





Challenger Programme

2018 - 2023 Evaluation

COMPLETED BY
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March 2025





Northside Partnership
Where Opportunity Meets Community



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



Cómhoinníte ag an Aontas Eorpach
Co-funded by the European Union



An Roinn Forbartha Tuaithe agus Pobail
Department of Rural and Community Development



Community Foundation Ireland

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme 2021 - 2027.

Contents

01

Introduction

1

- Aims & Objectives
- Methodology

02

Key Findings

3

- Impact of the Challenger Programme
- Recommendations - Areas for Development

03

Challenger in Numbers

6

- Review of the Annual Report Data 2018-2022

04

Challenger - the Lived Experience

9

- The Voices of Service Users & Service Providers

05

References

81

1. Introduction

Aim & Objectives

- The aim of this project is to evaluate the Northside Partnership's (NSP) delivery of the Challenger programme between 2018 and 2023 - with a particular focus on capturing the lived experience of students, parents and service providers.
- The evaluation aims to assess to what extent the Challenger programme goals and objectives were achieved. Using an inclusive participatory approach, the evaluation combines an analysis of existing quantitative data, Challenger programme reports, workplans and evaluations with an additional qualitative assessment of the programme to provide the NSP with a holistic evaluation of their delivery of the Challenger programme.

The Challenger Programme

- The Challenger Programme was set up by the NSP in 1995. It provides structured supports for students and their parents from sixth class to sixth year to help students:
 - Transfer from sixth class into secondary school
 - Prepare for their Junior Certificate
 - Complete their Leaving Certificate
- Every year the NSP provides support to a total of 200 students from five partner schools. As students complete their secondary education they are able to offer 40 new students a place on the programme each year. Challenger parents are offered a further education programme together with the supports provided to their children.
- Challenger is funded by the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP). The programme relies on the support of teachers and principals of the partner schools as well as the City of Dublin ETB and Dublin City University.
- Challenger has an oversight committee made up of representatives of students, parents, home school liaison officers, NSP staff and Dublin City University. This committee takes part in interviewing parents and students and in deciding who is offered a place on the programme.

1. Introduction

Methodology

- Triangulation of evaluation design was achieved by using a variety of both quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches, and by including a range of key stakeholders within the consultation process.
- Key stakeholders consulted include; students who are currently participating in the Challenger programme, parents whose children are current or former students in the programme, members of the school community such as Home School Community Liaison Officers, and the NSP's Challenger programme team who are responsible for managing and delivering the programme.
- In total 154 people were consulted, 30 current students, 112 parents, and 12 service providers.
- Photovoice, which is a participatory visual method, was used to capture the lived experience of both students (n=30), parents (n=11) and service providers (n=12). Photovoice is a method rooted in community activism which aims to facilitate people to tell their own stories directly [1]. In this case, we wished to amplify and centralise the lived experience of the Challenger programme impact in a way which was meaningful and inclusive for participants.
- A survey was also used to capture the thoughts and opinions of a wider sample of parents (n=101)
- In addition to this primary data collection, the annual Challenger reports were reviewed, as were a variety of related programme documents and previous evaluations.
- This type of triangulation of both methods and sample aims to decrease bias and increase validity of the evaluation findings.



2. Key Findings

Impact of the Challenger programme

It's a wonderful programme, extremely well run. A great addition to the community
Parent

'It's a Wonderful Programme'

- The feedback across the board from students, parents and service providers regarding the impact of the Challenger programme on the students who participate in it is overwhelmingly positive across the board.
- From improved academic performance, increased knowledge of career pathways, increased expectation of what students feel they can achieve in terms of post Leaving Certificate education and careers, to significant improvements in self-efficacy and self-confidence – the Challenger programme is experienced as overwhelmingly positive by all key stakeholders who contributed to this evaluation.
- Ninety-seven percent of Challenger parents surveyed (N=101) would recommend Challenger programme to other parents, and 99% are very satisfied/satisfied with the programme.

Levelling the Playing Field

Academic Opportunity & Achievement

- The vast majority of Challenger students (90% on average over the four year period) have progressed to either Further Education, Higher Education or to an Apprenticeship, with just 10% on average leaving to go directly to employment post Leaving Certificate.
- The percentage of Challenger students progressing to Higher Education increased from 38% to 63% from 2018/19 to 2021/22.
- Through its mix of practical supports in terms of grinds, and access to the Gaeltacht for families who would otherwise not be in a position to afford them, through to the provision of career guidance and the opportunity to visit university campuses and connect with new networks of friends, the Challenger programme has a significant impact of both the social and cultural capital of participating families.
- Social and cultural capital are important factors when it comes to social inclusion within education. By bridging the gap in terms of parents' and students' knowledge of how to navigate the higher education system and the opportunities, routes and pathways available to them, the Challenger programme provides a key function in reduction of social exclusion in education. (see Catts and Ozga, 2005; Mikiewicz, 2021, and Riches 2020 for more on the importance social and cultural capital in education).

2. Key Findings

Impact of the Challenger programme

Self-Confidence & Peer Support

- The dominant theme which is found across all stakeholder groups, and across all of the data-collection methods used in this evaluation, is the positive impact the Challenger programme has on the self-concept of both participating students and their parents. Students, parents and service providers consistently highlight the significant improvement in self-confidence that the Challenger programme instills in students.
- Peer-support and confidence in making new friends is also a key factor mentioned by stakeholders in this consultation.
- While concepts such as self-confidence, friendship and peer support can seem more intangible and perhaps less impactful measures of the programme's success than quantitative measures such as progression to higher education, research shows that confidence and strong peer friendships are key factors in students academic achievement. (for example see Hansen, K. and Henderson 2019; Sunu and Baidoo-Anu, 2023; Acosta-Gonzaga E. 2023; Alotaibi et al, 2023, and Shao et al, 2024).). Thus the impact and value of any interventions which can increase self-confidence and provide supportive peer-networks for students cannot be over-stated.

Impact on Family & Wider Community

- The Challenger programme not only impacts the participating students positively, but has had a significant impact on both the students' family and wider community.
- Parents and service providers in particular highlight the fact that Challenger is a whole family and indeed a whole-community programme. Parents must be committed to the programme and to supporting their children in participating fully. Parents speak of how Challenger has increased the families sense of togetherness, ability to communicate more effectively and overall sense of hope for the future.
- The role-modelling impact of previous Challenger students going on to third level, becoming teachers in their local schools and giving back via supporting the Challenger programme activities, is also felt deeply by the community.

2. Key Findings

Recommendations - Areas for Development

Sustainability and Diversity

- As outlined herein, the feedback across the board from students, parents and service providers regarding the impact of the Challenger programme on the students who participate in it is overwhelmingly positive across the board. The main areas highlighted in terms of potential need for attention, for growth and improvement, centre on the areas of sustainability and diversity
-

Insecure Funding Model

- As is common in the sector of community development, the Challenger programme is reliant on funding support from government agencies and public donations. While funding is currently secured for the next four to five years of the programme, longer term the programme remains at the whim of funding decisions beyond the control of the NSP. This insecure funding model makes long term planning or programme expansion challenging.
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Succession Planning

- The insecure funding model makes long term staff planning and further programme expansion difficult. The Challenger programme has expanded significantly since its initial inception, without a comparable increase in the staffing levels to support the expansion.
 - The current staffing model is highly dependent on current staff who have a very extensive and deep knowledge of the programme and how to run it efficiently and effectively.
 - This model appears unlikely to be sustainable if the current long-term members of staff were to move on from the programme.
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Diversity & Inclusion

- Service providers emphasise the need to expand the Challenger programme to include persistently underrepresented groups in higher education, such as the Traveller community.
- They also highlight the challenge of reaching students who lack parental support, which is critical for participation in the programme. Without this support, these students face additional barriers to accessing the Challenger programme and its benefits.

3. Challenger in Numbers



Challenger Annual Reports

- Each year the Challenger programme team produce an end of year annual report on the programme. Figure 1 provides a summary of the Challenger participants' outcomes in terms of their post Leaving Certificate destination, as outlined in the annual Challenger reports from 2018 to 2022.
 - As outlined in Figure 1, yearly there are approximately 40 students graduating from the final year of the Challenger programme. The annual reports provide detail of how many Challenger programme students progress post Leaving Certificate to either of the following - Further Education, Higher Education, Employment or Apprenticeship.
 - Further Education refers to education and training after post-primary level and up to Higher Education. Higher Education is provided mainly in Universities and Colleges of Technology or equivalent bodies, and is often referred to as Third Level.
 - As outlined in Figure 1, the percentage of Challenger students progressing to Higher Education increased from 38% to 63% from 2018/19 to 2021/22.
 - The vast majority of Challenger students (90% on average over the four year period) have progressed to either Further Education, Higher Education or to an Apprenticeship, with just 10% on average leaving to go directly to employment post Leaving Certificate.
 - In terms of engagement with the programme, as outlined in Figure 2 on almost 12% of students enrolled in the Challenger programme between 2018 and 2023 withdrew from the programme before their expected end-date. While detailed feedback from students, and/or their parents, who have withdrawn from the programme was not gathered as part of this evaluation, the Challenger programme team keep high-level notes as to the reason a student discontinues the programme. The most common reasons noted are that the student has other extra-curricula activities which either clash with the Challenger programme, which mean that the student has too many commitments already to attend; or that the student has moved schools, or has withdrawn from school.
-

Figure 1: Challenger Participant's Outcomes



Destination	2018/19		2019/20		2020/21		2021/22	
Further Education	13	33%	16	43%	8	21%	7	17%
Higher Education	15	38%	13	35%	19	50%	26	63%
Employment	6	15%	3	8%	6	16%	1	2%
Apprenticeship	6	15%	5	14%	5	13%	7	17%
Total	40	100%	37	100%	38	100%	41	100%

