

EVALUATION PROTOCOL

Salford Foundation's Steps Programme. A Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial Efficacy Study.

Cordis Bright

Principal investigators: Dr Stephen Boxford, Dr Jade Farrell, Madeleine Morrison, Emma Andersen, Professor Darrick Jolliffe, Camilla Antrobus, Caitlin de Souza.

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Evaluation protocol

Evaluating institution: Cordis Bright

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Trial design	A two-armed cluster randomised controlled trial with random allocation at the school year level.
Trial type	Efficacy study.
Evaluation setting	Secondary schools in Greater Manchester.
Target group	Boys aged 11-14 years old.
Number of participants	4,860 boys from 54 year groups across 18 secondary schools.
Primary outcome and data source	Perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes measured by the Global Early Adolescent Study Gender Stereotypical Traits Scale (Moreau, Ahmed & Cislighi, 2021).
Secondary outcome and data source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement of harmful online actions measured by the Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS; Barlett et al., 2016). • Confidence and intent to act as an active bystander measured by the Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale (SBES; Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2005). • Emotional and behavioural problems that are associated with offending behaviour measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) Total Difficulties score (Goodman, 2005). • Behaviours that support more positive interactions with friends, peers and family measured by the SDQ prosocial behaviours subscale (Goodman, 2005).

Protocol version history

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Table of contents

1	Study rationale and background.....	6
1.1	Introduction	6
1.2	Context.....	6
1.2.1	National context.....	6
1.2.2	About Steps and the local context.....	8
1.3	Rationale for the Steps programme model	9
1.3.1	Risk factors.....	9
1.3.2	Protective factors.....	10
1.4	Rationale for an Efficacy RCT evaluation of Steps	11
2	About the Steps programme	13
2.1	Overview	13
2.2	Theory of change	13
2.3	Who does the Steps programme aim to work with?.....	16
2.4	What does the Steps programme aim to achieve?	16
2.5	What is required to deliver the Steps programme?	18
2.6	How does the Steps programme work with boys?.....	18
2.6.1	About Steps.....	18
2.6.2	The Steps GBV curriculum	18
2.6.3	Types of additional content	20
2.6.4	Supporting boys with previous trauma and safeguarding	21
2.6.5	A qualified and experienced team.....	22
2.7	Control group conditions	23
3	Impact evaluation	24
3.1	Overview	24
3.2	Research questions	24
3.3	Trial design	25
3.3.1	Participative approach to the evaluation	26
3.3.2	Randomisation	26
3.4	Participant journey	31
3.4.1	School recruitment	33
3.4.2	Participant recruitment	35
3.4.3	Intervention and control group journey through the trial	37

3.4.4	Safe-exit with schools	38
3.4.5	Data collection	38
3.4.6	Sample size calculations.....	43
3.4.7	Recruitment rates	46
3.5	Outcome measures.....	49
3.5.1	Primary outcome	51
3.5.2	Secondary outcomes.....	52
3.5.3	Compliance	55
3.5.4	Stopping rules	56
3.6	Quantitative analysis.....	57
3.6.1	Primary analysis	57
3.6.2	Secondary analysis	58
3.6.3	Exploratory analysis	58
3.6.4	Data quality monitoring and support	60
3.6.5	Missing data	60
4	Implementation and Process Evaluation	61
4.1	Research questions	61
4.2	Research methods	62
4.2.1	Interviews with boys	65
4.2.2	Interviews with Steps programme stakeholders and school staff	66
4.2.3	Activity data analysis.....	67
4.3	Analysis	67
5	Cost data reporting and collecting.....	68
5.1	Principles.....	68
5.2	Capturing cost	68
5.3	Reporting costs	69
6	Race equity, diversity, and inclusion	70
7	Ethics and registration	74
8	Data protection.....	75
9	Stakeholders and interests	77
10	Risks	79
11	Timeline.....	81
12	References	83

13	Appendices.....	88
13.1	Appendix 1: Steps curriculum.....	88
13.2	Appendix 2: Trial timelines per school example.....	89

1 Study rationale and background

1.1 Introduction

This is an efficacy study protocol for a two-armed parallel cluster randomised controlled trial (RCT) evaluation and implementation and process evaluation (IPE) of Salford Foundation's Steps Programme.

The efficacy study will begin in January 2026, with fieldwork and trial taking place between May 2026 and June 2028. The analysis, reporting, peer review and publication process will take place from July 2028 to March 2029.

This section provides:

- An overview of the national and local context of the Steps programme.
- The rationale for the Steps programme model.
- The rationale for an efficacy study RCT approach.

1.2 Context

1.2.1 National context

Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to violence that is directed against a person because of their gender, and often disproportionately affects people of a particular gender. It is rooted in structural inequalities, power imbalances, and socially constructed norms about gender roles. As the [European Commission](#) (n.d.) defines it, GBV is:

“Violence directed against a person because of that person’s gender or violence that affects persons of a particular gender disproportionately. Violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of GBV that result in, or are likely to result in: physical harm, sexual harm, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women.”

In the UK policy context, this definition aligns closely with the Government's understanding of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG), which is used as the overarching framework for addressing GBV. The UK's *Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy* (Home Office, 2021) and related legal frameworks (e.g. *Domestic Abuse Act 2021*) adopt a gender-informed but legally gender-neutral approach: recognising that while anyone can be a victim of abuse, women and girls are disproportionately affected due to systemic gender inequality

and unequal power relations. Thus, GBV in the UK is conceptualised both as a violation of human rights and as a manifestation of unequal gendered power structures.

Steps has been developed in a national context which shows:

A clear need for more preventative action concerning GBV. The All-Parliamentary Public Accounts committee report on [Tackling Violence against Women and Girls](#) states the current approach to tackling violence against women and girls has not put enough emphasis on preventative measures that are necessary to deliver long-term change. It is vital that more preventative action is taken to educate children and young boys on healthy relationships to reduce the chance of becoming perpetrators in the future (Committee of Public Accounts, House of Commons, 2025).

A need for programmes like Steps which address healthy relationships, misogyny, and GBV. The YEF report on [Children, violence and vulnerability 2024: How do boys and girls experience violence?](#) (YEF, 2024) showed:

- A need for more effective education on healthy relationships and dating. The most commonly taught topics – sexual consent and harassment – have only reached about half of 13–17-year-olds, with 55% receiving lessons on consent and 43% on harassment. Additionally, only 40% of students say they have received lessons on how to be in healthy and respectful romantic relationships. Children who admit to perpetrating sexual violence are even less likely to say they have received lessons on consent and harassment than the average – only 39% and 31%, respectively. The YEF suggests this indicates that while some efforts are underway, there is a pressing need for more targeted and thorough education to effectively support and safeguard young people in their relationships. Steps provides an opportunity to reach more children in this area.
- Violence against women and girls is frequently seen on social media. 33% of teenage children have seen content on social media encouraging violence against women and girls. Girls are slightly more likely to say they have seen this content (34%) than boys (32%). 27% of all 13-17-year-olds say they have seen images or threats of sexual assault. A core element of Steps is supporting boys in relation to their approach to understanding social media its associated harms concerning misogyny, harassment and GBV.
- 45% of children in relationships say their partner constantly sends messages checking up on them. 27% are afraid to disagree with their partners in case they get angry. 20% have been pressured into sexual acts they did not want to engage in. 19% have been hit, kicked or shoved. 17% have had intimate images of themselves shared online.
- Children who have perpetrated sexual violence are significantly less likely to say they have received lessons on consent. Most children who have perpetrated sexual violence say they have had some form of lessons on dating and relationships in the past year (94%).

But they are less likely to say they have received lessons on sexual consent (39%) and harassment (31%) than the average (55% and 43%, respectively).

In addition, an Ofsted (2021) survey with 800 children and young people (>13 years old) found 92% of girls reported experiencing sexist name calling, 88% of girls reported receiving images or pictures they did not want to see and 64% of girls had experienced unwanted touching.

Online, the issue of sexual violence becomes even more pervasive – 27% of all 13-17-year-olds say they've seen images or threats of sexual assault. Additionally, 33% have encountered content that encourages violence against women and girls specifically, highlighting a concerning trend in digital spaces (YEF, 2024).

Victims often experience trauma, anxiety, and depression, which can hinder academic performance and social development. According to [*Equally Safe at School*](#) (2021), GBV can leave children feeling overwhelmed and unsafe, potentially resulting in complex trauma and enduring mental health issues.

Early adolescence is a critical period for shaping attitudes and behaviours. Research from developmental psychology suggests that this age group provides an opportune window to support young boys while social norms and peer dynamics are still malleable (i.e., early adolescents are strongly influenced by teenage social influences more so than adults (Knoll et al., 2015). Targeting boys in Years 7 to 9 allows for the Steps intervention to reach boys before harmful norms become deeply embedded. By addressing issues such as gender stereotypes, online influences, and consent during this formative stage, programmes like Steps can help to foster positive attitudes and behaviours that counteract GBV. Based on the age range, the programme does not explicitly focus on dating and relationship-based violence and instead includes content around healthy relationships and consent, without explicitly covering dating relationships.

1.2.2 About Steps and the local context

About Steps

Steps is a manualised, classroom-based intervention for boys aged 11–14 that aims to challenge and shift perceptions of gender norms and traditional stereotypes, increase recognition and critical awareness of misogynistic attitudes and language, and promote respect and equality in relationships. By helping boys to identify, reflect on, and reject harmful gender stereotypes and behaviours, Steps seeks to reduce the social acceptance of misogyny and, over time, contribute to a reduction in GBV. It is delivered to groups of around 20 boys for six weeks, in six sessions of around 60 minutes. Its key aims are to:

- **Motivate** boys to have the confidence to be positive influences around their school community.

- **Educate** boys about the impact of negative attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls in online and offline spaces.
- **Support** the development of boys' social skills and help them feel prepared to navigate complex situations relating to gendered social issues.

The local context in which Steps was developed

Steps was developed in response to concerns raised by young people in Salford in 2021/22 around issues including toxic masculinity, misogyny, and exposure to online pornography. The Salford Foundation worked with schools and young people to co-design initiatives on themes such as risky behaviours, online harms, and positive masculinity. In its original form Steps reached around 800 boys between 2021 and 2024. These insights shaped the development of the Steps curriculum, which was co-developed with education partners and the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) Violence Reduction Unit (VRU).

Steps has been funded in its current form during 2024-2025 by an investment from the GMCA, supporting the Greater Manchester Mayor's commitment to prevent and reduce GBV. This work was commissioned and overseen by the governing board of the GMCA GBV strategy. It was commissioned locally as a response to increasing concerns locally from school leaders, teachers and children about an increase in misogynistic activities among male pupils across schools in Greater Manchester and associated gender-driven negative behaviours.

