen any time, any place, anywhere. A young person can have a row with a friend, make a realisation and change the way they live their life forever. Given that this is the case, the question arises, why should society pay for your service? Well a good character development programme offers a four step process that is far more likely to get results than to leave it to chance.

Whatever service you provide (sport, cadets, youth work, sail ships, etc.) the four step process is either present or it isn't. If it is present the process runs through the activity like a golden thread and can be called character development but if the process is not present it is just an activity, a positive activity with all the benefits no doubt but it would fit more accurately under some other heading such as 'leisure, volunteering or engagement'.

The four step process\* is:

1. An interactive activity – This is not chalk and talk, young people must be actively engaged.
2. Compassionate challenge – Skilled staff must question the values, actions and behaviours of the young people in a caring but assertive way.
3. Guided reflection – Skilled staff support young people to identify and capture any realisations.
4. Transferred Learning – Young people decide how they will apply what they have learned to their lives in the future.

\*Based on principles of David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle

The critical success factor in their process is the ability of the staff member. A youth worker would be expected to have the necessary facilitation skills but some teachers and sports coaches also have this ability. The job title is less important than the skill set in successfully applying this four step approach.

Funders are faced with a wide range of youth activities competing for a dwindling pot of money. By practitioners of character development adhering to the same 4 step process, funders are better able to differentiate between character development programmes and other forms of youth provision.

**Recommendation 1. Embed and utilise the four step character development process in your work.**

### Inspira Case Study

*Delivering throughout Cumbria and Lancashire the Inspira organisation specialises in career and personal development services for 13-25 year olds working with local schools, academies, third sector partners and colleges.*

*Inspira's expertise around character development and its ability to explain its work using the four step process described above, has enabled it to expand into programmes aimed at supporting adults which are funded by employers, the DWP and the SFA.*

*An example of how Inspira has been able to broaden its offer is the Jobtrain programme commissioned by the DWP:*

*"Barriers to success are often tied to levels of confidence and resilience so the Jobtrain programme is designed to focus on developing the individual's character and self-belief. The course content is purposefully high energy and interactive, making use of group feedback and team challenges. Participant feedback demonstrates a real preference for this approach and the outcomes have been so positive that the commissioner has extended the contract."*



## 2. Speak the funder's language

Youth work is defined by the values in which it works, outdoors pursuits utilise the amazing British countryside for its context and the process described above defines character development. But none of this is as important to budget holders as the outcomes.

Hard pressed commissioners may well welcome your values, have a vision for the context, and understand the process but the key for the commissioner is achieving 'bang for the buck'.

There is still money out there – in 2016 the UK central government is set to spend over £89billion on education, £138billion on health care and £110billion on welfare. Local budget holders are undeniably feeling the squeeze but they do still have money and they have more decision making powers than ever before. By utilising the four steps character development approach defined above you will be able to achieve the outcomes that the budget holder requires such as employability, mental wellbeing, educational attainment etc.

Your task is to make it as easy and compelling as possible for them to invest in your service by speaking their language regarding outcomes. Whilst utilising a common language regarding process.

**Recommendation 2. Use the funder's language to determine outcomes.**

### Horizons Case Study

The Horizons programme is part of the Supporting Leicestershire Families initiative. Having been trained by PDP in the 4 step character development process the staff have been achieving fantastic outcomes for young people and their families. A good example of this is the story of one family consisting of a father, two boys, aged 18 and 15 and a girl aged 12. This family had sadly suffered the loss of their mother from Cancer 2 years ago, leaving dad to look after the children alone. Dad took the death of his wife very badly and suffered mental health difficulties and has had 2 strokes. The relationship between dad and the oldest child was at breaking point due to their roles within the family being very blurred.



The family support worker referred the two older boys onto a character development course designed in partnership with PDP and their father onto an identical course but for parents. After each task the staff challenged the participant's actions and their behaviours in a very productive and compassionate way, helping them to come up with their own understandings and helping them to recognise how their actions impacted on one another and how they might be perceived.

Dad started to appreciate how his actions and behaviour has impacted on his children; he now understands that his older child was confused about his role in the home following his mum's death and dad's ill health. The older son realised that dad is stronger than he thought and is now more supportive with the younger children. The older boy who was NEET and would stay in bed until past 1pm each day has now started a college course and is making great progress within his life.

By attending the course dad has built up a great network of supportive friends and he now attends further groups. The 4 step approach enabled participants to build or rebuild their self-esteem, strengthen their relationships and create a positive environment which has benefited their families.

### 3. Ensure you get the young people / funder balance

In commerce, customers are the budget holders (you do a service for someone and if they are happy they pay you) but in the provision of services, including youth services, this is different, you have 2 groups to please. You need to ensure that both the young person and the funder have their needs satisfied or you will cease to exist.

The term 'youth led' can cause confusion, the funder's needs are as important as the young people's needs. Listen to them, keep them informed and explain the values, context, process and outcomes to both groups.

**Recommendation 1. Give equal priority to the needs of the funders and the young people.**

## 5.0 Specific Recommendations for Commissioners

### 1. Make it personal

If you want to get the best results from people treat them like people. It is easy to disappear into a system which processes everyone into numbers and statistics when transparency is king.

Businesses work on relationships, projects work on relationships, young people work on relationships and so must you. To get the best results for young people you must establish a relationship with the people you commission.

The direction of travel over the last 30 years has been largely to commission based on quantifiable measures and factual information. To use this method alone is totally flawed. You need to make a case for interpersonal assessment so that qualitative, subjective judgment can be included.