- Further Education
- Higher Education
- Employment
- Apprenticeship

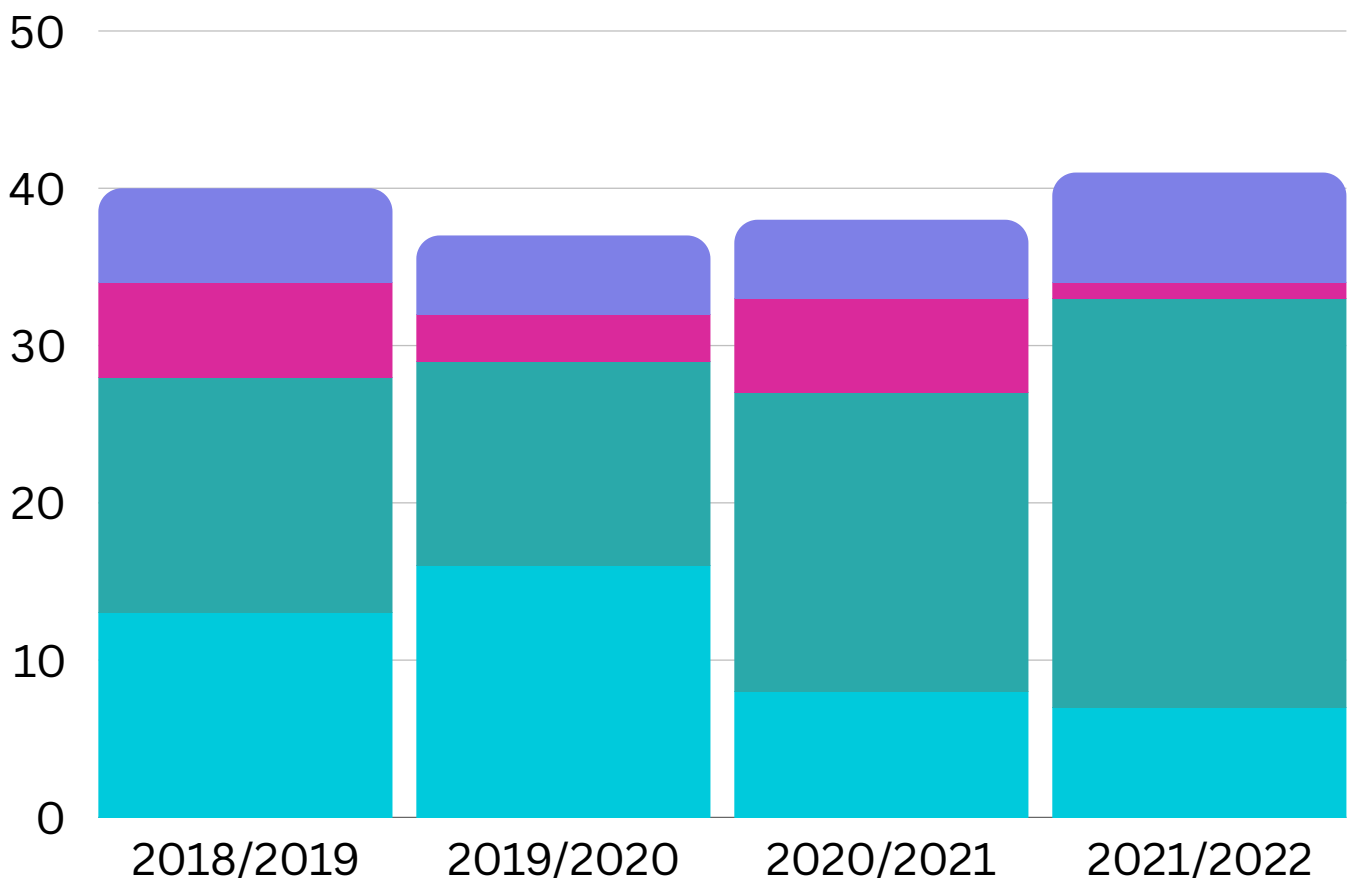
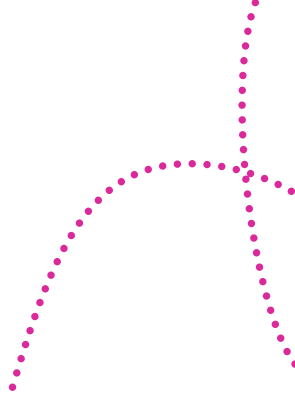
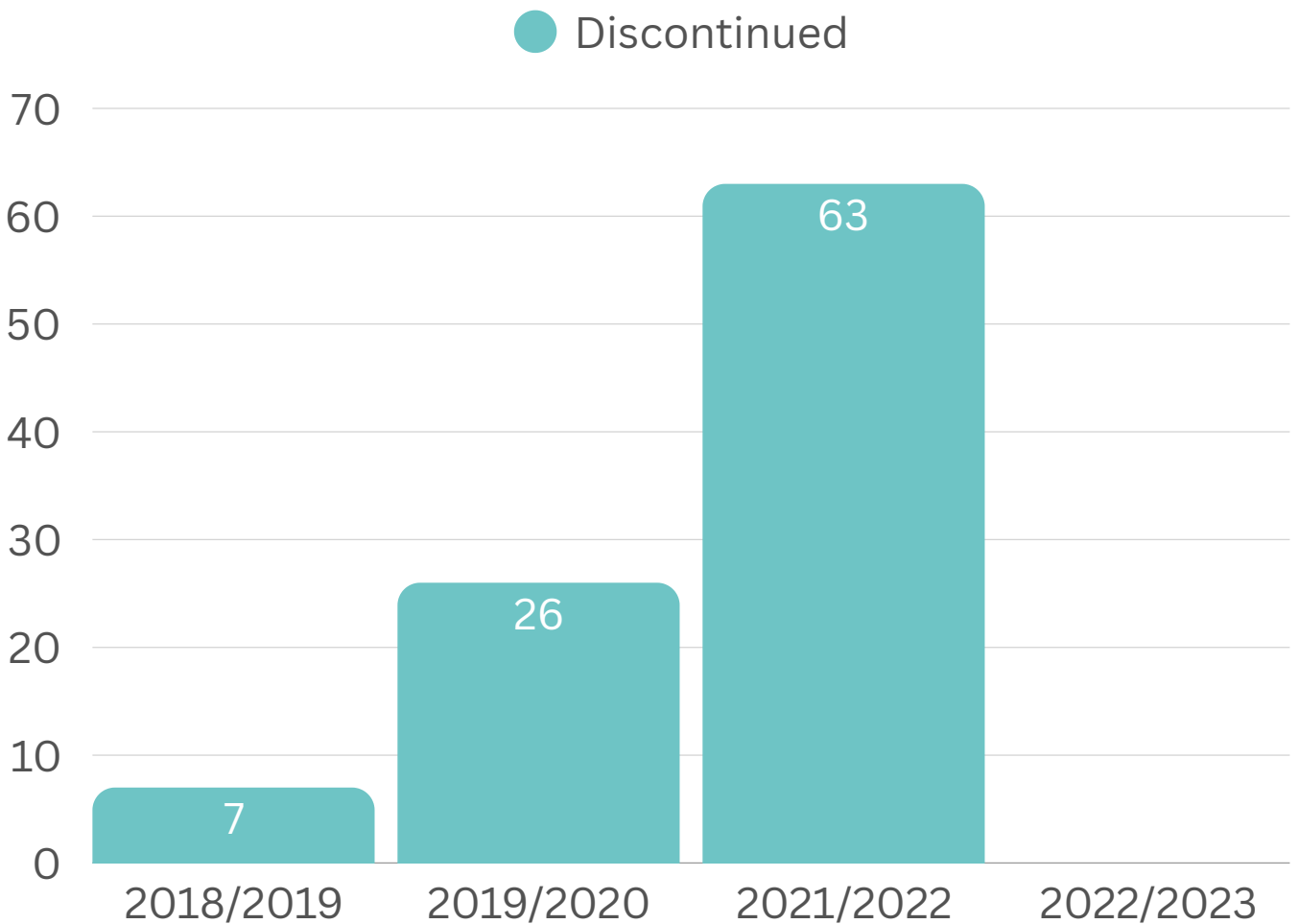


Figure 2: Challenger Participant Engagement*



	2018/19	2019/20	2021/22	2022/23
Discontinued	7	26	63	0
As a % of AVG # Challenger Students per year (n=157)	4%	14%	29%	0



4. Challenger the Lived Experience

As part of the evaluation process four consultation workshops were held with key Challenger programme stakeholders. These included workshops with students who are currently participating in the Challenger programme, parents of young people who are either current or past participants in the Challenger programme, the NSP Challenger programme team, and Home School Community Liaison Officers (HSCL) who are members of the Challenger programme Steering Committee.

In addition to this qualitative approach to data-gathering, a survey of parents was also conducted (N=101). The results of both the consultation workshops and the survey of parents are outlined in this section.

Challenger Parents

Key Findings

A facilitated focus group was held with a group of parents (N=11) whose children participate within the NSP Challenger programme. Parents used a mixture of photovoice and group discussion to explore and share their insight and experiences. As part of the Challenger programme, parents must complete the NSP STEPS to Excellence and Personal Development programme. Overall the groups' reflections on their own lived-experience of receiving support for both themselves and their children from NSP via Challenger coalesce around the following key themes:

Beyond Academic Support - Confidence, Self-Worth, Self-Esteem, Friendships:

- While all parents acknowledge the significant improvement in academic achievement amongst their children, and the impact of the financial support for extra-curricular tuition in the form of grinds, and access to the Gaeltacht in particular, the key impact which was reinforced by parents throughout both the focus group discussions, and in survey feedback, is the more tacit emotional impact that the Challenger programme has had on their children.
- More 'tuned-in', 'self-aware', higher 'self-esteem', 'self-belief' and 'self-worth' are all intangible benefits which parents have experienced their children receiving from participation within the Challenger programme. Parents consistently discussed the improved self-confidence which they see in their children since they began participating in the Challenger programme.
- While these intangible concepts can be difficult to measure and their impact challenging to assess, research has found self-confidence to be a key factor associated with both academic achievement and career progression. (for example see Hansen, K. and Henderson 2019; Sunu and Baidoo-Anu, 2023, Acosta-Gonzaga E. (2023). Thus the impact and value of any interventions which can increase self-confidence amongst students cannot be over-stated.

My daughter, she's a lot more, I don't know what the word is. Like she's smart, but like she's, I don't know.....Tuned in. Self-aware. Like very self-aware.....She probably wouldn't be though if she hadn't met half the kids in this programme.....because it wasn't me she was listening to, it wasn't the teacher she was listening to, it was the group of people she was around and the type of people that was around her, whether they were building her confidence or tearing it down or whether they were making her be a better person It was her experiences throughout this whole year that's changed her from being someone that cannot stand going to school, that hates life in general to someone who cannot wait to go out the door and walk everywhere. So it's amazing to hear how they go from being so shy to being so confident and standing up in front of hundreds. And it makes you proud like. Extremely proud.

And self-esteem. Self-worth....they don't teach that in school. With this programme, they have a voice. They have an opinion. They're listened to. And we listen to them more I find as well because we're taking into consideration that right, they're putting the work in on their end. Why don't we meet them halfway? It's like they're trying.

...the programme is brilliant. Like it's absolutely, even with her, I found she probably wouldn't be as happy in school or have the friends she has now at the minute if she hadn't have done the programme.....it kind of gave her a better outlook on life.

My daughter was so shy when she started....so it really does give them the confidence to stand up and speak in front of people and do all the things and make friends.

My daughter, she's very shy as well, so I can see actually at this point I can see it coming out now where she's gaining a little bit of her own self-worth and confidence. It's coming, so I'm really delighted. It's amazing to watch.

The self-belief as well kind of goes up, doesn't it? Like the way they feel about themselves and their confidence. It's not just towards other people, but their actual self-confidence and self belief...it just roots up real quick. I don't know what it is. Like mine's only in it a year and she would have been real shy or she'd have been real defensive, but then all of a sudden, ...it was like she was growing into this different person herself. I don't know how to explain it.

Challenger Parents

Key Findings

Increased Expectations & Knowledge about Routes to College & Careers

- Having increased knowledge about the possibilities of further and higher education is another key positive impact of the Challenger programme for the parents who participated in this consultation.
- This knowledge is part of what is often referred to as social and cultural capital - two concepts which are considered important factors when it comes to social inclusion within education. By bridging the gap in terms of parents and students knowledge of how to navigate the higher education system and the opportunities, routes and pathways available to them, the Challenger programme provides a key function in reduction of social exclusion in education. (see Catts and Ozga, 2005; Mikiewicz, 2021, and Riches 2020 for more on the importance social and cultural capital in education).

My son doesn't know what he wants to do yet, but he's already thinking about college places like. Things like that, which would never have been a conversation for us growing up.

My older son was also in Challenger and even though he didn't get the points that he needed, he went on to college, he did the pre-university. He didn't get enough points for the college place, but he knows what he's learned from Challenger, it's not the end of the road. He has a career path. He's got a job for now and he's going to go back as a mature student, you know. So no matter what, it will support him through life. When you think like when they finish at sixth, like after Leaving Cert, that's it. It's not. It's like a fulltime guidance counsellor in the background. Their own little like personal guidance.

Challenger Parents

Key Findings

Whole Family Positively Impacted

- As mentioned earlier, parental support and hands-on involvement is a key component of the Challenger programme. Parents of students enrolled in Challenger must themselves complete the STEPS personal development programme provided by the NSP.
- This whole family commitment to the Challenger programme is reflected in the positive impacts reported by the parents who participated in this consultation. Rather than being a programme which just benefits the participating student, parents report that participating in Challenger is something which benefits the whole family.
- Parents talk of how Challenger ‘brings the family together’ and creates ‘tighter bonds’ within the family unit. Parents also report that the whole family is learning new skills in terms of positive communication, knowledge and expertise which helps the whole family system support each other’s progress academically and educationally.

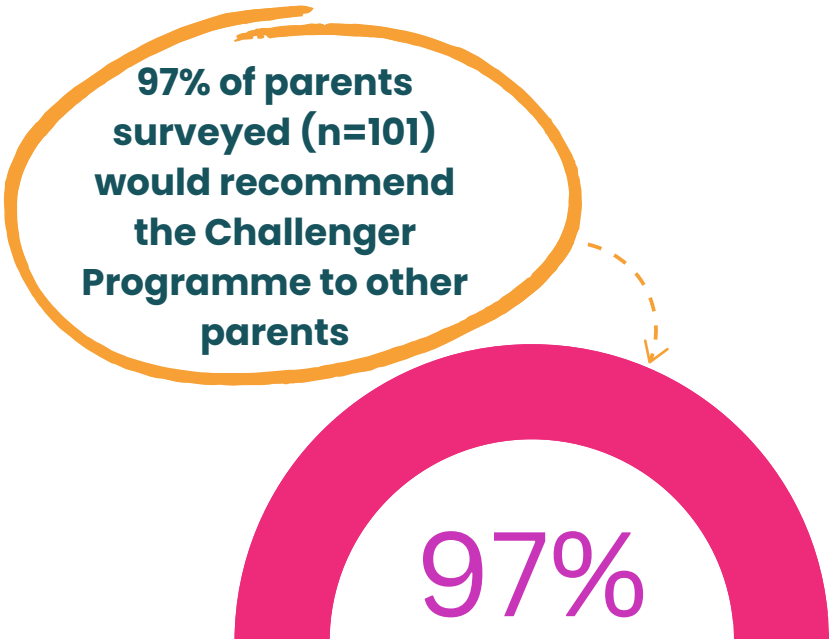
.....I can say to her right, I’m going to the gym because I feel like I’m going to blow a gasket in this house. And she’ll say right, I’ll see you in an hour and that’ll be it..... she knows I’m going over to get out, to get away from being frustrated with the kids or over-stimulated. And she then does it herself. Now, she’s like right, I’m going to join the gym in September with my friends because seeing is doing. And I wouldn’t have even done that if I hadn’t done the STEPS programme or the Challenger or any of this. Like I wouldn’t have been here as I am now. So it does. It benefits the whole family really.

Challenger Parents

Key Findings

Survey Feedback

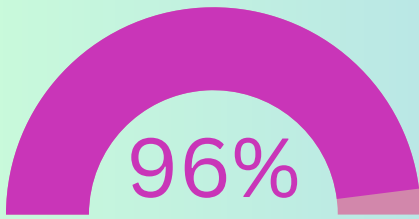
- In addition to the in-person consultation with a group of parents (n=11), a survey was distributed to parents of all current Challenger students - N=101 responses were received.
- The feedback from parents regarding the impact of the Challenger programme via the survey was once again overwhelmingly positive, with 97% of parents surveyed indicating that they would recommend the Challenger Programme to other parents. This question is an adapted version of the Net Promoter Score, a one-item scale measurement which, while not without its limitations, has been found to be a useful assessment of people's experiences of education and social care services. (see for example Wilberforce et al, 2019).
- As outlined in Figure 3, 99% of parents surveyed indicated that they were either very satisfied or satisfied with the Challenger programme, and the vast majority of parents also believe that the Challenger programme is supporting their child's academic progress as well as their emotional development.