1.3 Rationale for the Steps programme model

The Steps model has been designed and developed over time by Salford Foundation, education consultants, school staff, and in consultation with pupils to create a curriculum that addresses misogynistic behaviours and GBV by focusing on a range of protective factors against risk.

1.3.1 Risk factors

Risk factors for the perpetration of GBV among boys and young men include:

- Conflicted understanding of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Jewkes Flood & Lang, 2015).
- Exposure to rigid gender stereotypes and the normalisation of misogynistic attitudes (Morrison, Ellsberg & Bott, 2007; Ashurst & McAlinden, 2015).
- Structural inequalities, such as poverty, racism, and sexism, compound young people's vulnerability to school-related GBV and reinforce harmful peer cultures in and around schools (Pliogou et al., 2025).

1.3.2 Protective factors

Protective factors include:

- Understanding and developing healthy, respectful relationships (De La Rue et al., 2014).
- Understanding consent and boundaries and demonstrating empathy (Jewkes, Flood & Lang, 2015).
- Positive models of masculinity and peer-moderation (Flood, 2019).

The model has also been developed in line with the following evidence-led principles:

- **The role of peers is central.** Peer groups can act as both strong negative influences (reinforcing violence and misogyny) and strong positive levers for change when boys are equipped to challenge harmful norms (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).
- **Safeguarding, not sanctioning.** The Contextual Safeguarding framework emphasises that peer-on-peer abuse, including GBV, requires a safeguarding and educational response rather than a sanction-based behavioural approach. Sanctioning alone risks driving behaviours underground, reducing adult visibility and intervention (Firmin, 2017).
- **Universal approaches are essential.** Delivering Steps universally to all boys in years 7–9 ensures stigma-free participation because every pupil takes part as part of standard practice, rather than being identified or singled out for “risky” attitudes or behaviours. This means there will be no barriers to participation that could lead to isolation. This universal approach frames GBV prevention as a normal and positive aspect of personal and social development, not as a form of corrective or remedial intervention. It also capitalises on a critical developmental period when gender norms, identity, and peer relationships are still being shaped. By equipping all boys with the skills and confidence to question harmful stereotypes and support respectful peer norms, Steps promotes collective responsibility and positive peer influence across whole year groups, embedding GBV prevention within everyday school culture.
- **Equipping boys with tools to reject violence and misogyny** empowers them to act as positive role models, influence peers, and create cultural change that challenges the normalisation of GBV.

Cordis Bright produced an independent, unpublished, evaluation of the Steps programme between 1 May 2024 and 31 March 2025. This included a retrospective survey of 599 boys who participated and completed at least 50% of the Steps programme. Boys reported:

- **High satisfaction and perceived relevance of the programme:** 81% rated the sessions as “excellent” or “good”. 89% said it was “important” or “very important” that boys in other schools receive this kind of programme.

- **The programme improved boys understanding of key issues:** over 50% reported greater understanding of: the importance of respecting other people's feelings (60%); What a good friendship looks like (57%); The importance of respecting other people's privacy (55%); How jokes about women and girls can be harmful (53%); and What to do if someone is being unkind about women or girls (54%).
- **Over 60% of boys agreed that sessions had improved their following personal behaviours:** Being a good friend (78%); Respecting other peoples' feelings (77%); Respecting other peoples' privacy (75%); Being respectful to women and girls (72%); Telling someone it is not OK when they are being unkind about women or girls (67%); Not making jokes about women and girls (65%); Knowing when the media (e.g. videos on the internet) is sending a bad message about women and girls (63%); and Asking for help if someone is being unkind about women or girls (63%).
- **Over 45% of boys agreed that because of the sessions, their classmates displayed positive change in behaviours, i.e.:** Being a good friend (59%); Respecting other peoples' privacy (58%); Being respectful to women and girls (53%); Respecting other peoples' feelings (53%); Asking for help if someone is being unkind about women or girls (52%); Knowing when the media (e.g. videos on the internet) is sending a bad message about women and girls (50%); Telling someone it is not OK when they are being unkind about women or girls (50%); and Not making jokes about women and girls (46%).
- **Boys reported that because of Steps, the following harmful behaviours were happening less in their school, i.e.:** People making jokes about women and girls (39%); People being rude to women and girls (38%); and People calling women and girls names (35%). In addition, people are telling others that it is not okay when they do these things more often (35%).
- **The evaluation showed that the programme reached an ethnically diverse group of boys.** Based on the UK Office for National Statistics categorisations Steps reached boys from a range of ethnically minoritised backgrounds, e.g.: 49% from racially minoritised backgrounds of whom: 18% were Asian/Asian British, 18% were of Mixed/Multiple ethnicity, and 13% were Black/African Caribbean/Black British. This demonstrated strong reach and relevance across different communities.

1.4 Rationale for an Efficacy RCT evaluation of Steps

The evidence base for interventions that work in relation to GBV in schools is limited. The context and limited evidence base makes the case for an efficacy study of Steps strong in terms of the contribution to knowledge about whether programmes like Steps can work over and above business as usual. As outlined above the rationale for an efficacy study of Steps includes:

- National recognition that more needs to be done to address misogynistic behaviours among boys to support a reduction in GBV.
- Recognition among school leaders, teachers and children that this is an issue that has been growing in schools and needs addressing.
- A limited number of interventions that currently exist in this area which can address the All Parliamentary Accounts Committees concerns discussed above.
- Very limited evidence in the UK about programmes that have been shown to work in this area and how they work to reduce misogynistic behaviours and lead to reductions in GBV.

Steps is a programme that has been co-designed by Salford Foundation, education consultants, schools and pupils, and has an emerging evidence base that indicates that it may be achieving its desired impacts. This suggests the programme is ready for an efficacy study.

2 About the Steps programme

2.1 Overview

This section provides an overview of Salford Foundation's Steps programme. It covers the Steps Theory of change, who the Steps programme aims to work with, what is required to deliver the Steps programme, how the Steps programme works with boys, and information on the control group.

2.2 Theory of change

Steps is a manualised, classroom-based programme delivered to boys aged 11 to 14 years old, which aligns with the statutory PSHE (Personal, social, health and economic education) or RSE (relationships and sex education) curriculum. The programme is designed to reduce GBV by supporting boys to:

- Improved perceptions about traditional gender norms and stereotypes.
- Recognise, understand and reject harmful misogynistic attitudes, content, language and behaviours (online and offline) and other risky and harmful behaviours,
- Understand how online content and algorithms shape beliefs and can amplify misogyny.
- Build confidence and intent to be an active bystander.

The intervention consists of six weekly sessions (60 minutes), delivered to boys (around 20 per group) by trained Steps facilitators.

Table 1 summarises the Steps theory of change. This theory of change has evolved over time and is based on:

- Evidence of need collected by the Salford Foundation.
- Consultation with education consultants and school staff.
- Continuing consultation with boys who are in receipt of the programme.
- Continuing reflective practice by the Steps team.
- A rapid review of evidence conducted by Cordis Bright.
- Two workshops between Salford Foundation and Cordis Bright colleagues.

Please note the theory of change provides a summary of indicative timings for when outcomes may be achieved. These are theoretical and indicative as we are aware that boys will develop at different times – change may also not be linear. One of the purposes of the evaluation is to further test, reflect on and improve the Steps theory of change based on robust evidence.

Table 1. Steps programme theory of change

Why: Context	Why: Evidence	Who: participants	How: intervention	Short-term outcomes (2-6 weeks)	Medium-term outcomes (6 weeks-6 months)	Long-term outcomes (12-24 months) ¹
<p>National policy and practice recognise a need for earlier, preventative action to address GBV.</p> <p>Schools report increasing concerns about misogynistic attitudes and behaviours among boys.</p> <p>Early adolescence is a critical period for shaping attitudes and behaviours, including when</p>	<p>Risk factors for perpetrating GBV among boys includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflicted understanding of masculinity. • Exposure to rigid gender stereotypes. • Normalisation of misogynistic attitudes. <p>Structural inequalities – such as poverty, racism, and sexism – compound boys’ vulnerability to GBV and normalise harmful peer cultures in and around schools.</p> <p>Protective factors include:</p>	<p>A universal intervention for all boys in Year 7, 8 and 9 (aged 11-14 years old) attending secondary education including alternative provision in Greater Manchester.</p> <p>Boys would not be accepted into the programme if their parents/ carers let the school know</p>	<p>Steps’ aim is to reduce GBV by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Motivating boys to have the confidence to be positive influences around their school community, 2. Educating boys about the impact of negative attitudes and behaviours towards women and girls in online and offline spaces, and 3. Supporting the development of boys’ social skills and help them feel prepared to navigate complex situations relating to gendered social issues. <p>Steps does this though providing a universal offer including six weekly interactive sessions lasting between 50-75 minutes for groups of around 20 boys.</p>	<p>Boys are able to...</p> <p>Have improved perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes.</p> <p>Understand how stereotypes and misogyny normalise GBV.</p> <p>Recognise healthy gender-based roles.</p> <p>Show increased empathy towards women and girls affected by misogyny.</p>	<p>Boys have/are...</p> <p>Reduced endorsement of sexist beliefs and gender stereotypes.</p> <p>Improved behaviours that support more positive interactions with friends, peers and family.</p> <p>More respectful peer relationships with girls.</p> <p>More supportive responses to those affected by misogyny.</p> <p>Less sharing or tolerance of misogynistic content and earlier reporting/seek help.</p>	<p>There is a...</p> <p>Decreased likelihood of GBV by boys who have received Steps</p> <p>Decreased likelihood of offending behaviour among boys who have received Steps.</p> <p>Decreased likelihood of gender-based victimisation among girls</p>

¹ Behavioural change is typically observable from 12–24 months post-intervention. The current efficacy trial (to March 2029) captures short- and medium-term outcomes and mechanisms of change; long-term behavioural outcomes would require later follow-up or effectiveness evaluation.