This does not mean giving bias to someone you know. It means getting to know someone so that you can assess them accurately.

The personal approach, a Christmas card, a thank you letter or a 'how is it going' phone call will go a long way and help people go the extra mile to get the results you need. It also enables them to contact you with honesty and transparency if things start to go off the rails.

**Recommendation 1. Success relies on good relationships. Build a supportive 'learning culture' between the funder and the delivery agent from the start.**

### 2. Focus on results

In order to get the best results for young people, commissioners need to avoid 3 common pitfalls.

**Firstly** – The status of the organisation being commissioned is irrelevant; private company, government agency, local or national charity. Your focus needs to be on getting the result you require for young people and not stopping people from making a profit or favouring small local community groups. Private companies, big charities, mutual bodies or public interest companies should all be judged on the service they provide and not on the entity of the service and commissioners should refrain from showing any bias to a particular entity. Focus on who will give you the best result for young people based on their track record and their current offer/ability.

**Secondly** – Commissioners come in far more shapes and sizes than ever before. Schools, charities and local government have far more freedom to pay for the services you want. There is a natural bias however that must be consciously and continually challenged. The bias towards commissioning 'self and similar' E.g. Schools commissioning teaching assistants when they could buy in a revolutionary educational programme or health care looking only in the medical profession for solutions. Albert Einstein's famous quote "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results" has never more accurately been applied than to the commissioning of self or similar.

The first 2 questions of the commissioning process should be - what result do we aim for and are there already examples of the results being achieved really well? If so how can we get something similar here? If not how can we commission a new approach which will deliver the results we want?

**Thirdly** – Look for a balance between what works and what's new. There is a balance to be struck between bringing in the latest thinking and using the tried and trusted. It is as lazy to commission the latest fad as it is to commission the same tired old programme.

The best way to ensure you are getting the balance right is to explore and compare results. If you trial the latest approach and share your findings with providers you will help to up skill the workforce and avoid them becoming stale but it will also stop 'commission fliting' because there will be more latest thinking in 6 months' time.

By definition something new cannot be proven to work – you have to make a judgement that you think it will work. If we never take this risk we never get any change. However there are plenty of times when what is needed is a proven, tried and tested approach that can be delivered really well. There is no point reinventing the wheel.

**Recommendation 2. Look to commission for the best results; not in-house, not only the voluntary sector or only the most innovative, just the best results.**

### 3. Trust or dismiss

Your role is to understand what you are commissioning, how it will achieve the results you require (for example the four steps of character development), how it will be monitored, what will happen if things start going wrong and how it will be evaluated.

If you understand all of the above, you can commission with confidence.

Your role is not to manage the provision. If you are seeking solutions or continually asking for reports you may well have lost trust in your provider and failure is on the cards. You cannot half trust a provider. You either trust them and let them manage the provision or you must dismiss them and find a provider you can trust.

**Recommendation 3. Do not micro manage providers. They have responsibility so as far as possible offer support and allow them to lead you.**

## 6.0 Specific Recommendations for Policy Makers

### 1. Don't think of character development to meet a deficit

Nobody is the finished article. Everyone needs opportunities to develop their character. We should start with the view that we all have the potential to develop our characters as positive parts of ourselves. Character development should not only be seen as a cure for people, whose lives have gone off track, In recent times we have seen high flying people demonstrating very poor character in sport, commerce, politics, journalism etc. The more educated they are and the more powerful they become the more dangerous they are to society if they have not successfully developed their character.

Character development does support individuals who are struggling onto the bottom rung of society but by recognising the need for character development opportunities across the board we will ensure a healthier, safer and more productive society for everyone.

**Recommendation 1. See character development as a universal need.**

### 2. The education system must develop character or fail

What could the UK be if its people were even more creative, more confident more resilient? The education system does not have sole responsibility for the development of a young person's character but it does have a golden opportunity. A point recognised by the current Secretary of State. "The development of character and mental wellbeing are personal priorities of mine" Nicky Morgan Secretary of State for Education - 22nd Jan 2016. And yet the education system still focuses on other priorities such as the ability to acquire and retain knowledge. Is this because access to the internet is somehow in jeopardy or is it because the education system is somehow stuck in its ways?

Teachers are second to none in their ability to impart knowledge but in today's society we need holistic educators who can impart knowledge, train for skills and facilitate character development. Teacher training needs to achieve this or schools need to bring in people who have this skill set to fill the gap. Recommendation – Education must include character development.

### 3. Take the lead

The UK government has a clear empowerment strategy; devolving power to schools, local authorities and community groups etc. But empowerment without developmental support and clear leadership can feel like abandonment.

The speed of change in society is ever increasing and you are mistaken if you expect parents, teachers or youth workers to develop a young person's character without support.

The key is in supporting them to find each other and recommending a character development methodology as described in this paper.

At the end of the day this cannot be left to chance as it is the character of individuals and how they support one another that is the essential to the social fabric of society. Someone needs to take a lead. This paper can be the flag. Why not pick it up and run with it!

**Recommendation 2. Don't leave character development to chance. Join with others to support and promote the aims of this paper.**

## 7.0 Conclusion

Success in education is far more than qualifications or a career path. It is the enabling of people to live a life with purpose and integrity.

By following the recommendations in this white paper, practitioners become clearer and more valued, commissioners will become more approachable and effective and policy makers will be focused and more supportive.

The real beneficiaries will be young people however; they will receive meaningful character development opportunities delivered by skilled staff. They will explore their values without chastisement or indoctrination and they will be able to contribute to creating a society which supports the greater good as active and empowered citizens.