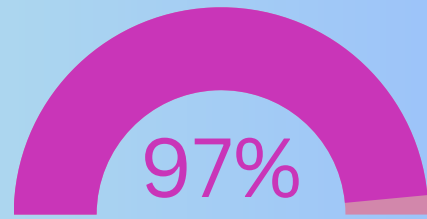
97% of parents surveyed (n=101) would recommend the Challenger Programme to other parents

97%

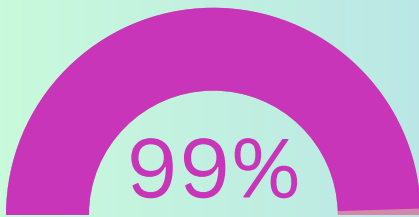
Figure 3: Parents Survey (n=101)



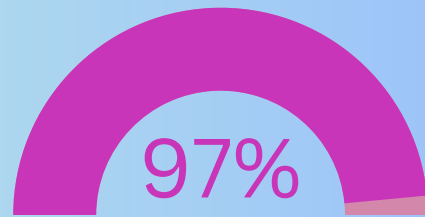
% of Parents who feel the Challenger Programme is helping their child prepare for their future education/career goals Extremely Well/Very Well



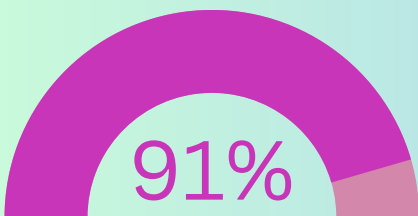
% of Parents who feel that the Challenger Programme is Very Effective/Effective in supporting their child's academic progress



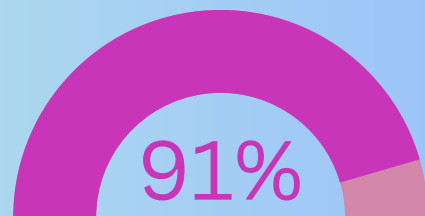
% of Parents who are Very Satisfied/Satisfied with the Challenger Programme



% of Parents who would recommend the Challenger Programme to other Parents



% of Parents who are Very Satisfied/Satisfied with the communication between Challenger Programme staff & parents



% of Parents who feel that the Challenger Programme provides adequate support for their child's emotional and social development

SURVEY FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS

My son got to go into the Institute for grinds. He said that he felt on a par with all the other students in there. I honestly would not have the finances to send him there. I am very grateful for all the support.

Jeanette has been amazing and really helpful throughout the years

My son has really come out of his shell and is more confident in himself

It's a wonderful programme, extremely well run. A great addition to the community

I think that Challenger boosts my daughter's confidence, helps her to form friendships and encourages her to work harder

It has brought my daughter out of herself, and more confident in herself; school results in exams have improved immensely and she is delighted to be back this year

FIGURE 4: CHALLENGER IN A WORD ACCORDING TO PARENTS

Lifeline

I'd say lifeline....because it does give kids that extra advantage that they normally wouldn't have to progress further in education and also in life. So yes, lifeline.



Hopeful

Focus

I would say focus. Just trying to give her a focus and a goal to work to, goals to work towards.



Privileged



Grateful

Grateful. Guidance to the kids and the parents again.



Future



Community

I think community. And not just for the kids, like for the parents as well because especially when your first child is going in, it's nice to see and talk to parents that are going through the same thing. And you're like you're not the only one.



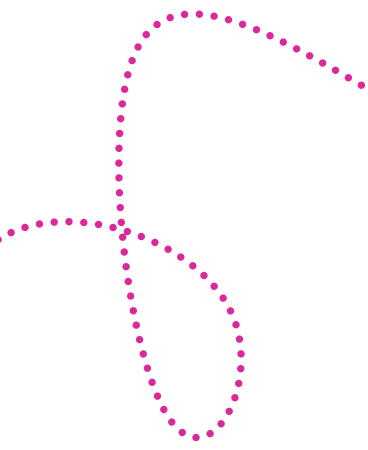
Saviour

Saviour. I think if my child hadn't have gone in to Challenger in third year, I don't think they probably would be going into sixth year now. So I think in an awful lot of ways, that saved my child and kept them on that path in school.



Challenger Parents

Photovoice Output





This is the first picture I picked to represent my children and what they're getting out of [the Challenger programme] and I think it represents confidence. And it's got medals on them, so I see that as achievements, which I think Challenger helps children today accomplish this confidence and achieve higher goals than most kids would.....academically, they're fantastic....And for the confidence, like my oldest daughter, she never in a million years would have ordered something for herself online or....gotten on a bus and paid. And since the Challenger programme, she's gotten the confidence now to do all that stuff..So she'll talk to people, strangers like and even just ordering food somewhere, she'll do it now no problem.



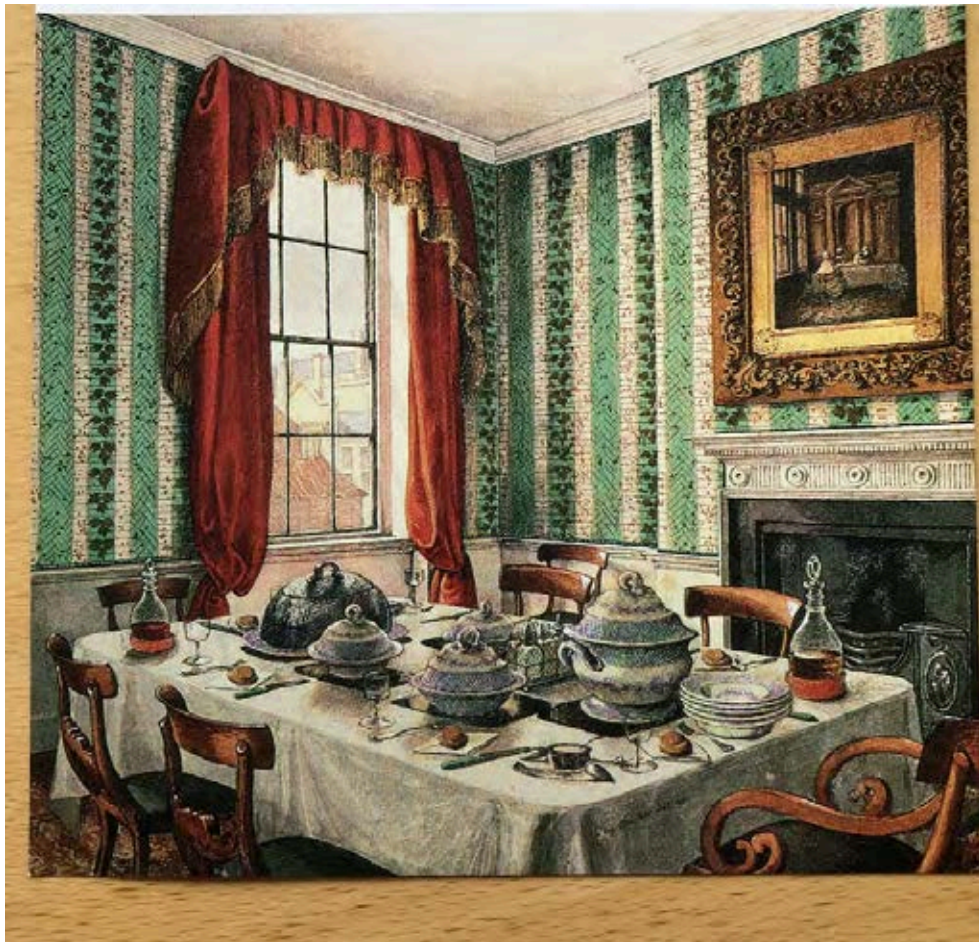
And the second picture I picked was that one because when my two older kids were growing up, I was working an awful lot, so I didn't really see them that much or get to spend a lot of time with them. And since the Challenger programme now, I've gotten more time with them and have become closer to them. So in that sense, the family has gotten a tighter bond from the Challenger programme as well.....I would have been, for want of a better word, probably a bit of a hard arse when it came to the two older kids because I wasn't there, so I didn't have the patience for them as much. But since the Challenger programme, the STEPS programme more so, I've changed my way of looking at things. So I'd sit down with the two of them and talk about whatever they want to talk about or we'd find something that we all find interesting and we do something with that. Like if it's going out and doing something or watching something, talking about something. So yes, it's brought me a lot closer to the two older kids.



I picked out this picture. It's got inscriptions on it, wisdom, courage, confidence, compassion and there's also a flower that's blooming. So I think for my child or for the children in Challenger, this is a route that will take them to achieving whatever goals they want to achieve through confidence, compassion, courage and in the process, they will get wisdom from the Challenger programme.



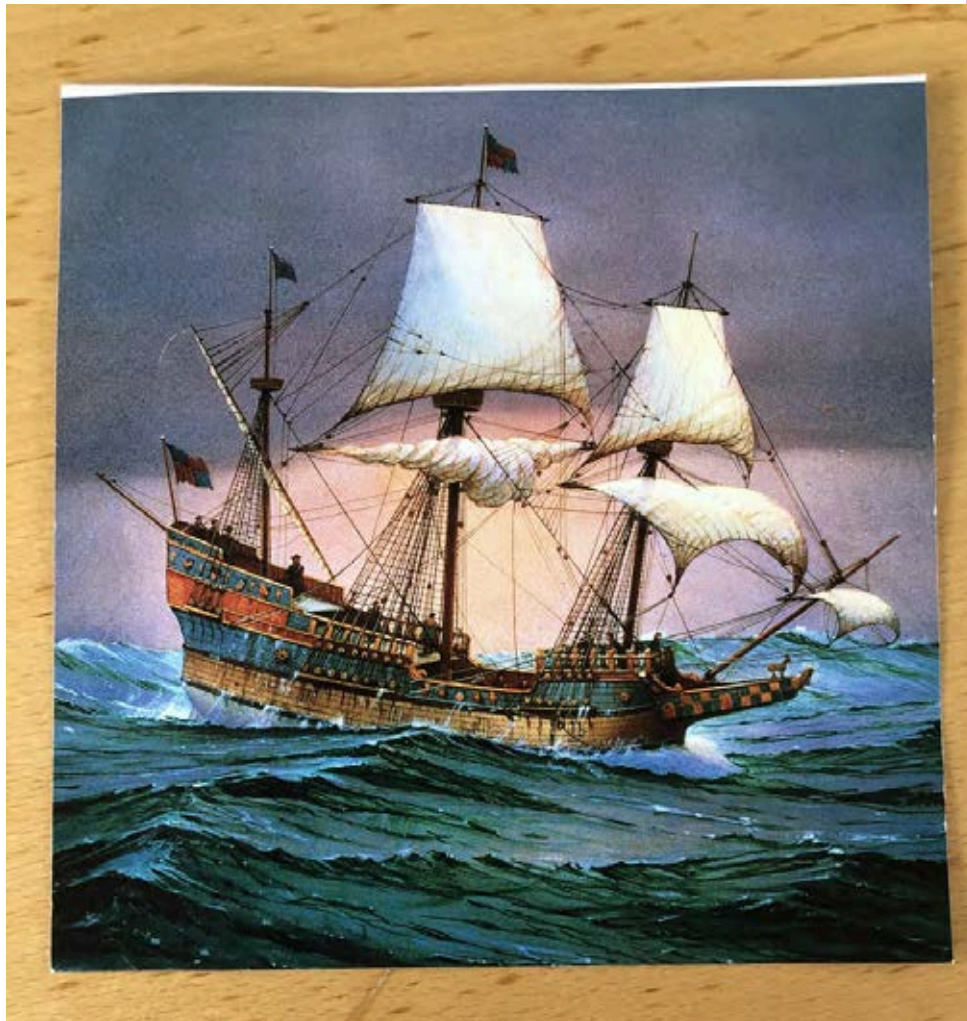
I have this picture here. It looks like it's royalty and there's a crowd of people that are watching a procession. So at the end of the year, our children, they graduate. So it's a way of recognition of achievements and there are bodyguards there, so we will be there as parents, just to support the children in their achievements and encourage them.



And then the third picture, the dinner table. Unfortunately, there's no people there, but I would interpret that as a family. They sit together and share a meal together. Apart from sharing meals, they will share probably everything as a family.



I picked a tree because it just reminded me of like growing and really growingThe tree looks to be growingand it reminded me of [my daughter] in the Challenger Programme and growing and it looks very healthy and hopefully this programme will, you know, foster that for her.
That's why I picked it.



This is just a ship on the sea and I was thinking of a voyage or a journey and she's on one. We're on one together. I get real emotional talking about it. You know, I feel like this time, it is real emotional for me anyway. I wasn't expecting it. So yes, just, you know, hoping you do the right thing for them and that's what I find that anyway.....I find it hard, you know. To make the mistakes and you don't want them to make mistakes, but they'll only learn from it, you know.