Why: Context	Why: Evidence	Who: participants	How: intervention	Short-term outcomes (2-6 weeks)	Medium-term outcomes (6 weeks-6 months)	Long-term outcomes (12-24 months) ¹
<p>gender norms and peer influences are still forming.</p> <p>Locally, the Greater Manchester VRU, Salford Foundation and partners identified misogyny and harmful gender norms as a growing issue requiring a universal, school-based response.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understanding and developing healthy, respectful relationships. Understanding consent and boundaries and demonstrating empathy. Positive models of masculinity and peer-moderation. <p>Evidence supports:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peer-based approaches that shift group norms. Safeguarding-led, educational responses rather than sanction-based approaches. Universal delivery to avoid stigma and maximise cultural change. 	<p>they wished to opt-out of their child receiving Steps.</p>	<p>Weekly topics: gender stereotypes, internalisation and misogyny; supporting those affected by online misogyny; online diet and our safety online; algorithms and social media; healthy relationships, consent and being an active bystander.</p> <p>Delivery takes place in secondary schools either in classrooms or other appropriate school locations (e.g., halls or meeting rooms) typically during PSHE/RSE curriculum lessons or at other times during the school day.</p> <p>Who: The delivery team for Steps includes a Senior Team Leader and three FTE Steps facilitators from Salford Foundation, supported by an Operations Manager, Educational Consultant and the Salford Foundation CEO. The team are supported by a Greater Manchester GBV Education Strategy Group and Operational Professional Teachers Group.</p>	<p>Recognise misogynistic content, language and behaviours (online and offline) and other risky and harmful behaviours.</p> <p>Understand how online content and algorithms shape beliefs and can amplify misogyny.</p> <p>Understand healthy relationships, consent and boundaries.</p> <p>Demonstrate increased confidence and intent to act as an active bystander (speak up, seek help, say no).</p>	<p>Reduced endorsement of harmful online actions.</p> <p>Able to curate a healthier social media feed and as such are less likely to be exposed to harmful content.</p> <p>Greater respect for consent and boundaries.</p> <p>More likely to be an active bystander and provide stronger peer support for intervening.</p> <p>Reduced emotional and behavioural problems that are associated with offending behaviour.</p>	<p>Decrease in overall incidences of GBV and misogyny in schools and the community².</p>

² Although due to greater awareness there may be a short-term increase in reporting.

Although Steps is delivered in small groups, the programme may also contribute to longer-term change in the wider environment within schools. In theory, this could occur through strengthening boys' critical understanding of harmful gender norms, increasing their recognition of misogynistic attitudes and behaviours, and building confidence to act as an active bystander. Over time, this may help reduce the acceptability and normalisation of misogynistic language and behaviour, contributing to a wider cultural shift in schools. Steps may also contribute to this through informal diffusion within schools, including where school staff are exposed to, and engaged with, delivery and messaging alongside Steps facilitators. However, this efficacy trial is not designed to directly measure whole-school cultural change or longer-term school climate outcomes, as doing so would require different measures (e.g. whole-school surveys, staff-reported culture/climate, or behavioural/incident data), an alternative trial design (i.e. randomisation at the school level) and longer follow-up. Instead, the trial focuses on testing whether Steps leads to measurable changes in key early outcomes at the individual level that are theorised to be important precursors to longer-term cultural change.

2.3 Who does the Steps programme aim to work with?

Steps is a universal intervention suitable for all boys in Year 7, 8 and 9 (aged 11-14 years old) attending secondary education including alternative provision in Greater Manchester. Boys would not be accepted into the programme if their parents/carers let the school know they wished to opt-out of their child receiving Steps.

2.4 What does the Steps programme aim to achieve?

As outlined in the theory of change, the steps programme aims to reduce boys' future engagement in GBV. The short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes are described below (where the ticks refer to outcomes that will be directly measured as part of the RCT):

Short-term outcomes

Between two and six weeks, boys are able to...

- ✓ Have improved perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes.
- Understand how stereotypes and misogyny normalise GBV.
- Recognise healthy gender-based roles.
- Show increased empathy towards women and girls affected by misogyny.
- Recognise misogynistic content, language and behaviours (online and offline) and other risky and harmful behaviours.
- Understand how online content and algorithms shape beliefs and can amplify misogyny.
- Understand healthy relationships, consent and boundaries.
- ✓ Demonstrate increased confidence and intent to act as an active bystander (speak up, seek help, say no).

Medium-term outcomes

Between six weeks and six months, boys have/are...

- Less likelihood of endorsing sexist beliefs and gender stereotypes.
- ✓ Improved behaviours that support more positive interactions with friends, peers and family.
- More respectful peer relationships with girls.
- More supportive responses to those affected by misogyny.
- Less sharing or tolerance of misogynistic content and earlier reporting/seek help.
- ✓ Reduced endorsement of harmful online actions.
- Able to curate a healthier social media feed and as such are less likely to be exposed to harmful content.
- Greater respect for consent and boundaries.
- More likely to be an active bystander and provide stronger peer support for intervening.
- ✓ Reduced emotional and behavioural problems that are associated with offending behaviour.

Long-term outcomes

Between 12 to 24 months, there is a...

- Decreased likelihood of GBV by boys who have received Steps.
- Decreased likelihood of offending behaviour among boys who have received Steps.
- Decreased likelihood of gender-based victimisation among girls.
- Decrease in overall incidences of GBV and misogyny in schools and the community.³

The theory of change highlights a gap between medium-term and long-term outcomes from around six months to 12-24 months. This is because evidence from previous reviews of school-based GBV and dating-violence prevention programmes (Whitaker et al., 2006; De La Rue et al., 2017; Melendez-Torres et al., 2024) indicates that interventions of this kind can achieve measurable short-term changes in knowledge, attitudes, and social norms, while measurable behavioural change (for example, reductions in perpetration or victimisation) typically requires longer-term follow-up. These studies highlight that attitudinal change is the earliest, most sensitive indicator of mechanism activation, whereas behavioural outcomes take longer to consolidate and are less reliably detected in universal samples within six months post intervention. In light of this, the six-month follow-up in the Steps trial is designed to assess the durability of attitudinal change, recognising that any sustained behavioural change would be expected to emerge over a longer timeframe (12 months +).

³ Although due to greater awareness there may be a short-term increase in reporting.

2.5 What is required to deliver the Steps programme?

To deliver its intended activities, outputs and outcomes, the Steps programme requires the following key inputs:

- Funding to cover Steps team member costs, equipment and materials and other expenses.
- Trained and skilled team members to deliver the intervention.
- Schools which are willing to accept the Steps programme will need to: provide premises and support in relation to setting up the programme; provide demographic data on boys in Year 7 to 9 (discussed in section 3.4.5); and to work with the Steps team, i.e. supporting achieving opt-out consent for boys, provision of classrooms/rooms and time in the day to accommodate the programme, having a member of staff present during delivery, and providing follow-up support where boys make disclosures during Steps sessions or if safeguarding concerns arise.

2.6 How does the Steps programme work with boys?

2.6.1 About Steps

Steps is a structured, manualised, classroom-based programme delivered face-to-face to boys aged 11-14 years old in groups of around 20. The programme is designed to reduce GBV by supporting boys to improve their perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes.

During the sessions Salford Foundation want boys to feel:

- **Open** to learning new information from facilitators.
- **Comfortable** in expressing their opinions without fearing saying ‘the wrong thing.’
- **Interested** in unpacking ‘difficult’ conversations around misogyny and gender norms with facilitators and their peers.

2.6.2 The Steps GBV curriculum

The curriculum has been designed to complement the core elements of the Relationships and Sex Education curriculum that all schools follow. The Steps team prioritises covering the core content for each session; however, additional topics may naturally arise in conversation, and the trained, experienced, Steps facilitators (youth workers) will support and encourage broader discussions. Please refer to Appendix 1: Steps curriculum.

The weekly content includes:

- **Week 1: Gender Stereotypes, Internalisation, and Misogyny.** Boys are introduced to the Steps programme’s three key concepts which lay the foundations for later sessions. A

simple input–output model is presented to show how socialisation (inputs) can shape internal beliefs and lead to outward behaviours (outputs). Boys are made aware of how gender stereotypes have a negative impact on their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of other people.

- **Week 2: Awareness of and supporting those affected by (online) misogyny.** Boys are made aware of misogyny as a prevalent social issue that affects women and girls. They are informed of how misogyny can be directed to women and girls in online spaces. Through a fictional scenario, boys reflect on how they might respond to female peers if they are impacted by online misogyny. Using elements of being an active bystander, boys are informed of healthy responses to supporting their female peers.
- **Week 3: Our online diet and our safety online.** using the Steps input/output model, boys are encouraged to reflect on how their consumption of online content affects their wellbeing. Boys learn about how misogynistic content creators intentionally make content that, on the surface appears to seek to help men and boys, but in reality, contains divisive and provocative content as this boosts online engagement.
- **Week 4: Algorithms and social media.** boys are shown the basic mechanism of how social media prioritises what content is shown to them and how consistent engagement with misogynistic content increases the likelihood of social media algorithms presenting more misogynistic content. Boys are informed of how they can maintain a healthy online diet through reducing their time online, using digital wellbeing tools, and actively avoiding engagement with misogynistic or negative content.
- **Week 5: Healthy relationships and being an active bystander.** boys reflect on how healthy relationships with their peers and family can be maintained through respecting people’s choices, identities, and boundaries. Boys are made aware that misogynistic beliefs make relationships unhealthy, which links back to discussions in previous weeks about being conscious of how harmful messaging shapes behaviours and expectations of others. Boys are informed of what should be considered to ensure that affirmative consent is being expressed and obtained in platonic relationships (e.g. resisting peer pressure and negative values within platonic relationships). Using scenario-based activities, boys respond to examples of consent and boundaries being disrespected by using the active bystander model. Boys are encouraged to consider their safety and seek help from trusted adults if they witness misogynistic behaviours in public.
- **Week 6: Survey and debrief.** Once the boys complete the follow-up/T2 evaluation survey, they are encouraged to ask any questions or share reflections about their experiences throughout the previous week.

2.6.3 Types of additional content

The Steps curriculum has been designed to complement the core elements of the Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum that all schools follow. Therefore, boys may already have a baseline understanding of some of the content that is covered throughout Steps. Steps facilitators prioritise covering the core content for each session; however, additional topics may naturally arise in conversation, and Steps facilitators will support and encourage broader discussions. This section outlines different scenarios that commonly come up and how the Steps facilitators work in these situations. Types of additional content include:

- **Romantic relationships.** This typically comes up in week 5 as Steps facilitators talk broadly about relationships and consent. When discussing relationships and consent, boys often raise questions about romantic dynamics. Steps facilitators use this as an opportunity to apply session content on respect, boundaries, choice and identity to both romantic and platonic contexts. They also use their judgement to distinguish between curiosity, commentary and disclosure, and follow up with school staff where needed.
- **Racism.** In early sessions, boys sometimes draw parallels between racism and misogyny as they make sense of stereotypes and expectations. Steps facilitators use this as an opportunity to explore how these forms of discrimination intersect, showing that prejudice and privilege often overlap and reinforce one another. This helps boys understand that misogyny does not operate in isolation – its boundaries shift across different cultural and social contexts – and encourages them to reflect on how intersecting identities shape people’s experiences.
- **Cultural norms.** Steps facilitators will create an inclusive environment that acknowledges and respects pupils’ varied cultural and religious perspectives. When conversations about cultural norms or gender roles arise, they will facilitate these thoughtfully, ensuring responses are appropriate to the local context and recognise the intersections between culture, gender, and other aspects of identity.
- **'Sexism towards men'.** Some boys express the view that they “get a bad deal” because they are male. Steps facilitators validate the experience, then unpack it as part of wider gender dynamics. The Steps team recognises that males can also experience GBV. However, the focus of this curriculum is to prioritise violence enacted by boys and/or men on woman and/or girls.
- **Bullying or prejudice.** Personal experiences sometimes surface during bystander discussions. Steps facilitators thank boys for sharing, avoid lingering on sensitive examples in the group setting, and ensure schools are informed so follow-up support can be provided.