I think the public speaking was great. She has a bit of confidence more so out of the house and I think it's from the public speaking. They're very good with building their confidence and opening up - because at home, she's very quiet. She likes to stay in. Everything is a push, but she comes [to the Challenger programme] and like I say, she walked in and that's enough for me. She wants to do it. I think that's great.

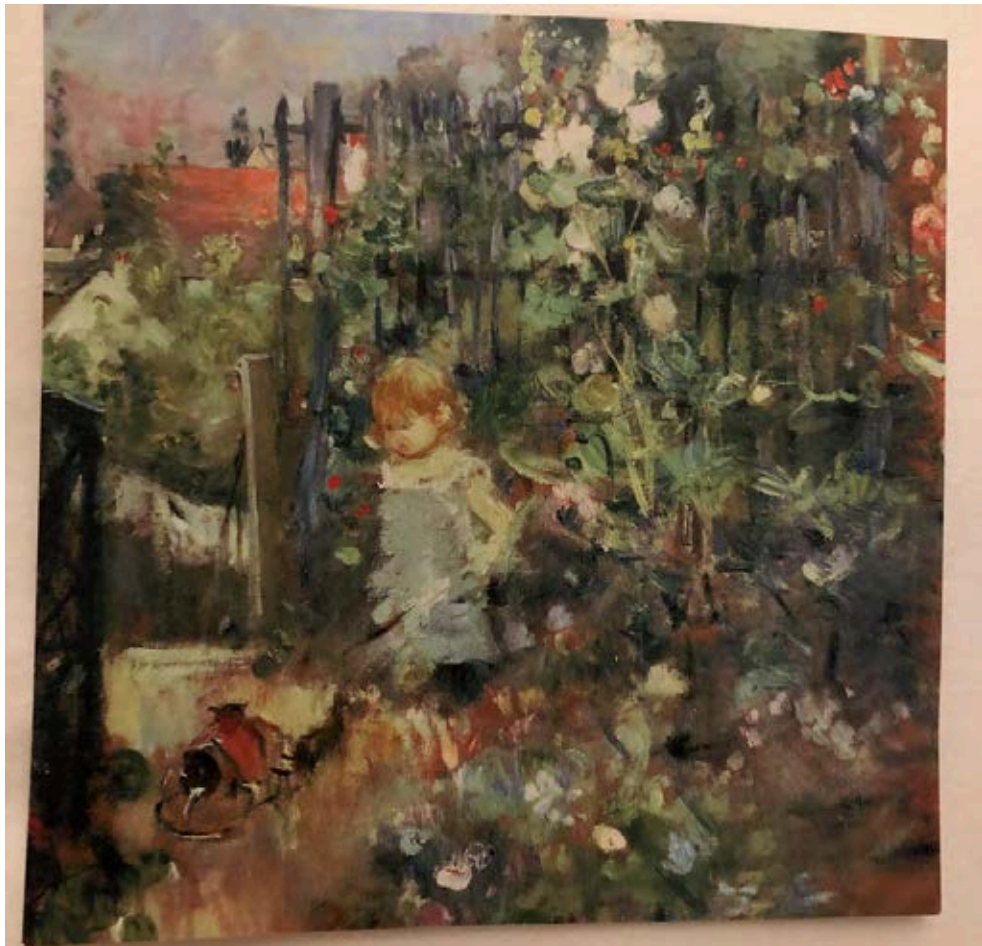


So for my daughter, I chose that picture there. She's a very outgoing and popular young girl and she's got lots of friends. I think the programme has kind of helped her develop that kind of sense of social intelligence a little bit. She's starting to see she can sometimes see things very much from her own perspective andI think by having lots of different people that aren't necessarily school pals or, do you know, and there's kind of challenging characters in her group as well and it gives her an opportunity then to come home and say well, you know, let's see it from their perspective or, you know, even getting influenced. The teacher that's doing the reading group, she's come through the Challenger programme as well. So I think there's opportunity to see, you know, inspirational people around. Academically, results were definitely better this year in terms of reading and spelling and particularly English. I don't spend much time reading. I never really fostered a culture of reading in my home unfortunately, so I was happy that, do you know, she did have the time to get the novel.

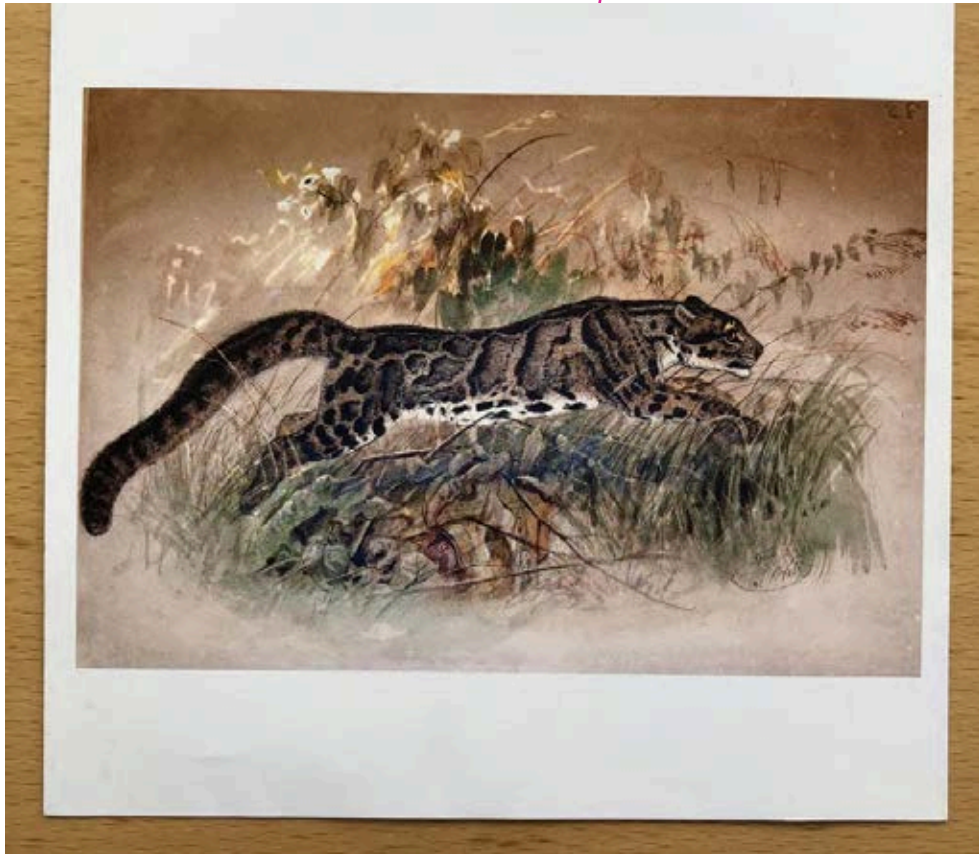
You have to commit to your education. So I think I'm trying to hold her in that space now that it's not all about the pals and hanging out. Like you do actually have to work hard to get what you have in life. Like I had to get an education to get a job to put money into that Revolut for you. It just doesn't appear. So I think what I'm trying to hopefully do is foster that a little bit more. But I think, you know, academically and kind of intelligence-wise, emotional intelligence-wise, she's got a lot out of it.



I've chose these kind of two together. So I kind of feel my life is a little bit of a long, hard road at the moment, whether that's kind of family life and all those bits that kind of go along with life. And I of think from the STEPS programme, I kind of was trying to wrap that scarf around a little bit more, whether that was just looking after myself a little bit, putting those goals in, being a bit more sure of myself and where I want to kind of go, along this road.... there's loads of different ways to go in life. So yes, I mean family life is hard, so I think these two are trying to just wrap those bits that we got from STEPS and navigate the way.



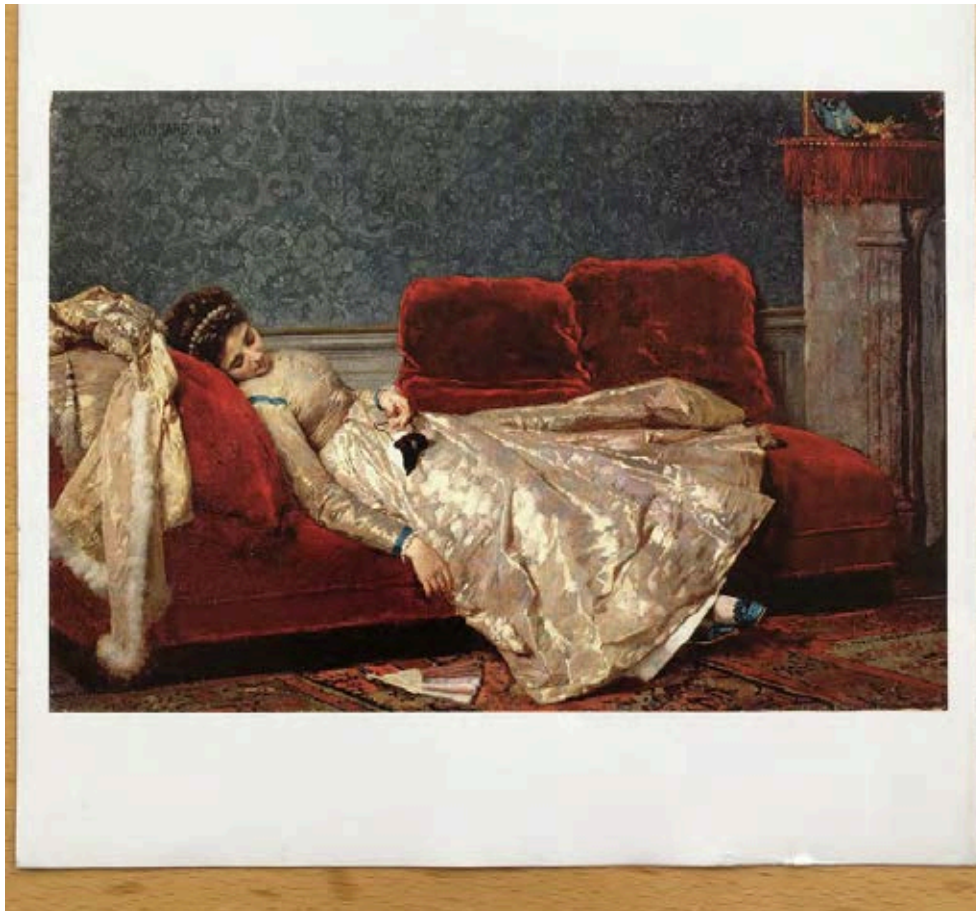
Well, I just seen there's a little garden with flowers and stuff like that and I think a few people mentioned it, just growth as well. I've seen it with my children as they go through [the Challenger programme]. Some better than others, but that's individual personalities. And so this just reminded me I suppose of one of my children, and their just nice and content and they just go with everything and love everything and enjoy everything and I suppose two of them would be more like that. They'd take hold of everything. One's a lot quieter than the others, so she gets told to do the Challenger. You're going to your grinds, or not grinds, your classes. You're doing this, you're doing that.....And she goes and loves it then. So that's where I have to kind of, I do have to push her. She's that type of person. And as well, it's keeping them off the streets. Try to keep them busy and keep them involved in everything. And then the last one again, I think somebody else said it. It's brought us all together, I think. Because like the eldest was telling, one of them is going to the Gaeltacht on Saturday, so having a discussion on, like you know, what it's like and what to bring and how you'll get on and this and that. We were all involved in that.



I think this is very strong, powerful. It's a leopard. I thought it was a puma, but it's a leopard. Because my girls have been growing from strength to strength with confidence, independence and maturity as well. And they're not afraid to go it alone, whereas you know, they don't need to be like following the crowd, doing things just because their friends are doing them. They're now the ones encouraging other people to join with them and do the things, like go to the Gaeltacht and all that and they're kind of promoting it to the others because they've been already. So I'm very proud of them for that. So that's them.



It's got nice calm seas in the background there and a nice horizon, blue skies, which, is kind of, you know, hopeful. And the front bit where the waves are crashing over, it looks like the evil eye....evil eyes are to ward off evil and jealousy. So you know, I'm always telling them when people are being mean to them and stuff, bullies and stuff, they're usually jealous of something about you. My child would have a lot of anxiety about this because she gets bullied a lot because she loves education ...So I mean she's come a long way with that. She's still finding it hard in school with things like that, where people tease her and stuff. So it takes a lot of energy from her to keep standing up and keep going and doing what she's doing, which is like the tide. You can't stop it. It keeps coming, ebbing and flowing like and moving. So that's what she's doing, moving on all the time and going, following her dreams.



This is me, exhausted from everything. Trying to be their everything because I'm a single parent. Bringing them everywhere, trying to be their rock and giving them lifts to all the grinds and the different things they want to do. And yes, that's me at the end of it all. Relaxing, exhausted and yes....like getting them there. Some of the kids even have, like my two don't do sport, but [other kids would] be doing sports and so they're juggling between like fitting in the sport and then going to the grinds or going to the classes after school for the Challenger. But it's hard ...their school put on extra classes for maths and Irish, and [my child] wants to go to everything. So yes, it's hard racing around trying to fit it all in.



This first one is like my family. We came in 2005 in the winter time to Ireland and we have lots of sheep where I'm from. That's why it's like, sheep are close to our heart. And then 2007, my daughter was born here. She is like, you know, the flowers, I am happy she is growing in the sunshinesometimes kids, you know, stay on their own, drugs and everything. That's why, you know, I'm so happy she grows up from flowers and can follow her heart. She is very happy [with the Challenger programme].



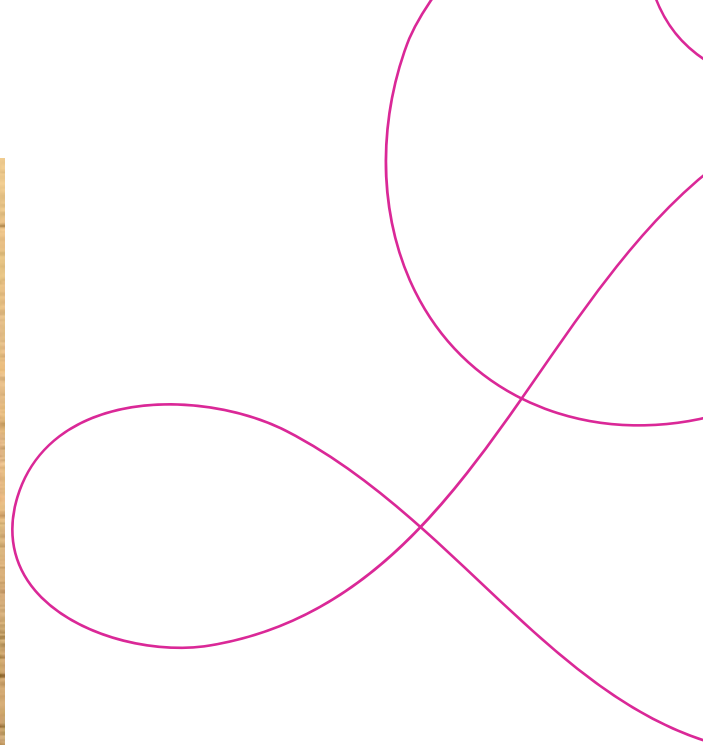
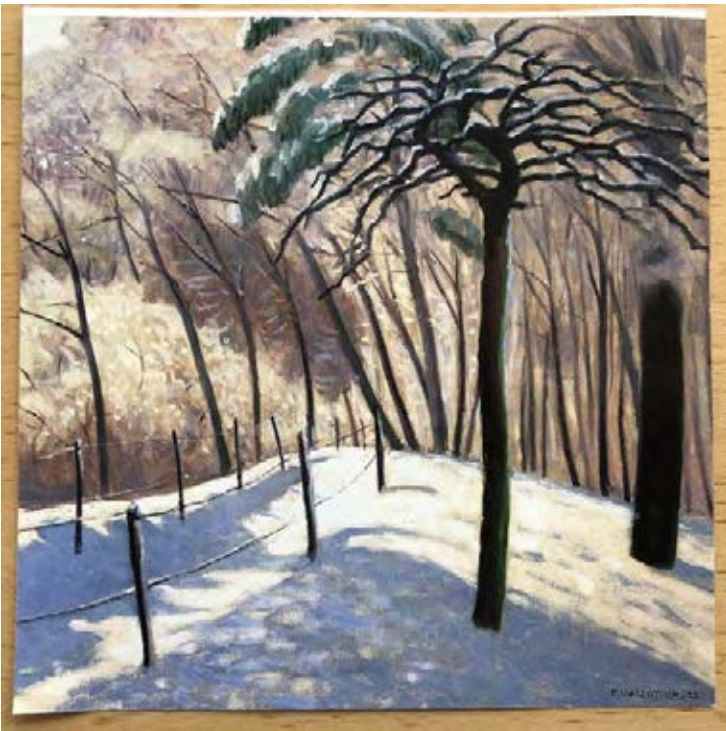
This reminded me of my son because he would just live for art. Rather than give him a book or anything, just give him a paint brush or a colouring set and he's happy as Larry. Challenger has given them confidence, definitely, 100%. My youngest is not a great mixer. He'll have a few friends, but he'll have those friends for life, do you know. Like whoever's in his group, he'll always be with. But [Challenger] has given him more self-confidence. Even like yesterday, I was actually shocked with him because he has to organise his work experience...So he says I'll do it up in the local super-market because if I go to college, at least then I'll have retail experience to get a job around college.....I was actually so proud of him to actually go up and ask to speak to the manager.... that is a huge thing, I would have thought. And then he comes out and goes yes, I got it. I'm delighted with that, so it has boosted his confidence. Definitely it has and I hope that confidence will still grow....definitely, confidence-wise. Even if they don't go on to college, do you know what I mean, it's giving them confidence in life. Life skills, socialising and things like that as well. Public speaking is actually brilliant for kids, bring them out of their shell.



I picked this first one for my daughter and me. A circus. Because she's into everything and she has me bringing her to everything as well. So if someone said will you do this? She'd be like yes, I'll do that. So she has me run ragged and I think it looks like a horse race or something there and I think that's kind of like what Challenger is bringing home as well is that like you know, you have to kind of row in with everyone and, you know, do your best and try and get to the end of the race.

And then this second one is family. I just think, although it's only a mother and a child, but I think in general, as a parent, that protective thing over her children and she's looking for guidance, for some help, I suppose, on the road of parenting because we've never done this before. She's been first and my young lad is coming in behind.

She really wanted the Challenger programme and when she got the phone call to say she got it, she actually cried her eyes out because she was so happy she got this programme. Like she just thought this was the best opportunity on the planet. She's a good kid.she tries really, really hard. Really hard. And she wants to be a teacher and I know she will. She will be a teacher because she's determined, you know that way. So like that's why I'm throwing the kitchen sink at her, just trying to grab every opportunity I can, just to push her that little bit more to get to where she wants to be. And with the Challenger, I think it has helped her.



So I started off with this picture.you can't see the path forward, but the fence is there to guide you along the way. So I think that's what the Challenger has done for my daughter. And then what it's given her is a new circle of friends and friendship and company. And I suppose taught her about compassion and friendship and supporting each other and not having to tick a box and that type of thing.



And then the second one....it's sort of the family for me. So I just feel warm and happy and content and I feel that she's being supported in what she needs, which means that I'm being supported in what I need.

Challenger Students

Key Findings

The following pages outline the photovoice output from the workshops held with young people who currently participate in the NSP Challenger programme. The young people represented a range of years within the programme, from first year through to sixth year. One workshop was held with junior cycle students (first to third years), and one workshop was held with senior cycle students (fourth to sixth years).

Overall the groups' reflections on their own lived-experience of receiving support from NSP via the Challenger programme coalesce around the following key themes:

Opportunities & Growth

- The students highlight through their photographs the increased opportunities they feel they are receiving through participation in the Challenger programme. From extra support via grinds, access to the Gaeltacht, and public speaking courses - the students speak of expanded horizons, getting a 'head start' and having doors opened for them by the programme.
- This leads to a sense of a brighter future, filled with possibility and more opportunities than they would have if they had not participated in the Challenger programme.
- In keeping with the feedback from parents, the students also highlight the increase in self-confidence which Challenger has instilled in them.

Friendship & Peer Support

- Again echoing feedback from parents in this consultation, the students highlight the positive impact of peer support and the new friendships which they have made in the Challenger programme.
- Challenger allows students to widen their circles of friendships beyond their schools, and enables them to connect with like-minded people. Students also report that Challenger is increasing their confidence in their ability to make new friends.
- Research consistently shows that friendships can positively impact students' academic performance and grades through the provision of emotional support, stress-reduction, improved focus and better concentration (see for example Alotaibi et al, 2023, and Shao et al, 2024).



The Challenger Programme moves us along the way the wind carries the butterfly....the programme is really helping, especially the public speaking.

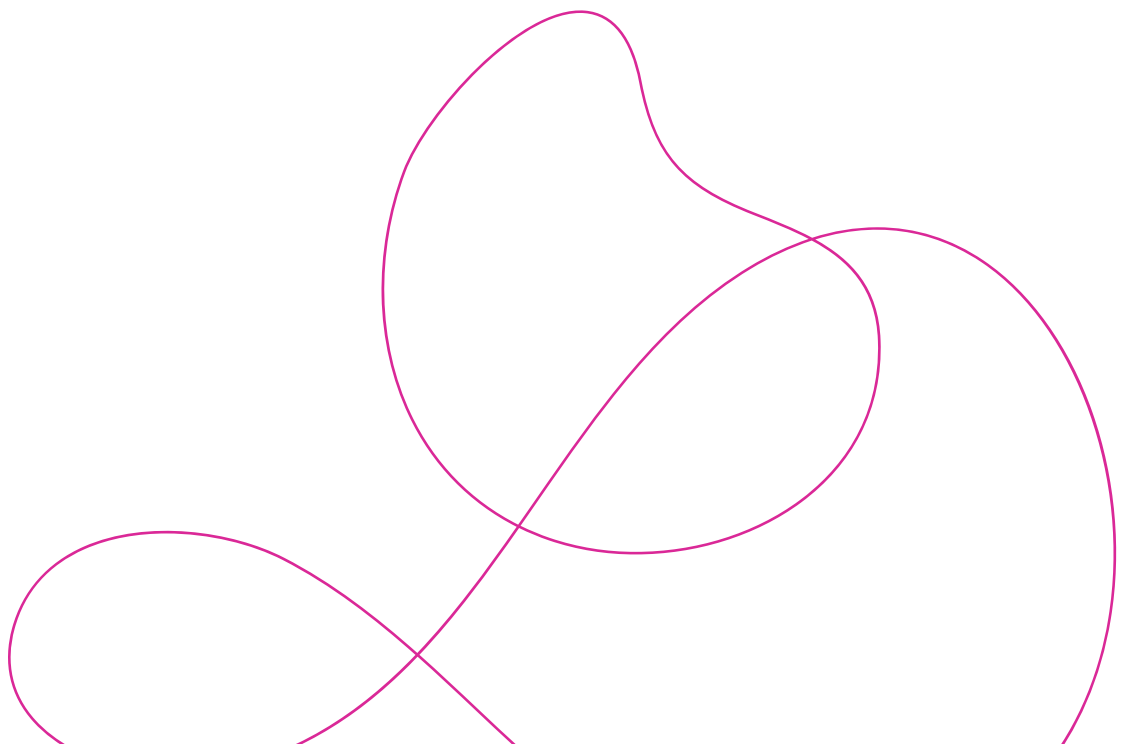


I thought the Challenger programme could be the greenhouse and we are the flowers inside, and it's helping us to grow.

The maths is really helping me – I did badly in my maths in my Christmas exams and I did better in my summer maths.



Challenger helps us take bigger steps in life, helps with confidence and all – and it can help lead us to go down different roads as we go through the programme. Like the public speaking, the speeches I've done in DCU, I would never have gotten up in front of all those people if it wasn't for Challenger, because I was so shy before.

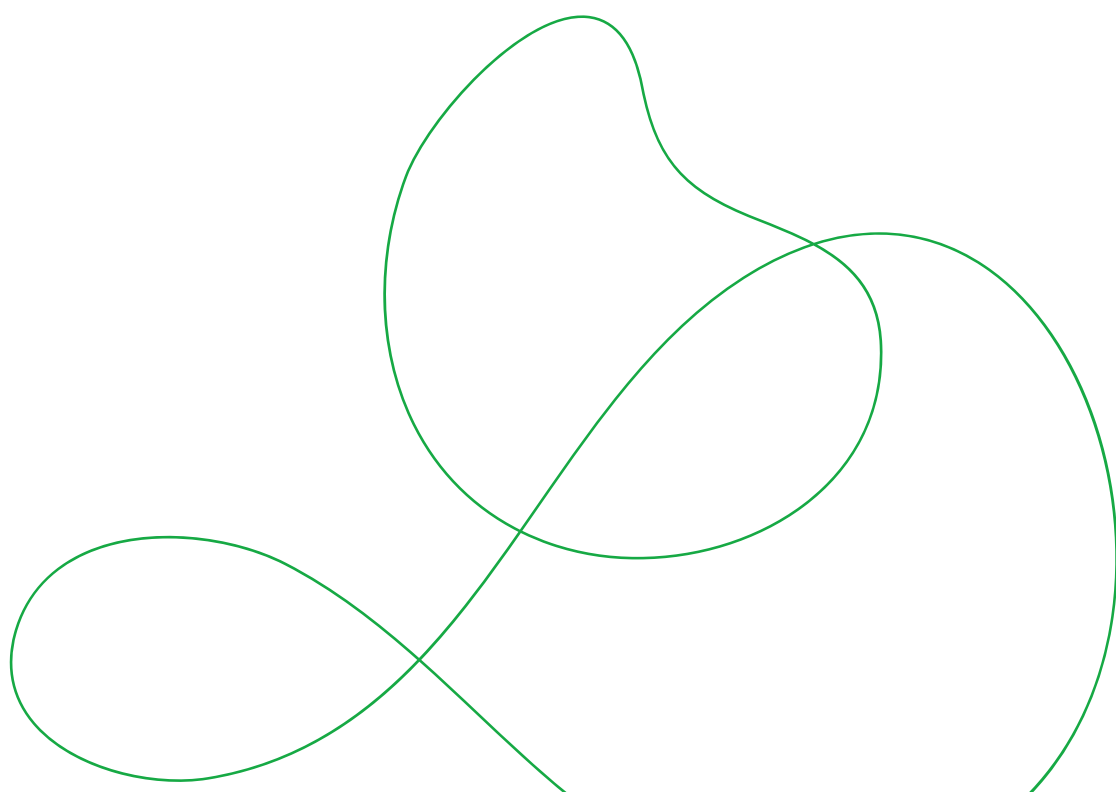




These are two photos and they are both parallel, one's like if you don't go to Challenger and you don't get as many learning opportunities, that's the dead plant because it dies, your education has more of a chance of dying, you lose interest. The second picture, that's the alive plant, and you get your confidence to learn. You get more opportunities and your educational ability and interest grows. It's brighter as well, because your future is brighter. It's bright, it's more colourful – because there are loads of dead plants and loads of alive plants, the alive ones capture your eye more, people are going to pay more attention to you if you have all the abilities – like public speaking – that Challenger gives you.