- **Gender identities.** The Steps curriculum is not designed to explore diverse gender identities and sexualities. However, in development of the curriculum, Salford Foundation have considered that gender norms and expectations shape and are shaped by other aspects of identity, including sexuality and gender expression. Boys have raised questions about how these groups may experience gender stereotyping, and at times boys have expressed views that reflect homophobia or transphobia. Salford Foundation provides guidance for schools during in-person/video training on how to respond when these topics/comments may come up. Within sessions, Steps facilitators take a relational approach that encourages respectful discussion about gender and sexuality. They help boys recognise how certain language or beliefs can cause harm, while supporting them to reflect critically on how the experiences of people of all genders and sexual identities – including gay and trans people – connect to the broader themes of equality, respect and power explored within the Steps curriculum.

2.6.4 Supporting boys with previous trauma and safeguarding

Steps is delivered in line with Salford Foundation’s Safeguarding policy which is aligned to statutory guidance and reviewed annually. It is also delivered in line with school safeguarding policies. The Steps team, all who have enhanced DBS clearance, work closely with schools to ensure appropriate safeguarding approaches are in place for boys. This work will start during the evaluation set-up phase and as part of school recruitment and onboarding (i.e. before baseline (T1) questionnaires are completed).

Salford Foundation have delivered similar GBV initiatives in a school and youth setting. Since April 2023, over 1,100 boys have received this educational based learning. During this period Salford Foundation report that there have not been any safeguarding concerns raised by Steps staff or school staff related to the topic.

Any needs that boys may have are identified and supported primarily through each school’s existing pastoral and safeguarding systems, ensuring a sustainable and integrated approach to pupil welfare. As part of the school recruitment and onboarding process, Salford Foundation and Cordis Bright will work with participating schools to confirm that robust safeguarding policies, designated pastoral/safeguarding leads, and referral pathways are in place for both the programme and the evaluation. This ensures that the Steps programme is delivered only in settings with appropriate capacity to respond to any disclosures or emerging concerns.

Throughout delivery, the Steps facilitators will maintain close communication with school teaching and pastoral staff to identify any boys who may be experiencing distress or who require additional support.

Where relevant, Steps facilitators will maintain safeguarding and delivery notes where conversations indicate that a boy may require additional support. These notes are recorded solely for safeguarding and programme delivery purposes and are managed in line with Salford Foundation's safeguarding and data protection policies. These records will not be collected or analysed as part of the evaluation dataset and will remain within the school's safeguarding systems unless a safeguarding concern requires escalation in line with school procedures.

Steps facilitators will also maintain regular communication with school safeguarding leads or pastoral leads to discuss any emerging concerns and to understand how safeguarding issues raised during the programme are being addressed and will continue to be addressed following the completion of Steps delivery. This includes discussing the rate and nature of safeguarding submissions and the support mechanisms available within each school.

Where appropriate, Steps facilitators will work with school staff to connect boys to additional or complementary local services, such as Early Help support, counselling services, or Youth Justice Service (YJS) prevention programmes, in line with the school's existing safeguarding and wellbeing processes. Such safeguarding pathways remain available as needed to ensure individual safety and wellbeing, depending on the specific circumstances.

Once the delivery of Steps has been completed, if the Steps facilitator has concerns about any boy, they will communicate with the school's designated safeguarding or pastoral lead to ensure continuity of care.

Following delivery of the Steps programme, the Steps facilitators remain embedded in the school for the full term to enable ongoing check-ins with boys as needed. As part of the final session, boys are routinely signposted to further sources of information and external support where appropriate.

Oversight of the entire process will remain with a designated strategic leader within the school, ensuring that boys' receive the highest standard of post-programme care and continuity.

2.6.5 A qualified and experienced team

The Steps facilitators at Salford Foundation who deliver Steps hold degrees in Educational Psychology, alongside specialist training in RSE, Talk Relationships (including for boys with SEND), and a Level 3 Award in Education and Training. They are active members of the Manchester Boys Impact Hub, with one serving as co-chair, and have extensive experience in knowledge exchange and professional development, having presented the Steps programme at major conferences including [GM4Women](#), the [One Education Safeguarding Conference](#), the [British Educational Research Association Conference](#), and the [Boys Impact Hub Conference](#).

Steps facilitators will engage in six-weekly 'Connect Conversations,' which will be an opportunity to reflect on learning and support continual professional development. In addition, the team will engage in REDI training and developmental opportunities every quarter which may include webinars or conferences on topics including (but not limited to) intersectionality, cultural and local contexts, unconscious bias, curriculum inclusion, and culturally responsive instruction.

2.7 Control group conditions

Boys in the control group will continue with 'business as usual' in their year groups. As the Steps programme takes place within the school day, typically during lesson time, boys that are in the control group will continue to attend their regular lessons. Salford Foundation will discuss with schools what delivery timetable makes most sense (i.e., if this will take place using PSHE/RSE for the six weeks, or if this will take place during a different lesson each week) as this may depend on the current length of lessons and available space within the school. As randomisation and delivery is taking place at the year group level, boys in the control group should not be aware of any disruption to their usual timetable for themselves or their classroom peers.

3 Impact evaluation

3.1 Overview

This section presents an overview of information about the impact evaluation. It covers:

- Research questions.
- Trial design.
- Randomisation approach.
- Participant journey through the trial.
- Sample size calculations.

3.2 Research questions

The key research question for the efficacy study is:

Among boys aged 11–14, does a universal, classroom-based, manualised programme designed to improve perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes, promote healthy relationships, and build confidence to act as active bystanders, compared to business as usual, lead to measurable improvements in boys' perceptions about gender norms and traditional stereotypes?

The key primary outcome for Steps is boys' perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes, measured by the Global Early Adolescent Study [Gender Stereotypical Traits \(GEAS-GST\) Scale](#) (Moreau, Ahmed & Cislighi, 2021). More information about this measure and the rationale for selecting it is presented in section 4.1.1.

Additional research questions are:

1. **Delivery.** Can Steps work under ideal circumstances?
2. **Impact.** What is the impact of Steps? Do different sub-groups of boys have different outcomes, e.g. those from marginalised/minoritised groups, e.g. ethnicity, those with an EHCP etc.
3. **Unintended consequences.** Does Steps have any unintentional consequences? If so, what are these? Do different groups of young boys experience these differently?
4. **Negative effects.** Are there any serious negative effects that can be attributed to the Steps programme?
5. **Mechanisms.** Which factors contribute most to the observed outcomes?

We are committed to delivering this evaluation in line with race equity, diversity, equality and inclusion. As part of this, we will explicitly assess differences in access, experiences and outcomes for boys from racially minoritised and marginalised backgrounds (e.g. Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, boys with an EHCP). This will be addressed in both the

impact evaluation and the implementation and process evaluation, and in our analysis and reporting (see section 7).

3.3 Trial design

Table 2 presents an overview of the efficacy study trial design.

Table 2. Trial design overview

Trial design, including number of arms		A two-armed cluster RCT with random allocation at the school year level
Unit of randomisation		School year groups
Stratification variables		Secondary schools in Greater Manchester
Primary outcome	Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes
	Measure (instrument, scale, source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global Early Adolescent Study Gender Stereotypical Traits (GEAS-GST) Scale (Moreau, Ahmed & Cislighi, 2021).
Secondary outcome(s)	Variable(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Endorsement of harmful online actions Confidence and intent to act as an active bystander. Emotional and behavioural functioning. Behaviours that support positive interactions with friends, peers and family.
	Measure(s) (instrument, scale, source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS; Barlett et al., 2016). Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale (SBES; Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2005). Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total difficulties score (Goodman, 2005) SDQ prosocial behaviour subscale (Goodman, 2005).
Baseline for primary outcome	Variable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceptions about gender norms and traditional stereotypes
	Measure (instrument, scale, source)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GEAS-GST (Moreau, Ahmed & Cislighi, 2021).
Baseline for secondary outcome(s)	Variable(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Endorsement of harmful online actions Confidence and intent to act as an active bystander. Behavioural and emotional functioning. Behaviours that support positive interactions with friends, peers and family.

	<p style="text-align: center;">Measure(s) (instrument, scale, source)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale (SBES; Banyard, Plante & Moynihan, 2005). • Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS) measures (Barlett et al., 2016). • Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total difficulties score (Goodman, 2005) • SDQ prosocial behaviour subscale (Goodman, 2005).
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3.3.1 Participative approach to the evaluation

In line with good practice in young person-centred evaluations, we will adopt a participatory approach to ensure that the perspectives and experiences of boys inform the design and delivery of both the RCT and IPE. Working in partnership with Salford Foundation, we will identify a group of approximately 4–8 boys who have previously participated in the Steps programme. These boys will be invited to form a peer researcher group, which will play an active role in shaping key elements of the evaluation.

We plan to convene around three participatory workshops with the peer researcher group during the evaluation set-up phase. These sessions will introduce the purpose and value of evaluation, provide an accessible overview of RCTs and IPEs, and explore what the boys hope to gain from their involvement. The workshops will also be used to co-develop and review study materials, including information sheets, privacy notices, questionnaires, and topic guides to ensure they are age-appropriate, engaging, and accessible. Discussions will further explore other meaningful ways in which boys could contribute to the evaluation process.

Our intention is to maintain ongoing contact with the peer researcher group throughout the evaluation, working flexibly to support their continued involvement in ways that reflect their interests, preferences, and capacity. This participatory approach is designed to improve the relevance, accessibility, and acceptability of the evaluation for boys, while also strengthening the quality and validity of study design and data collection.

3.3.2 Randomisation

Summary of approach

This efficacy study will be a two-arm, parallel cluster RCT, with random allocation at the school year level. As the intervention is universal, all boys in Years 7, 8 and 9 in participating schools whose parents/carers do not opt-out from the study will be included in the evaluation.