This represents that there can still be bright things, growth, even if it's raining – because it looks like it's raining in the photo. Even though you might not like some of the classes that you do, you can still have nice things in the programme.





The sprouts of the tomatoes – it's like Challenger gives loads of opportunities that come out of nowhere, but they help you grow and support you.

It's nice to see how they go from green to like an orangey colour to red – the changes in it.



There's a bench over in the corner and I thought I'd take a picture of it because lots of people sit on benches to talk, and that's what we do in Challenger we sit around and talk, and get to know each other. So I thought that would be a nice picture. Some people can be very lonely, so you get to meet other people.



This is to represent the friends I made through the Challenger Programme. It helps with Irish and Maths and public speaking – I'm able to talk without a bother. And you make friends along the way.



The tree represents growing, you're able to talk to people. We just thought this was a really nice garden, and it was nice because every time we come up to this room we walk past it so we see it a lot. Coming in you walk past it and you would notice it.



All the other strawberries were little tiny things and really green, and this one was fully grown all by itself and it was at the bottom and I just thought it was nice, that you can grow by yourself.



We took a picture of the shovel because it points you in the right direction, and that's what the Challenger programme does. It gives you the support to pursue what you want to do, the grinds are really helpful, and something we don't get in school....and the Gaeltacht, I feel more confident speaking Irish now.



The line represent the gap in life before and after Challenger, as in now we have the possibility of a third level education.



We took a picture of the flower coming out of the netting to represent the growth through the programme.



The Van symbolises the support we get from the Challenger programme for young people in the community, that support like in third year and the grinds in sixth year....the Public Speaking has had most impact definitely for me, I wouldn't even talk out in front of people and then in DCU for the graduation I did a whole speech. It helps a lot.



We took a picture of this bucket that says 'Head Start', because that's what Challenger gives you, a head start in your education, and it can open up opportunities for you. It opens up doors, gives you the opportunity to do different workshops that you wouldn't otherwise get to do.



The hands here show how Challenger brings us all together.



We took a picture of a wishing well to symbolise hope, because Challenger gives you hope for your education. Further education after school.



And then flowers, because Challenger helps you grow with your education.



We took a photo of a dead plant to show that was like at the start, I took a photo of an alive plant to symbolise our growth.



We took a photo of our feet, to symbolise the support we get from others on the programme, and all our hands in a circle to represent diversity – we're all different and all equal.

Challenger Service Providers

Key Findings

The following pages outline the output from the workshop held with both the NSP Challenger team and members of the school community who assist in the recruitment of Challenger students within the eligible schools.

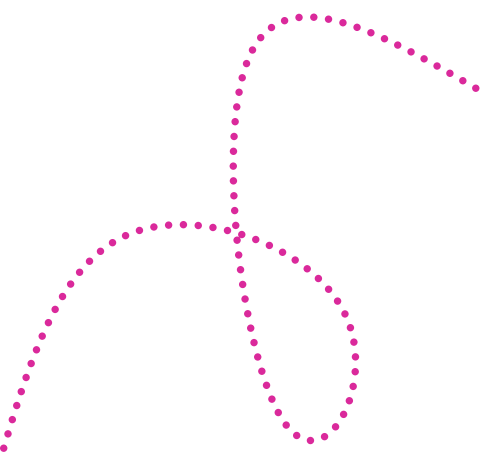
The group used both photovoice and design-thinking exercises to reflect on, express and discuss their experience of the Challenger programme.

Overall the groups' reflections on the Challenger programme coalesce around the following key themes:

Levelling the Playing Field

- From the perspective of the service providers who participated in this consultation, a key positive impact of the Challenger programme is its ability to level the playing field when it comes to equity of opportunity within education. By providing practical support in terms of grinds, and funding to support access to the Gaeltacht it provides those who would otherwise not be in a position to afford these with a 'seat at the table'.
- Another key aspect of levelling the playing field is providing parents and students with the knowledge, guidance and expertise in how to navigate the routes in terms of post Leaving Certificate further and higher education options.
- Both of these combine to provide Challenger students and their parents with an important resource in terms of the social and cultural capital required to bridge the gap with regard to social exclusion within education. (see Catts and Ozga, 2005; Mikiewicz, 2021, and Riches 2020 for more on the importance of social and cultural capital in education).

“.....sometimes we overestimate the amount of information that our amazing parents have in terms of helping their child progress. And I think that Challenger really, really helps those families and, you know, I wouldn't like to lessen the impact of that. I think it's really, really important because it's not just monetary value that parents would value. It's the know-how, the progression, the realisation that other people are doing all of this as the norm. And I know that from personal experience because I have a parent going, well, sure you just come to school and do the homework. And you're like, well, no, not if they want to score, you know, your 500-plus points. And I think if that's the aim of Challenger, I think well, that's what they're succeeding in....”



Challenger Service Providers

Key Findings

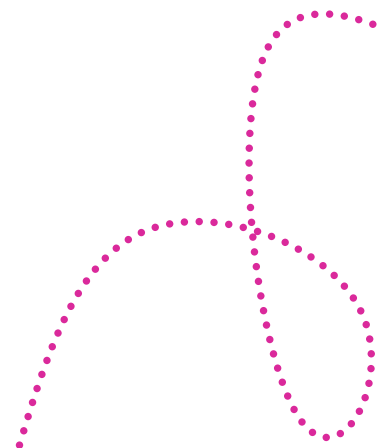
Expectation, Motivation & Ambition

- Another key impact of the Challenger programme identified by the service providers who participated within this consultation is the more intangible boost and support the programme provides participants.
- Service providers report that the programme instills confidence in students to expand their horizons and to consider more ambitious career and educational pathways than they might have previously had in mind for themselves.

Family and Community Impact

- Echoing parents who participated in this consultation, the service providers also highlight that the Challenger programme impacts positively not just the students who participate in it but also their wider extended family and indeed their community.
- Through role-modelling and peer support, the benefits of the Challenger programme reaches far beyond the individual student to both their families and community.

“...when Challenger participants return to their area to work that's a great source of pride within the community and it's really important for role modelling again. So yes, it's all about development of peers”



Challenger Service Providers

Key Findings

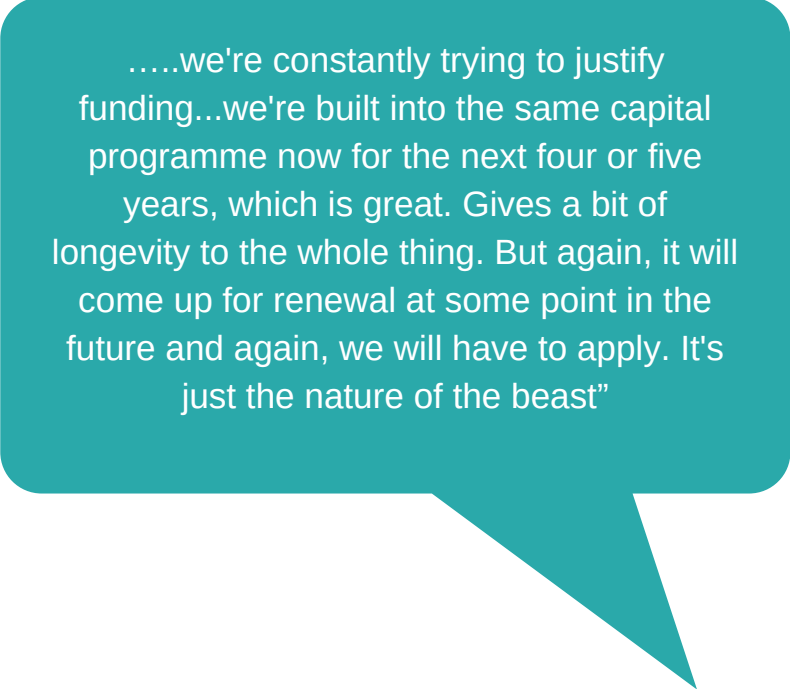
Challenges & Areas for Development

Sustainable Funding and Staffing

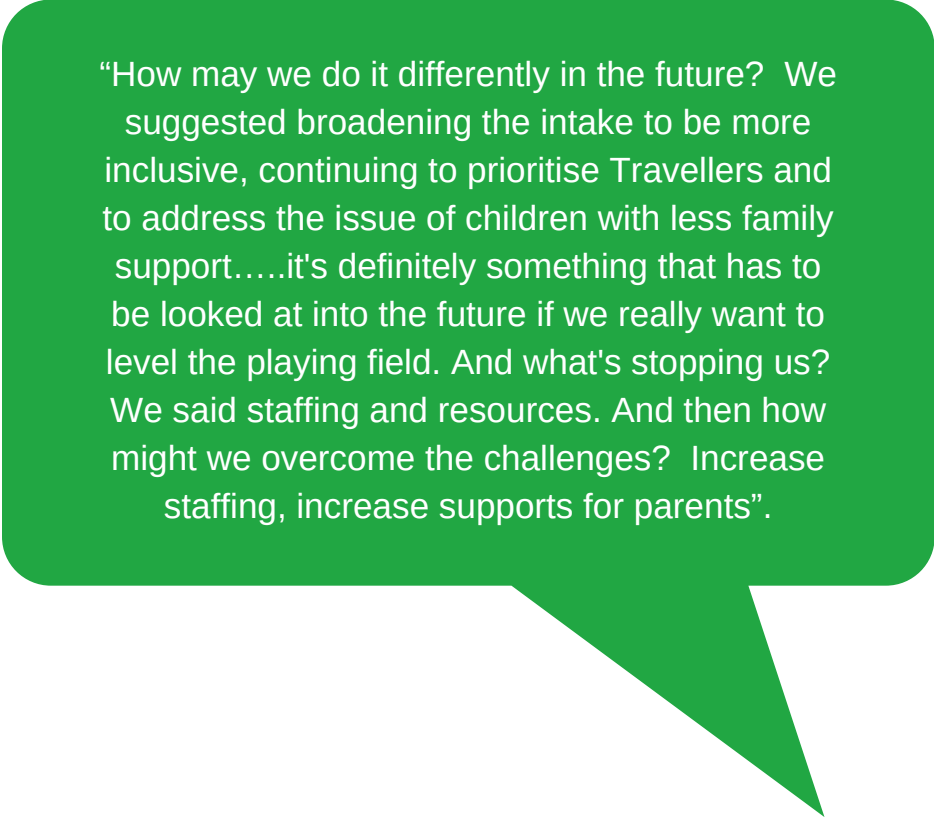
- A lack of a reliably sustainable funding model was identified by service providers as a key challenge for the long term sustainability of the programme. While the Challenger programme is currently funded for another four to five years, after this round of funding ends the NSP team will have to apply once again for funding to continue the programme.
- This funding insecurity presents a risk in terms of the sustainability of the programme in the longer term. The programme has expanded considerably since its inception in 1995 and yet the staffing levels to support the programme have not increased in line with the level of expansion of the programme. The programme is heavily reliant on the continued commitment of a small team who go above and beyond their core duties to deliver the programme to its current standard.

Increasing Diversity & Inclusion

- Another area for development highlighted by service providers is the need to broaden out the Challenger net to include communities who remain under-represented with regard to educational progression. This includes the Traveller community, and students from new communities who have moved to the area.
- Service providers also spoke of the need to reach students who do not have the parental support necessary for participation in the Challenger programme. As mentioned herein, Challenger requires commitment not just from students, but also from their parents. Thus students who do not have this parental support are further disadvantaged in terms of their ability to access the Challenger programme and the supports it offers.
- As noted above, the programme is at capacity in terms of how much it can expand within the current resource context, so resourcing would need to be reviewed if any expansion or development of the programme is to be enabled.



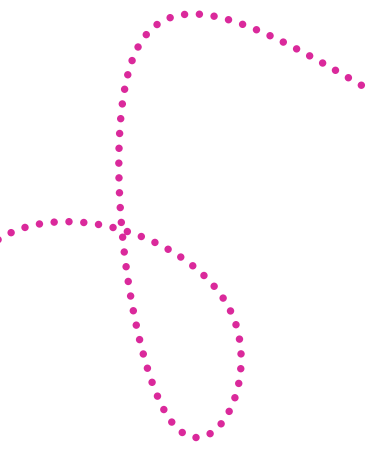
.....we're constantly trying to justify funding...we're built into the same capital programme now for the next four or five years, which is great. Gives a bit of longevity to the whole thing. But again, it will come up for renewal at some point in the future and again, we will have to apply. It's just the nature of the beast”



“How may we do it differently in the future? We suggested broadening the intake to be more inclusive, continuing to prioritise Travellers and to address the issue of children with less family support.....it's definitely something that has to be looked at into the future if we really want to level the playing field. And what's stopping us? We said staffing and resources. And then how might we overcome the challenges? Increase staffing, increase supports for parents”.

Challenger Service Providers

Photovoice Output





I chose this picture first of a tree because I just thought that the Challenger programme really provides a space for pupils to grow. And maybe at the end of the process, they have something to give back to their communities or to their families as well. So that was my first one.

And then the second one was this family seem to be going on a journey. So I thought that was a fairly apt one because it is the pupils I suppose on the programme they're on it for a number of years, so it's definitely a journey, but there's an emphasis there on the family as well, that they're all on the journey together.

...the skills and knowledge and experiences that they have entering into it, they can build on them and they'll learn new skills and they'll perfect some of the ones they already have. And by the end of the programme, hopefully, they've matured and they're still the same pupil, but that they have a wider breadth of skills and experiences to offer.



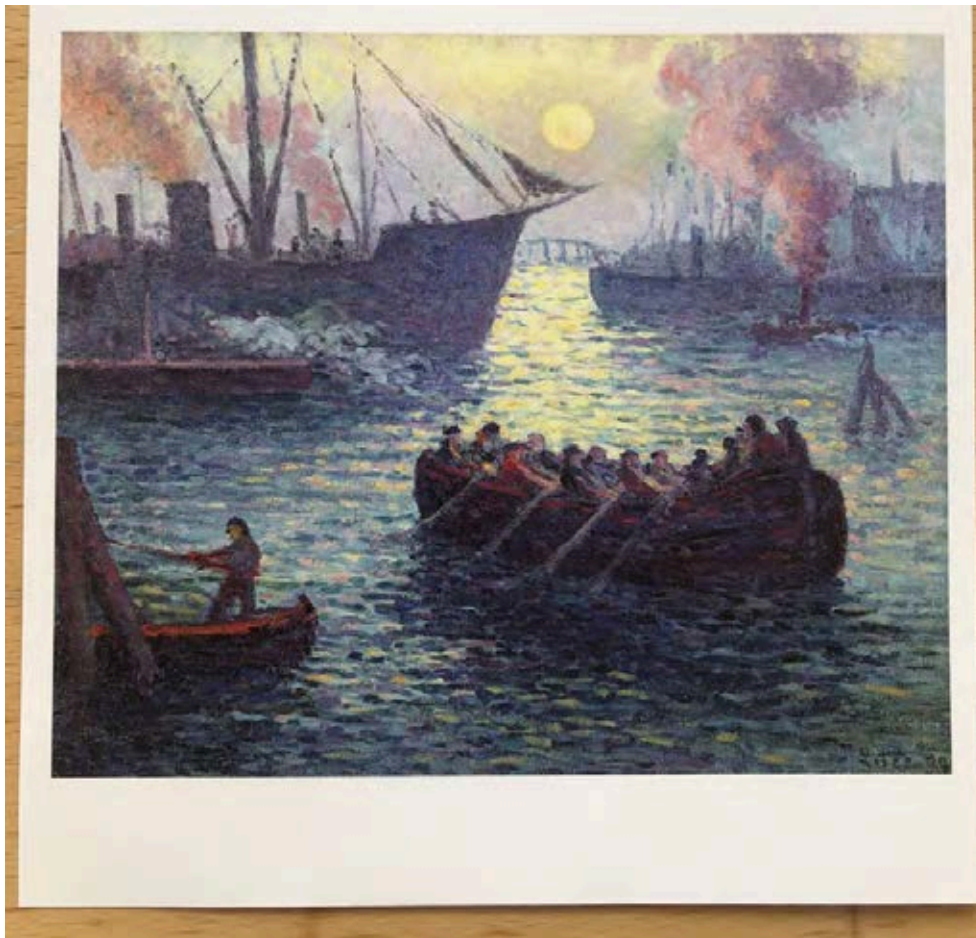
I chose this because when I looked, you can see that it's an individual made up of lots of different shapes and different parts. And I think that kind of represents the students in our school and the students that go on the programme, that there's lots of different elements to them and they're not just the good, quiet kid that's going to work. And you know, it shows the complexity of the individual, you know, fitting in with the programme.



I love a busy picture and I think it represents all the different things that are about Challenger and all the different types of students and young people that they get. But I also love the element of, I presume it's Joan of Arc and the triumph and the peace flag and the serenity. And when I think of the Challenger programme, I think of the successes that have come from it. I was showing the Challenger video to future parents and I could see a parent in the background on one of the videos - a mam that put her two daughters through the Challenger programme. And I thought of her daughters because they're super successful - in college, one of them is training to be a barrister. But it wasn't just about what they've achieved. It's who they are as people because the mam and the two daughters embody the Challenger programme and they embody the area they come from and the school that they went to, in that they give back. They participate. Their outlook is anybody can achieve, and that's why I chose that one.



I also went with a similar theme of growing and blossoming with the flowers. I suppose I was thinking of that kind of idea of, you know, the environment needs to be right for people to blossom.we're choosing or putting forward children who are really capable. However, they do still need those supports in order to reach their full potential. So that was kind of what came to mind here.



This one then I chose in terms of how the programme is or might grow. So it's, there's kind of a boat here with a whole load of people on it. And I was thinking of, you know, the children on the Challenger programme and they're setting sail and everything's swell. And then there's, I'm assuming, a fisherman on his own on the boat here still tied up. And I was just kind of thinking of maybe some of those children who we would love to see on the programme who have potential, but that there might be kind of barriers for them. So whether it's kind of parental involvement or maybe it's their academic scores and I suppose just how we can help them jump on the boat with everyone else and target those children, not just the ones we kind of know are going to succeed.



So I picked the first one....there was just kind of an element of pride when I saw it. And I suppose for our sixth class students, it is a proud moment for those that are actually accepted onto the Challenger programme. And then, I suppose even, you know, when they finish their first year in it. I went to the Challenger graduation last year and it was just, oh, you know, it was a proud moment just to see so many of them there and all their parents there. And yes, just really kind of doing their best to succeed. And I suppose the little pattern on it is intertwined. And I suppose it is, the Challenger brings kids from all different schools and just brings them altogether to achieve the same goal.

And then the second one, represents the element of diversity. And I know in the last year or so, there's been a big kind of, you know, push to try and obviously broaden who comes onto Challenger. And then just the bird that you would just love for every child, just not to have those challenges and to be free just to, you know, try and even come onto the Challenger programme.



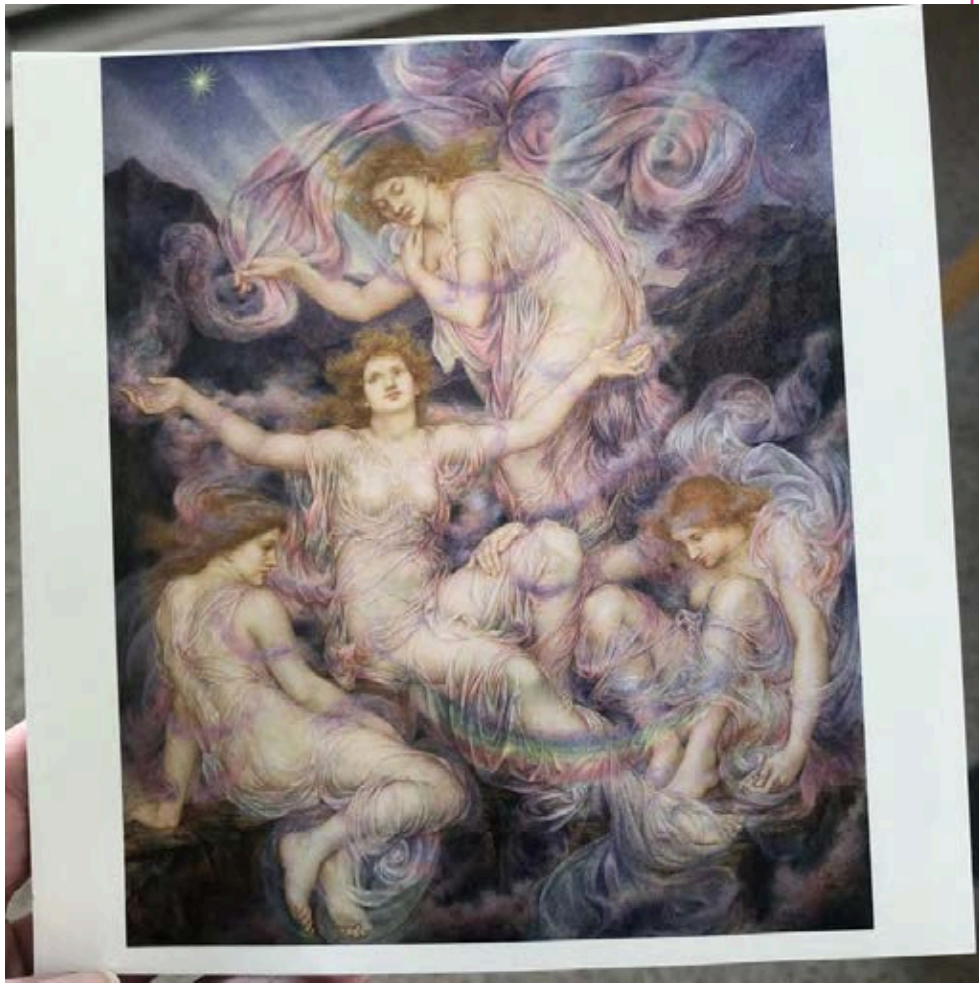
This one spoke to me immediately because it seems like a very elite setting and to me, it was like the Challenger programme giving every child a place at the table. And even though the girl is young and these men are much more senior and they're very formal in their top hats, she's standing very upright and confident, and that's what we would hope that the children get from the Challenger programme. And I think it probably resonated because I spoke to some of the sixth class children yesterday, and I asked them about their future careers and their aspirations for their future. And I was a little bit disappointed initially because the majority of them said they wanted to do apprenticeships. And I was saying, you know, but you could maybe be an engineer, not just, it's great to be a plumber, but like they kind of just follow each other. And I think what the Challenger programme possibly can do is to open up this world. It's to see big. Like to aspire to more. And I think that Challenger puts all of the steps in place to allow them to do that so the challenges that would have stood in their way if we didn't have this programme, like access to the Gaeltacht, like grinds, the really, really practical measures that allow a child and like all of the measures that are put in place to allow children to aspire to be primary school teachers. When all of those kind of supports are put in place for the children, then they can aspire to be anything. And I think that that's a really wonderful thing and I think that maybe we're at the junior end, so we're at the sixth class, so they're only coming into this, into the Challenger programme. But I think maybe we need to even start earlier to... And I know the teachers do, but we still need to promote it more. To think big, dream big, aspire more and to see their strengths for the amazing children that they are. Like we're always telling them they're amazing. But when you go into sixth class and they all tell you they want to be hairdressers and plumbers and I'm looking at them going you can be an engineer. You can be a creative artist. Like, you know, don't see barriers. Jump those hurdles. And I think Challenger does put the steps in place for them to do that.



And the waves was similar. And it's a beautiful picture and I think again, it's, this picture just reminded me that possibly at the younger age going in, the prospect of, oh, will I take the form? Will I bring it home? That the future is beautiful, but there is fear and trepidation with the children at like 11, 12 years of age when they're thinking of applying for Challenger. Like one child, when I said you could be an engineer definitely and that Cahllenger will allow you to, prepare you for your four years in college. And he said, oh, four years, I'm not doing that, and immediately changed his mind. So I think, you know, there is fear, and like, you know, the sea is beautiful and terrible and scary. And it's a lot, it's all of those different things. And that's the way their future is for them. But it's a brilliant future and I think putting the right supports in place will help them.



This one spoke to me the loudest. Just a picture of mother and child. I think it spoke to me loudest just because Challenger, whenever we were kind of promoting Challenger, and different organisations have kind of knocked on our door in years gone by to try and do a Challenger-like programme in their own areas. And I often thought what is the magic sauce that makes it work? And I always go back, it's the relationship with the parents and the children and the connection that they get. I think it brings an awful lot of it together. Like some parents have been involved on the Challenger committee for years and attended all the meetings, you know, and are actively involved in all the bits and pieces and group work and everything and events and stuff that took place. So I think that's one of the key things. I know a couple of years ago back, another Partnership were interested in developing a Challenger-like programme. And we went in and we had a chat with them and they had the framework document that we had done a few years ago to kind of give them a road map of how to run a Challenger-like programme in their own area and how to do it. And they were very keen to kind of get it up and running, so they were. But they couldn't. They had seen the complexity of the work involved in it with every different year group, you know, and the resources that were needed. They couldn't get their head around how we were doing so much, you know, for every year group, which was brilliant.



I chose this one. I thought it was really lovely. It just kind of caught my eye straight away. It looks like four angels in it. In my head, they were probably the virtues, like representing maybe courage and strength and the different virtues. And they're kind of weaving this rainbow through them all. And I thought that kind of represented maybe enlightenment and it just got me thinking about Challenger, that it's very much a collaboration between the student, the parent, the school, Jeanette, Paul, that together, they're all the kind of scaffolds that hold the child up, so I thought that was really nice. And in the background, there's a little, I took it to be the North Star, and I kind of thought the Challenger's a bit like that. It helps children follow the North Star, whatever that North Star is, and keeps them, you know, on target to sail towards where they want to go.