The trial will use a restricted block design (Torgerson & Torgerson, 2013) to ensure balance across trial arms and year groups. Specifically, each school will be allocated to one of six predefined randomisation sequences, with three sequences assigning one year group to the

intervention, and three sequences assigning two-year groups to the intervention. In practice, this design means that:

- Across the 54 year groups in the trial, 27 year groups will be allocated to the treatment group, and 27 to the control group.
- Each year group (Year 7, Year 8, Year 9) will appear 18 times across the trial, with exactly half (n=9) allocated to intervention and half (n=9) to control.
- Every school will have at least one intervention year: half of schools will have one intervention year and two control years, and the other half will have two intervention years and one control year. This achieves the closest feasible approximation to a 1:1 allocation ratio within schools, given the three year-group structure.

This design was chosen to:

- Maximise statistical power by ensuring balance across arms at both the school and year-group level.
- Minimise contamination risk within schools compared to individual- or class-level randomisation, while maximising power and minimising the total number of required schools relative to school-level randomisation.
- Provide the most elegant solution, by ensuring that all schools receive Steps for at least one year group. This means there is a greater likelihood of schools being supportive of the evaluation and the evaluation being informed by higher quality data.
- Align with Salford Foundation's delivery capacity by controlling the number of year groups allocated to intervention in each school year.

Supporting the Steps team to further reduce contamination risk

Because Steps targets attitudes and social norms, there is a risk of contamination through informal discussion between participating and non-participating pupils and staff. Even without direct exposure to session content, peers in control groups may hear about the programme themes (e.g., gender stereotypes, respect, online behaviour, relationships) or observe attitudinal changes among intervention pupils. Similarly, teachers who work across year groups may share insights or resources with colleagues teaching control year groups.

While positive peer influence is an intentional part of the Steps theory of change, particularly in strengthening active-bystander norms, such diffusion is undesirable within the trial period, when we need to isolate causal effects. To minimise contamination risk during the efficacy phase, the evaluation team will work closely with Salford Foundation and participating schools to implement the following safeguards:

- **Training and guidance.** We will provide training, ongoing support and an evaluation handbook which will include key information for Steps facilitators on what can and cannot be shared with school staff (e.g., not sharing any intervention content with teachers in control group years and avoid the sharing of any materials). The handbook will also include concise messaging on maintaining the integrity of randomisation and avoiding inadvertent information sharing.
- **School-level communication.** We will support Steps facilitators and school leads to provide consistent and standardised information to staff about the purpose of the efficacy study, the aims of the Steps programme, and the distinction between intervention and control year groups. Communications will emphasise that staff in control years should not access Steps session plans or resources until after the trial concludes, i.e. T3 questionnaires are completed.
- **Randomisation and information management.** Randomisation results will not be disclosed to schools until after baseline data collection. We will limit knowledge of allocation to one or two designated school contacts to reduce pre-rollout discussion. Those contacts will receive tailored briefings on the importance of maintaining separation between intervention and control years.
- **Monitoring and documentation.** Steps facilitators will log any observed or reported instances of information sharing between pupils or staff. These logs will be reviewed periodically to assess contamination risk and to record actions taken. We will also explore potential contamination as part of our implementation and process evaluation interviews with pupils and staff, to capture qualitative evidence of spill-over or diffusion.
- **Analytical considerations.** Controlling for potential contamination is built into our analysis design: the primary mixed-effects model will already account for school and year group-level clustering. Because the primary outcome (attitudes) is susceptible to spill-over, any diffusion is more likely to bias estimates toward the null, rather than produce false positives. In addition, we plan an exploratory sensitivity analysis comparing effect sizes between one-year and two-year treatment schools, since contamination risk is plausibly higher in the latter. Where feasible, we will consider including brief items in the control group questionnaires at T2 and T3 (e.g. *“Before today, have you heard about the Steps sessions from pupils in other years?”*) to provide descriptive evidence of diffusion.
- **Design justification.** Finally, we selected year-group randomisation within schools partly to contain peer-to-peer spill-over while preserving feasibility. This approach balances practical delivery with the need to isolate programme effects during the efficacy study.

Through these combined design, delivery, and monitoring strategies, we will actively minimise contamination risk while documenting and, where possible, quantifying any residual diffusion between groups.

Implementing randomisation

As described above, random allocation will be conducted at the school year level. This will be done using the six predefined sequences set out in Table 3. Each sequence specifies whether one or two year groups in a school are allocated to the intervention, and which year groups are allocated to which arm.

To ensure balance across the 18 schools, sequences will be applied in blocks of six schools, with each sequence used once per block. This guarantees that across each block, half of all the year groups are allocated to the intervention and half to the control group, and that each year group (Year 7, 8 and 9) is equally represented across both trial arms. Given that the trial will recruit 18 schools, three of these blocks will be used. This will ensure balance across the 54 year groups by both year group and trial arm.

Table 3. Randomisation sequence: An example block of six schools

Sequence	School type	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
S1	1 treatment year	Intervention	Control	Control
S2	1 treatment year	Control	Intervention	Control
S3	1 treatment year	Control	Control	Intervention
S4	2 treatment years	Intervention	Intervention	Control
S5	2 treatment years	Intervention	Control	Intervention
S6	2 treatment years	Control	Intervention	Intervention

The rest of this section explains the randomisation process in more detail, i.e. how the sequence will be generated, concealed, blinded and how allocations will be revealed throughout the study.

The randomisation approach will include the following steps:

Step one: Generating the randomisation sequence. The random sequence list will be generated in advance by Cordis Bright using Sealed Envelope software, with a fixed random seed⁴ to allow reproducibility and audit. Cordis Bright will securely store the list. Neither the schools nor Salford Foundation will have access to the sequence list.

Step two: Allocation concealment. When a school signs its Service Level Agreement, it will be assigned the next available sequence on the list. The assignment will be recorded in an

⁴ A seed is a pre-specified number that enables recreation of the exact random allocation list as needed; it provides auditability and transparency without affecting allocation concealment.

allocation log (including date, school ID, and allocator within the evaluation team) to ensure transparency and prevent manipulation.

Step three: Supporting delivery planning. Once the schools have been recruited and assigned their sequence, to support delivery planning the evaluation team will inform Salford Foundation whether a school has been allocated one or two intervention year groups (which is determined by their sequence), without disclosing which year groups have been randomised to which arms. This allows delivery capacity to be managed effectively across schools (as Salford Foundation will need to arrange delivery timelines at this stage) while preserving allocation concealment at the school and individual level. No further information will be shared with Salford Foundation about which year groups in each school will be receiving the intervention at this stage. This approach ensures randomisation remains concealed, while supporting Salford Foundation's delivery planning and capacity to deliver across each half-term.

Step four: Blinding allocation during baseline testing. All boys will complete their baseline questionnaire at least a week before the intervention commences. Baseline questionnaires will be completed in the first half of any term (i.e., summer half-term one)⁵. During this period neither the delivery team at Salford Foundation nor school staff will know which year group/s are receiving the intervention. This is to ensure the baseline questionnaires are blinded. The Steps programme will also organise mop up sessions to collect baseline and follow-up questionnaires for boys who missed sessions with the aim of reducing attrition. These mop-up sessions will happen before randomisation is revealed.

Step five: Revealing allocation. Following the completion of baseline data collection, allocation will be revealed. At this stage, Cordis Bright will share the allocation with Salford Foundation colleagues, who will disclose this to school colleagues. Salford Foundation will work with school colleagues to finalise programme delivery practicalities (i.e. delivery timings and spaces), and schedule implementation of the Steps programme follow-up data collection.

Step six: Managing school-level dropout. If a school withdraws after allocation, a replacement school will be sought (before the end of the summer term 2026/27). To protect randomisation integrity, replacement recruitment will be conducted blind to allocation requirements: Salford Foundation will identify and confirm eligibility for a replacement school without being informed of the original school's sequence type or the required replacement sequence. Once eligibility is confirmed and the school has provided agreement to participate, Cordis Bright will assign the replacement centrally using the pre-specified approach (seeking

⁵ Year groups will likely complete their baseline questionnaires at different times across the school week. All baseline questionnaires will never take place during an extended break (i.e. summer holidays) and will never be split over pupils changing year groups.

the same sequence type where feasible; otherwise using the pre-specified swap rules, e.g. S4 with S3; S5 with S2; S6 with S1) to maintain balance. All withdrawals, replacement decisions, and the rationale for any swap will be documented in the allocation log, with date-stamped records. Salford Foundation will not be able to influence sequence assignment for replacement schools, as sequence assignment will occur only after recruitment/eligibility confirmation, via a central process.

3.4 Participant journey

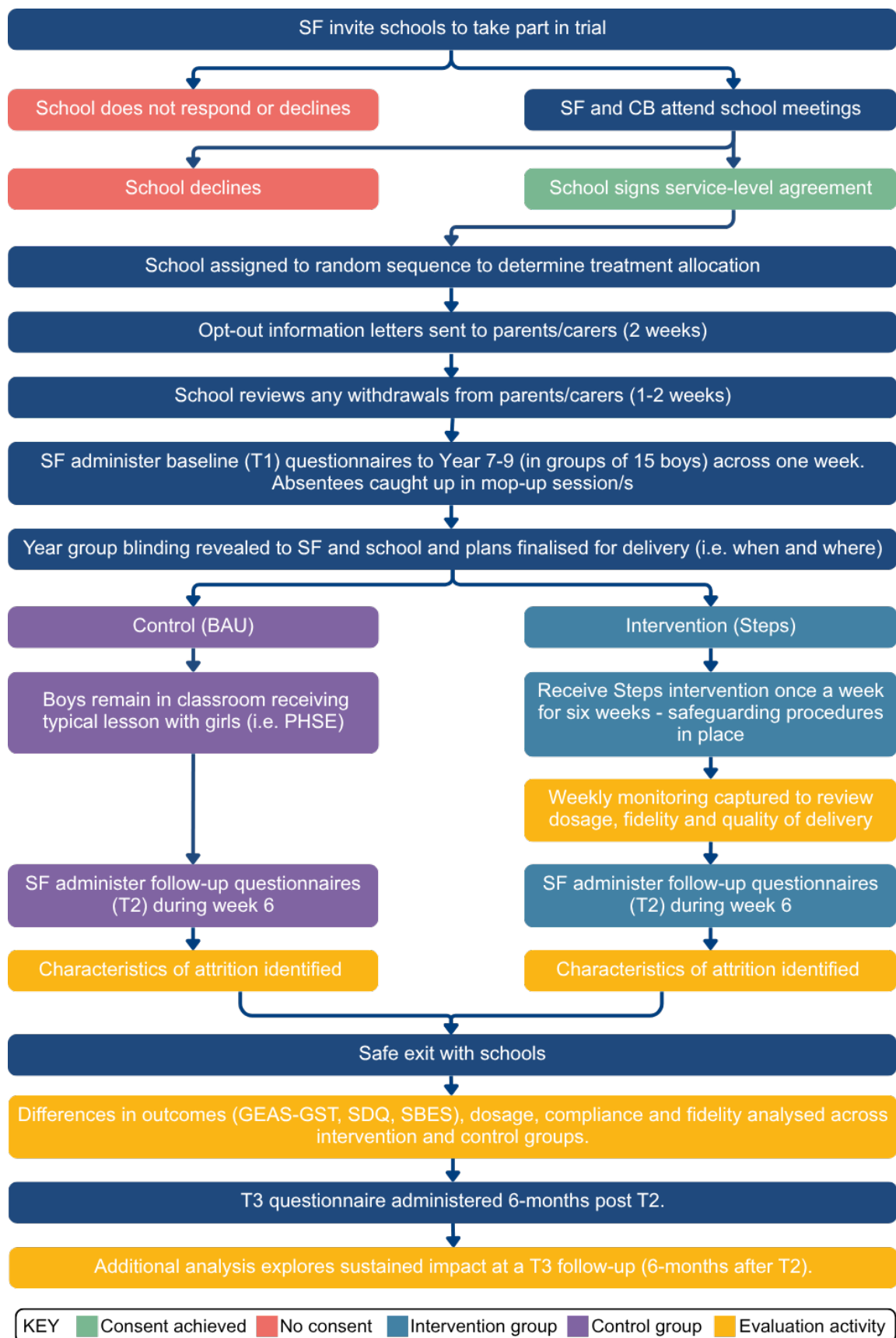
Figure 1 presents the trial pathway for the efficacy study. This shows the following key steps:

- Eligibility criteria.
- Recruitment rates.
- School onboarding.
- Opt-out consent.
- Randomisation process.
- Intervention and control phases.
- Safe-exit with schools.
- Data collection at baseline (T1) and follow-ups (T2 and T3).

Additional information on the week-by-week activity for a school can be found in Appendix 2: Trial timelines per school example.

The rest of this section describes how each of these processes will be implemented and conducted in full.

Figure 1. Trial pathway



3.4.1 School recruitment

This section outlines the approach to school recruitment.

School selection criteria

Schools will be purposively identified, selected and recruited to ensure:

- Steps has not been delivered in the school previously.
- No schools outside of Greater Manchester are recruited.

The criteria below will be used as a guide for identifying and reaching out to schools to ensure the study is reaching as representative a population of boys from across Greater Manchester as possible.

- Representative proportion of pupils from ethnically minoritised backgrounds (30%)⁶.
- Representative proportion of pupils with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) as measured by Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) (5%)⁷.

There will be no requirements to gain geographical spread across the 10 Greater Manchester Boroughs.

School onboarding

Informed by the selection criteria above, Salford Foundation and Cordis Bright will work together to identify 18 secondary schools. Salford Foundation will contact and invite the schools to participate in the Steps programme and efficacy study. Cordis Bright will support this process by working with Salford Foundation on introductory information that can be shared with schools including a Service Level Agreement. Once schools agree a meeting to discuss with Salford Foundation, recruitment will take a three-phase approach:

Phase 1: Salford Foundation will meet with the school to provide information on:

- What the Steps programme is about and what the benefits may be.
- An introduction to the evaluation.

⁶ [The Census 2021 data](#) reported 34.0% of children and young people (0-24 years old) in Greater Manchester are from minority ethnic backgrounds, compared to 25.9% for England. [Census 2021 data for the total population](#) of Greater Manchester found 28.7% are from minority ethnic backgrounds.

⁷ [Government data](#) for 2024/25 on special educational needs in England suggests 5.3% of pupils have an EHCP. In Greater Manchester, this ranges from 4.8% in Bolton to 6.1% in Manchester and Oldham. EHCPs have been chosen to remove any bias from schools on their interpretation of boys that may require additional support.

- What the next steps would include.

Phase 2: Salford Foundation and Cordis Bright will meet with the school to provide further information on:

- The Steps programme.
- The efficacy study, implications and expectations for the school (e.g., randomisation, opt-out consent).
- Timelines for taking part in the study.
- Answer any questions about the programme, the delivery and evaluation components.

Phase 3: If the school is happy to proceed, they will sign a Service Level Agreement with the Salford Foundation. This will set out agreed expectations in terms of what Salford Foundation will deliver and what the school needs to do to successfully support the implementation of Steps.

Supporting Salford Foundation and schools

Cordis Bright will provide guidance and training, including a co-developed evaluation handbook, to the Steps facilitators and project managers to ensure all information about the programme and the efficacy RCT are clearly communicated to boys and their parents/carers. This will include providing schools with information sheets describing the project and a set of Frequently Asked Questions. Together, Cordis Bright and the Salford Foundation will support schools with any questions they receive about the project information sheets from parents/carers. This process will be monitored by capturing feedback from the Steps facilitators and project managers to ensure that materials are being used appropriately.

Managing resistance and framing the Steps programme

Resistance to participation is recognised as a potential implementation risk, particularly given the sensitive nature of the Steps programme and the use of a randomised evaluation design. We will mitigate this risk through careful framing of the programme during school recruitment and onboarding, alongside clear communication about expectations, roles, and timelines.

At the school level, Steps will be framed as a targeted, preventative programme aligned with safeguarding, PSHE/RSE, and pupil wellbeing priorities, rather than as a punitive or deficit-based intervention (which it is not). During onboarding meetings, Salford Foundation will emphasise the programme's aims, delivery model, and alignment with statutory requirements, as well as the practical support provided to schools through the Service Level

Agreement. Clear information will be provided about randomisation, data collection, and school responsibilities to minimise uncertainty and disengagement. During the onboarding process we will ensure that schools including their staff (e.g., teachers whose lessons Steps may affect) are happy for Steps to be implemented in line with the plan in this protocol.

Should schools raise concerns or potential resistance to participation due to perceived cultural sensitivities around the Steps programme content, Salford Foundation will address these during school onboarding discussions. The Steps curriculum has already been delivered across Greater Manchester in schools serving boys from a wide range of demographic backgrounds, including schools with high proportions of pupils from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and schools with different governance structures, including faith-based schools.

During onboarding, Salford Foundation will emphasise that the programme is designed to support boys wellbeing, healthy relationships, and respectful peer interactions. Steps facilitators are trained to approach discussions about gender, relationships and online behaviour in an open, respectful and developmentally appropriate way that recognises that pupils may bring different perspectives and experiences to these conversations.

Where schools anticipate questions from parents or carers, Salford Foundation will support schools in communicating clearly about the aims of the programme and how sessions are delivered.

At the same time, the programme avoids framing cultural or religious groups as more likely to resist the content. This is to ensure that conversations remain respectful and inclusive and do not unintentionally reinforce assumptions about particular communities.

Further information on how facilitators manage discussions relating to cultural norms, identity and respectful dialogue during sessions is provided in Section 2.6.3.

Consideration of potential resistance from parents/carers and boys will be embedded within the programme's wider communication and recruitment approach (see Section 3.4.2).

3.4.2 Participant recruitment

This section outlines the approach to participant recruitment

Participant eligibility criteria

Steps is a universal intervention. All boys in Year 7, 8 and 9 (aged 11-14 years old) attending secondary education including alternative provision in Greater Manchester will be eligible. Boys would only not be accepted into the programme if their parents/carers let the school know they wished to opt-out of their child receiving Steps.

Opt-out consent

The half-term before a school is scheduled to receive the programme, an opt-out consent process will be implemented for parents and carers of boys in Years 7-9. Because the Steps programme is designed to be delivered as part of, or to complement, the statutory PSHE/RSE curriculum, and therefore forms part of pupils' regular educational provision, explicit parental consent is not legally required for participation. Instead, parents and carers will be informed about the study and given the opportunity to withdraw their child if they wish.

Opt-out consent is widely considered appropriate and ethically acceptable in school-based cluster-randomised trials of universal interventions, as it maximises participation and reduces selection bias while still respecting parental autonomy (see, for example, Bonell et al., 2023).

The following outlines the process to opt-out consent for this study:

- Schools will send an information sheet, privacy notice and opt-out consent form about Steps and the efficacy study. Parents/carers will have a deadline of two weeks after receipt to inform the school if they wish for their child/the child they care for to **not receive Steps**. Contact information from Salford Foundation, Cordis Bright and the school will be included on information sheet should parents/carers have any questions. The forms will provide parents/carers with two options:
 - Do nothing and their child will take part in the evaluation and Steps (if intervention allocation) or BAU (if control allocation).
 - Sign and return the forms to school if they would like to **opt out** of their child/the child they care for receiving Steps.
- The school will collate any opt-out forms and ensure this information is relayed to class teachers to ensure any opting-out boy does not complete the questionnaire or participate in the Steps programme (if their year group is allocated the intervention group).
- Boys may withdraw from the study without giving a reason up until two weeks after completing the final follow-up (T3) questionnaire (about six months after the baseline (T1) questionnaire). The Steps delivery team will be trained to recognise and respect withdrawal and to communicate this to the evaluation team and schools. Schools will also be provided with information and support for how to handle boys wishing to withdraw and can discuss this with Salford Foundation and the evaluation team. The information sheet and privacy notice will include a clear explanation of withdrawal rights.

If a parent/carer or a boy decides to opt-out before the baseline (T1) questionnaire and randomisation, they will not be able to participate in the Steps programme or evaluation. This is in line with the YEF's agreement with the Home Office as a What Works Centre, whereby funded programmes are only to be delivered in the context of a rigorous evaluation. This

approach is necessary to maintain the integrity of the cluster RCT design. Allowing pupils to receive the intervention outside the evaluation framework would potentially introduce contamination between groups and undermine the ability of the study to produce reliable evidence about programme impact.

We will discuss with schools what boys whose parents opt-out will receive during the school onboarding process. This may vary depending on school preference. However, one option is that boys whose parents/carers opt them out or withdraw them will remain in the classroom with their (female) peers.

The information sheet, privacy notice and opt-out consent form will be developed collaboratively by Cordis Bright and Salford Foundation colleagues with input from boys as part of our participative approach to delivering the efficacy study. These will be developed during the set-up and mobilisation phase of the evaluation. These materials will be concise and accessible and in line with [YEF data protection guidance](#). They will explain the Steps programme, the purpose of the evaluation, what participation involves and data protection assurances. We will also produce these so that they can either be sent home with boys in hard-copy and/or sent to parents/carers via email. We will work with each school to understand their preferences in how to ensure these reach parents/carers.

Managing participant-level resistance and framing

To mitigate high rates of withdrawal from parents/carers and boys, clear and consistent information will be shared, highlighting Steps as a universal, preventative programme focused on wellbeing, skills, and decision-making, aligned with statutory PSHE/RSE provision, rather than as a behavioural or disciplinary intervention.

For boys, Steps sessions will be introduced by Steps facilitators in a strengths-based and non-stigmatising way, with clear ground rules around respect, confidentiality, and voluntary participation in discussions. As highlighted in Section 2.6, Steps facilitators are trained to recognise and respond appropriately to discomfort or disengagement, and boys will be reminded of their right to withdraw at any point without consequence.

3.4.3 Intervention and control group journey through the trial

Boys in the intervention, receiving the Steps programme, will attend weekly sessions for six weeks lasting around 60 minutes. Delivery takes place in secondary schools either in classrooms or other appropriate school locations (e.g., halls or meeting rooms). These will take place either during PSHE/RSE lessons or other lessons (if using lessons other than PSHE, these will be at different times each week to minimise subject lesson disruption, e.g. ensuring

pupils do not miss six maths lessons for example)⁸. The Steps curriculum will be covered across six weekly sessions.

Boys in the control group will continue with their typical lessons each week. As randomisation is at the year group level, there should be no disruption to timetables across their year group.

3.4.4 Safe-exit with schools

Steps facilitators will remain embedded in the school after the Steps programme has been delivered for the full term to enable ongoing check-ins with boys as needed. As part of the final session, boys will be routinely signposted to further sources of information and external support where appropriate. Oversight of the entire process will remain with a designated strategic leader within the school, ensuring that boys receive the highest standard of post-programme care and continuity.

3.4.5 Data collection

This section outlines the approach to quantitative data collection in the study. This includes both outcome data and monitoring data.

Summary

Table 4 presents an overview of the different data types that will be collected at each stage of the efficacy study. These include:

- Outcomes measures.
- Monitoring data including:
 - Demographic data.
 - Activity and dosage data for Steps.

Each data type is then discussed in full throughout the remainder of this section.

⁸ As Steps aligns with the PSHE/RSE curriculum, boys in the treatment group will still receive their full entitlement to PSHE/RSE lesson time, ensuring compliance with statutory curriculum requirements.

Table 4. Data types and data collection sources

Data type	Data collection source	Data collection point				
		School onboarding	Baseline (T1)	Delivery phase	Follow up (T2)	Follow-up (T3)
Outcomes measures	Boys, with support from Steps facilitators (T1 and T2) and from schools/ Cordis Bright researchers (T3)		✓		✓	✓
Demographic data	School data	✓				
Activity and dosage data (treatment)	Salford Foundation			✓		
Evaluation monitoring data	Salford Foundation	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Outcome data collection

Outcome data will be collected using validated self-report measures. These will be collected at three points in time:

- **Baseline outcome measures questionnaire (T1).** This will be administered to boys in both the treatment and control groups after school year randomisation has been allocated but before this has been revealed to the Steps team, schools or boys. This will take place in the half-term preceding the delivery of Steps, i.e., within two to three weeks of the programme starting.
- **Follow-up questionnaire (T2) during Week 6 of the Steps programme.** This will be administered to both the treatment and control groups approximately six to nine weeks after the baseline, depending on how long schools require to prepare for delivery.
- **Follow-up questionnaire (T3) six-months after T2 questionnaire completion.** This will be administered to both the treatment and control groups approximately six months after T2 questionnaire completion (i.e. after exit from the programme).

Steps facilitators will administer the T1 and T2 questionnaires to boys in groups. Cordis Bright will work with schools to support T3 administration. The questionnaire administration process will be co-designed by Cordis Bright, Salford Foundation, participating schools and informed by boys who have experienced the Steps programme to ensure high completion and anonymity. The approach will include the following key principles:

- Piloting questionnaires with a group of boys that have previously taken part in Steps in the evaluation set-up and mobilisation phase to sense check the timings, readability and accessibility of the tool.

- Steps facilitators will introduce the survey, its purpose and information on expectations for completion.
- Boys will complete the questionnaires using tablets/laptops. Our experience in other RCTs has suggested that children prefer completing questionnaires electronically rather than in hard copy. However, hard copy options will be available as a back-up (e.g. if Wi-Fi goes down etc.) and to boys if they say that they would prefer to complete a paper-copy version.
- We will discuss with schools the best way of operationalising questionnaire completion with boys. Our preference is to send unique questionnaire links to boys via email at the start of the session using Smart Survey. The boy can then click on the link when the project co-ordinator says it is okay to do so and they can complete the survey. Plan B will be to generate individual QR codes for each boy and share these with boys on stickers at the beginning of the session. The boys would then use the table scanner to open their unique questionnaire. It is likely that we will tailor these options with each school to ensure it works. We will also pilot and test these approaches during the set-up phase to ensure they will work in practice. The back-up option will be hard-copy questionnaires where Steps facilitators will have to complete unique IDs by hand on questionnaires before the boys complete them.

Steps facilitators will offer “mop-up” sessions for boys to capture T1 (before randomisation is revealed to Salford Foundation and schools) or T2 questionnaires from any boys that may have been absent.

During school set-up Cordis Bright and Salford Foundation will consult with schools to identify the most feasible window for T3 data collection within the academic calendars which will include mapping staffing requirements to ensure sufficient capacity. This may mean there is some small variation in the timeframes for T3 data collection. Cordis Bright will work with schools to minimise this variation as much as possible.

To maximise feasibility and completion rates while accommodating a range of school contexts, two complementary approaches to T3 administration will be offered:

- Completion supported by Cordis Bright staff who will attend schools when surveys are being administered, i.e., evaluation team members will support school staff to introduce and oversee T3 survey sessions in class time.
- Schools will distribute unique, secure survey links to pupils via email which can then be completed in class time or outside of school time.

The former would be preferable in terms of response rates. The latter option reduces school staff time requirements and allows flexible participation, especially where classroom scheduling is challenging.

In both approaches, Cordis Bright will host the survey and generate survey links and survey completion will take approximately 20-30 minutes and will follow the same data security and safeguarding protocols as T1 and T2. Schools participating in the trial will be consulted during mobilisation to determine which of these models (or a mix) best fits their contexts.

Incentives

To encourage engagement from schools and pupils in the efficacy study, including completion of the T3 questionnaires, we propose offering incentives at both the school and pupil level.

At the **school level**, each participating school will receive a £500 honorarium upon completion of all data collection activities, including supporting the administration of T3 questionnaires.

At the **pupil level**, we propose a prize draw to incentivise completion of T3 questionnaires. In each school, any pupil (across both treatment and control groups) who completes the T3 questionnaire will be entered into a draw to win one of five £25 high-street vouchers (e.g. Love2Shop). This equates to £125 worth of vouchers per school (£2,250 in total).

These incentives are designed to recognise boys and schools' time and effort, promote retention across all time points, and encourage participation without introducing bias between groups.

Outcome measures

Outcome measures will be collected at three time-points. All boys in Year 7, 8 and 9, whose parents/carers have not opted them out, will complete baseline (T1), follow-up (T2) (during week 6 of the Steps programme) and T3 (six months following completion of Steps) questionnaires which will include the following measures: GEAS-GST, SDQ, Slaby Efficacy Bystander Scale and Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (See section 4 for more information about outcome measures). Each questionnaire will take around 20-30 minutes to complete and will be done during school time, within lessons (e.g. PSHE/RSE) in groups of around 20. If completing these tools is perceived to trigger any issues, Steps facilitators will communicate to the class teachers to follow the schools' safeguarding processes and inform the schools designated safeguarding lead.

Demographic data

During school mobilisation, Salford Foundation will work with schools to capture demographic data at the individual level. This information will be collected based on a lawful basis, whereby personal data is processed under Article 6(1)(e), which is processing necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest (namely the independent evaluation of a publicly funded programme which aims to improve perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes, promote healthy relationships, and build confidence to act as active bystanders), and special category personal data (e.g., ethnicity,

EHCP) is processed under Article 9(2)(j), which is also related to research purposes in the public interest.

This includes:

- First and last (family) name
- Unique Pupil Number (UPN)
- Date of birth
- Postcode
- Age
- School name
- School year group
- Sex assigned at birth
- Ethnicity (in line with ONS Guidance)
- Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) status and description
- Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) status
- Looked After Children (LAC) status
- English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Ethnicity, sex assigned at birth and age are sought in line with [YEF's policy on collecting demographic data](#). Ethnicity and EHCP will be used to measure whether Steps is reaching its targets. For the YEF Data Archive, first and last name, date of birth, postcode and a young person reference number is needed to ensure data linkage can take place between ONS and Department for Education.

Activity and dosage data

Activity and dosage data will be collected by the Steps facilitators who are responsible for delivering Steps. At the end of each session, the Steps facilitators will complete a brief SmartSurvey form answering the questions on the following categories:

- Name of project co-ordinator.
- Date of session and session week (i.e., 1-6).
- A register of boys who attended each session.
- Session topic covered (checklist against curriculum).
- Informal reflections on how the session went using quantitative scales.
- Length of sessions (including if there were any disruptions to delivery, e.g. fire alarm).

- Any EDI considerations (i.e. race or cultural topics raised during delivery).

Steps facilitators will also complete an attendance register for each session to capture total number of sessions completed for each boy.

Evaluation monitoring data

Throughout the Efficacy study, a monitoring data spreadsheet will be used. The spreadsheet will include information on:

- School consent via signed service level agreement.
- School delivery dates.
- Boys/numbers whose parent/carer have provided opt-out consent.
- Randomisation outcomes.
- Outcome measure completion rates for T1 and T2.
- Trial completion.
- Trial withdrawals and attrition.

This data will be collected and stored on Salford Foundation secure servers and shared with Cordis Bright on a timely basis which will be discussed and agreed during evaluation set-up and mobilisation. We will then use it to audit the integrity of randomisation processes, data collection and to assess recruitment, retention and exit through the trial. We will also use it to monitor any differences in participation across groups, for example, by ethnic background.

3.4.6 Sample size calculations

This section sets out power calculations for the study, which were conducted a priori as part of the initial trial design and co-design period. These calculations are summarised in Table 5 below and explained in more detail throughout this section.

The recruitment target for the trial has been determined by power calculations and the delivery capacity of Salford Foundation. Salford Foundation estimate that they can deliver to **18 schools**, with three year groups (Years 7 to 9) participating in the evaluation.

Randomisation occurs at the year-group level, resulting in **54 school-year clusters** (i.e. delivery to 27 year groups over the course of the study).