...there's somebody who's very much kind of, I don't know, pensive and thinking. And I thought the Challenger kind of gives kids that space just to be more, I suppose to have that chance to do some critical thinking or reflection, and that's really important as part of success, to get to where that North Star is.



Sunflowers remind me of optimism. Again, they're kind of a very happy flower, bright flower. It was only when I sat down that I noticed that it was actually all women sitting round the table. And I suppose certainly, my experience as home-school liaison, I am dealing with mothers more so than fathers. Our Challenger committee is quite female dominated. At the graduation, there was probably a majority of mothers there, I would say. There's probably more mothers doing the STEPS programme.

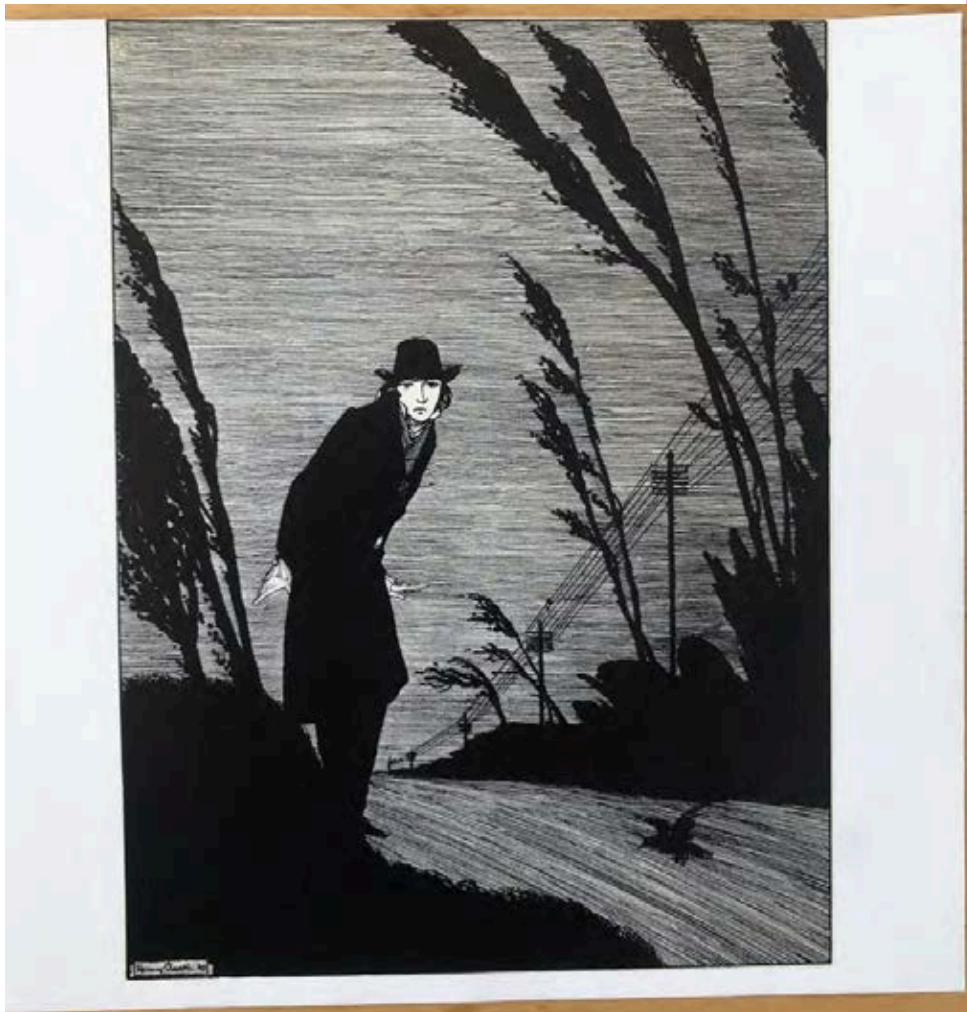
I suppose the women being around the table, being the support. I suppose this is our role to support them so they can support their kids.it was the optimism of the flowers, that's really what struck me there.



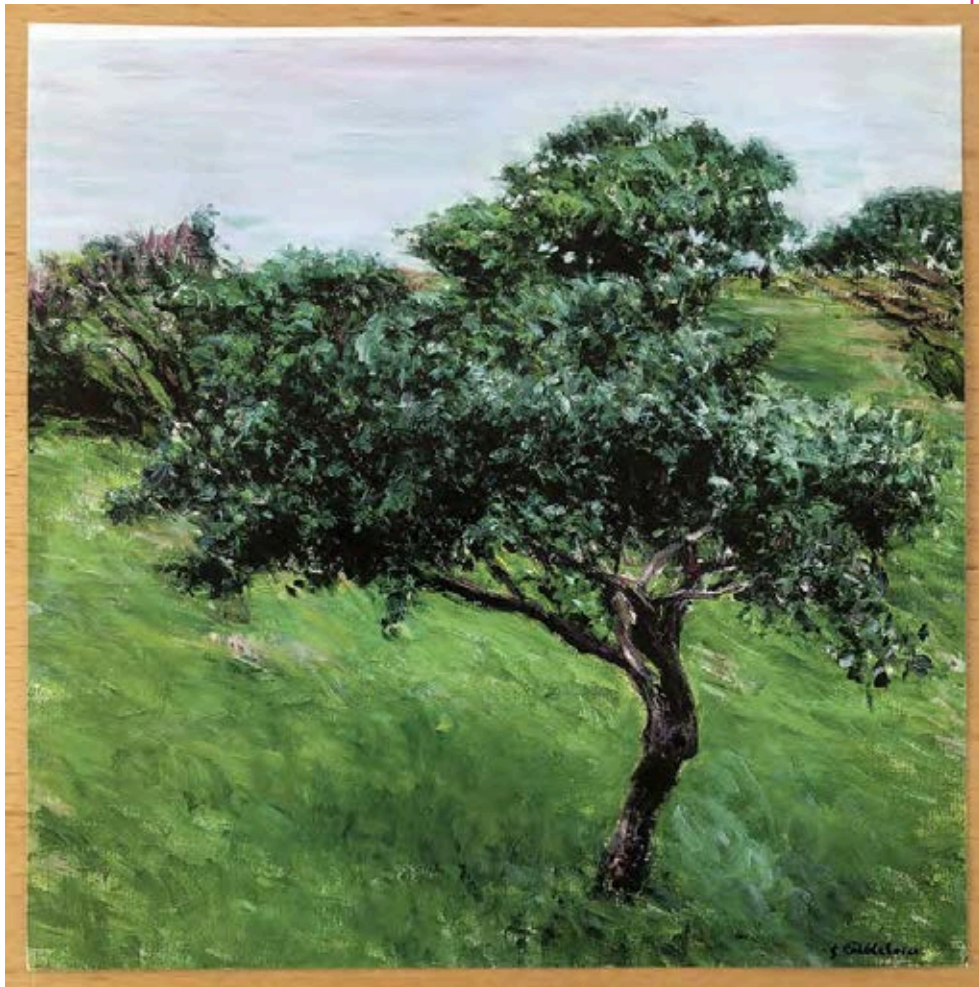
I love the 1920s, but they look quite posh, and I think a lot of our kids feel that, you know, college, all that, it's not for me, whatever. You know, it's for the posh people. And that again, they could join that table as well, you know, and be part of it.



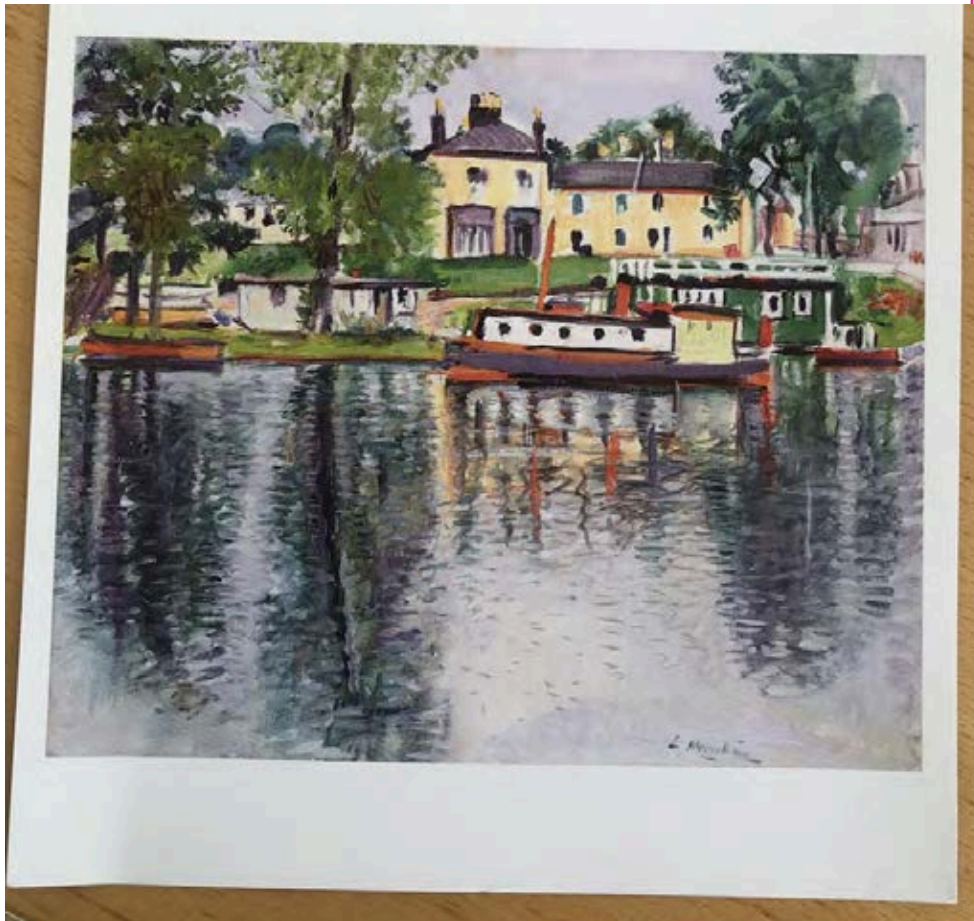
The family. The Challenger programme doesn't work without that unit. We promote to sixth class, so our information evening with parents and students, and we talk to both of them about their role when they come on the programme, how important it is for the parents. And maybe going forward, we put more tools, investing a little bit more in the parents. We invest 90% of the programme into the students, but we need to give the tools to the parents. So maybe one or two more workshops. We do the STEPS programme and that takes a chunk of our budget, but I still do think one or two workshops for the parents to give them maybe an IT workshop or a literacy workshop, you know, to support them. But the family unit is so important and we always say to the parents you do your workshop and the students does theirs and you both go home together and you chat around the table about Challenger. And the table in a family kitchen is very important. So that's what that represents for me.



I wear many different hats on Challenger. Last night, it was a black hat for somebody not being respectful. Took the code of conduct out and made them all read it again. So I wear very different hats on Challenger for different situations. So sometimes on Challenger, because for me, it can get very overwhelming with the work, sometimes I feel lost.



The first one I picked was a tree, that's the strength and the fact that it's rooted in the community.....there's that strong roots. And I would go into schools as part of my role and even standing in front of the class, the Challenger students stand out as having the confidence. They'll ask a question. They're not afraid to speak out and ask questions. So I think those courses that are on the Challenger programme, especially the public speaking because it's something that I would find difficult, so I always admire people who could speak, who could do the public speaking. So I just see it as the strength of the community and as part of the background.



At the riverbank there, we have a boat. And that kind of, I see that as the children preparing for a journey, to get ready for the journey of life basically on the Challenger programme. Obviously, increase the options that they have going forward. And another thing in that picture that jumps out at me is just the reflections here. And that kind of makes me just think about the future because I think it's not really now that people, that students really grasp the significance of what the Challenger programme can bring. But I think it's in years to come when they kind of, you know, 20 years down the road when they can kind of look back and reflect on their lives that they've actually realised the impact that it's had and be very grateful, I think.



I just picked these two owls because it just shows that, you know, the student is not alone on the programme. And, being a child nowadays is kind of hard. They all come from all different backgrounds,,,,, sometimes a parent doesn't have all the answers and the support they need. So we're just kind of like here for them for whatever they need.



I think what jumped out at me was the calmness and the colour to it. So the colour for me represents what education can provide for people. I think education is so important and the better your education, the more education you can get behind you really before you hit adulthood, the more colour and options you have for your future, I think the brighter your future's going to be. So the colour just jumped out at me there and then just the calmness because I think there is a certain calmness to Challenger in that the students are doing this on a... It's not a compulsory thing. They're doing it on a voluntary basis. So there's always that. They're free to basically leave or quit whenever, if they ever want to. There's no obligation for them to be there. So I think from that sense, they're under less pressure. They can be a bit calmer than they can be in school, for example, where things are more obligatory.

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Acknowledgments

Sincerest thanks to all of the team at Northside Partnership, participants in the Challenger programme, students, parents and members of the school community who all gave so generously of their time, insight and expertise, in service to this evaluation.

Particular thanks to Cathy Reinhardt, Paul Hayes and Jeannette Beirnes for expertly facilitating the access to data, consultation participants, and for supporting the use of innovative methods which aim to put those who are seldom-heard at the centre of this evaluation.

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The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development, and the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST) Programme 2021 - 2027.