Based on available data on the average male cohort sizes in Years 7 to 9 in Greater Manchester, we anticipate an average **cluster size of 90 boys per year group**, yielding a total randomised sample of approximately **4,860 participants** (2,430 boys allocated to Steps and 2,430 boys allocated to business-as-usual).

This recruitment target reflects the maximum feasible reach of Salford Foundation within the planned delivery period and forms the basis for the study's power analysis.

Power calculations were undertaken to assess whether the planned sample size is sufficient to detect a meaningful impact of Steps. Calculations are based on the following parameters:

- Intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC): 0.04
- Pre-test post-test correlation: 0.5 at the individual level
- Alpha: 0.05
- Power: 0.8
- Number of clusters: 54 year groups (27 intervention, 27 control)
- Average cluster size at randomisation: 90 boys

To account for clustering, we have assumed an ICC of 0.04. A systematic review of school level cluster RCTs in the UK indicates ICCs are typically low (median = 0.028; Parker et al., 2021), with a study of three UK school-based studies suggesting ICCs for aggression and bullying are between 0.01 and 0.03 (Bonell et al., 2015; Hale et al., 2014). Given our design, an ICC of 0.04 is judged to be a conservative estimate, capturing clustering at both class and year-group levels.

Table 5 shows that, under these assumptions, the MDES achieved at randomisation for the study would be 0.178.

We also recognise that the MDES achieved by the final analytical sample for the primary analysis will depend on the achieved attrition rates across the study. Therefore, Table 5 also presents the following three scenarios, to assess the sensitivity of the final analytical MDES to different attrition assumptions:

- **10% within-cluster attrition** (i.e. loss of individual pupils within year groups). Under this assumption, the average cluster size decreases from 90 to 81, resulting in a final MDES of 0.180.
- **15% within-cluster attrition.** Under this assumption, the average cluster size decreases from 90 to 76, resulting in a final MDES of 0.181.
- **20% within-cluster attrition.** Under this assumption, the average cluster size decreases from 90 to 72, resulting in a final MDES of 0.182.

These scenarios consider within-cluster (pupil-level) attrition, but in line with YEF definitions, attrition will be measured at the individual (pupil) level, regardless of the unit of randomisation. This means that if a school or year group withdraws after randomisation, all affected pupils will be counted as attrition, even if replacement schools or cohorts are later recruited to maintain statistical power.

Although year-group or whole-school withdrawal is considered unlikely given the trial's design and delivery model, we will take proactive steps to minimise this risk. Salford Foundation and Cordis Bright will meet with schools at multiple points before baseline questionnaires are completed and randomisation to assess their readiness and willingness to participate. For schools where there is a delay before delivery commences, Salford Foundation will check in at appropriate timepoints to confirm continued engagement. Any additional school recruitment would therefore serve only to maintain the overall sample size and representativeness, not to offset attrition rates in reporting.

These calculations were conducted using PowerUp! (Dong & Maynard, 2013).

Table 5. Sample size calculations

		Randomisation	10% attrition	15% attrition	20% attrition
Minimum Detectable Effect Size (MDES)		0.178	0.180	0.181	0.182
Pre-test/post-test correlations	Level 1 (participant)	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
	Level 2 (cluster)	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Intracluster correlations (ICCs)	Level 1 (participant)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Level 2 (cluster)	0.04	0.04	0.04	0.04
Alpha		0.05	0.05	0.05	0.05
Power		0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
One-sided or two-sided?		Two sided	Two sided	Two sided	Two sided
Average cluster size		90	81	76	72
Number of clusters (year groups)	Intervention	27	27	27	27
	Control	27	27	27	27
	Total	54	54	54	54
Number of participants in final analysis sample	Intervention	2,430	2,187	2,052	1,944
	Control	2,430	2,187	2,052	1,944
	Total	4,860	4,374	4,104	3,888

3.4.7 Recruitment rates

Over the course of the efficacy study, Salford Foundation will aim to recruit 18 schools with an average of 90 boys per year group, meaning 270 boys per school. As highlighted in Table 6, this would result in approximately 2,430 boys for both the intervention and control arms. The total sample size would be 4,860.

Table 6 presents estimated recruitment rates across school half-terms. It shows trial fieldwork starting in Summer term 2026 and ending in Summer term 2028. It provides three attrition scenarios:

- At 10% attrition, 4,374 boys will be retained for the final sample
- At 15% attrition, 4,104 boys will be retained for the final sample
- At 20% attrition, 3,888 boys will be retained for the final sample

In all three instances, these scenarios achieve an MDES of below 0.20 in line with YEF guidance.

Both high dropout rates and non-random item non-completion can significantly affect the internal validity and generalisability of an evaluation's findings. To mitigate drop-out rates, we will:

- Embed T2 data collection in session delivery time so boys' complete surveys in "class time" not their "own time".
- Using a co-developed monitoring approach (i.e., a Smart Survey questionnaire for Steps facilitators to complete after each session and attendance registers) to track the risk of attrition throughout the trial. We will provide regular updates during project management meetings with the YEF and Salford Foundation.

We have a track record in working closely and flexibly with Salford Foundation and delivery providers to problem solve attrition issues as and when they occur, which forms part of our robust project management approach.

Table 7 provides information on school recruitment, mobilisation and delivery. This provides a proposed timetable to ensure Salford Foundation can deliver to an average number of year groups per half-term (i.e. 18 classes of around 20 boys across a maximum of three schools per half-term).

Table 6. Participant recruitment flows

Term	Summer 2025/26		Autumn 2026/27		Spring 2026/27		Summer 2026/27		Autumn 2027/28	
Half-term	HF1	HT2	HF1	HF2	HF1	HF2	HF1	HT2	HF1	HF2
Dates	20 Apr – 22 May	1 Jun – 21 Jul	1 Sep – 23 Oct	2 Nov – 18 Dec	4 Jan – 12 Feb	22 Feb – 2 Apr	19 Apr – 28 May	7 Jun – 22 Jul	1 Sep – 22 Oct	1 Nov – 17 Dec
Target number of boys recruited to Steps and evaluation and complete baseline data collection										
Quarterly Target	0	540	0	720	720	720	720	720	0	720
Cumulative Target	0	540	0	1,260	1,980	2,700	3,420	4,140	4,140	4,860
Scenario 1 - Assuming 10% attrition, target number of boys who complete the intervention/control and complete T2 data collection										
10% attrition	0	54	0	72	72	72	72	72	0	72
Quarterly	0	486	0	648	648	648	648	648	0	648
Cumulative	0	486	486	1,134	1,782	2,430	3,078	3,726	3,726	4,374
Scenario 2 - Assuming 15% attrition, target number of boys who complete the intervention/control and complete T2 data collection										
15% attrition	0	84	0	112	112	112	112	112	0	112
Quarterly	0	456	0	608	608	608	608	608	0	608
Cumulative	0	456	456	1064	1672	2280	2888	3496	3496	4104
Scenario 3 - Assuming 20% attrition, target number of boys who complete the intervention/control and complete T2 data collection										
20% attrition	0	108	0	144	144	144	144	144	0	144
Quarterly	0	432	0	576	576	576	576	576	0	576
Cumulative	0	432	432	1,008	1,584	2,160	2,736	3,312	3,312	3,888

Table 7. School recruitment, mobilisation and delivery timetable

Term	Spring 26/27		Summer 25/26		Autumn 26/27		Spring 26/27		Summer 26/27		Autumn 27/28		Spring 27/28		Summer 27/28	
Half-term	HF1	HF2	HF1	HT2	HF1	HF2	HF1	HF1	HF1	HT2	HF1	HF2	HF1	HF2	HF1	HF2
Dates [®] School [™]	5 Jan – 13 Feb	23 Feb – 27 Mar	20 Apr – 22 May	1 Jun – 21 Jul	1 Sep – 23 Oct	2 Nov – 18 Dec	4 Jan – 12 Feb	22 Feb – 2 Apr	19 Apr – 28 May	7 Jun – 22 Jul	1 Sep – 22 Oct	1 Nov – 17 Dec	4 Jan – 11 Feb	21 Feb – 31 Mar	18 Apr – 26 May	5 Jun – 21 Jul
1		Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3									
2		Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3									
3				Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3						
4				Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3						
5				Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3						
6					Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3*					
7					Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3*					
8					Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3*					
9						Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3					
10						Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3					
11						Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3					
12							Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3				
13							Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3				
14							Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3				
15								Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3			
16								Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery			T3			
17									Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery					T3
18										Recruit	Mobilise	Delivery				T3

Note. Mobilise includes schools administering opt-out consent processes, conducting baseline (T1) questionnaires and Cordis Bright revealing randomisation. Delivery includes the six-week Steps programme (for treatment year groups) and follow-up (T2) questionnaires during week six. * these schools may require T3 slightly earlier or later due to the summer holidays.

3.5 Outcome measures

Table 8 maps outcomes from the Steps theory of change against the validated measures for the Efficacy study. Both the outcomes and measures have been discussed, prioritised and agreed through discussions between Cordis Bright, Salford Foundation and the YEF.

All measures were reviewed to ensure they are in line with Early Intervention Foundation evidence standards, i.e., that they are not amended, that they are standardised and validated, and capture the project's outcomes. In addition, measures were prioritised which were brief, use clear and age-appropriate language, and have been validated for use with young people of the same age and/or from marginalised backgrounds. More information about each measure is presented below the table.

Outcomes will be measured at the individual level through the administration of online self-reported validated measures. All measures will be obtained at three time points:

- **Baseline (T1):** after the opt-out consent window and prior to randomisation and before any support begins.
- **Follow-up (T2):** during week six of the Steps intervention (which will likely be eight to 10 weeks after randomisation) for both the treatment (on exit from the programme) and control groups.
- **Follow-up (T3):** six-months after completion of T2s, i.e. on exit from Steps.

More information about how outcome measures will be collected is presented in section 3.4.5 and in Table 8.

Table 8. Outcome measures

Outcome	Measure	Construct	Items	Collection point(s)
Primary outcome				
Improved perceptions about harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes.	Global Early-Adolescent Study - Gender Stereotypical Traits (GEAS-GST)	Perceptions about traditional gender norms and stereotypes	7	T1, T2, T3
Secondary outcomes				
Reduced endorsement of harmful online actions.	Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS)	Harmful cyberbullying actions	9	T1, T2, T3
Confidence and intent to act as an active bystander (speak up, seek help, say no).	Slaby Efficacy Bystander Scale	Beliefs about the efficacy of violence prevention	8	T1, T2, T3
Reduced emotional and behavioural problems that are associated with offending behaviour.	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) total difficulties score	Emotional and behavioural functioning	20	T1, T2, T3
Improved behaviours that support more positive interactions with friends, peers and family.	SDQ prosocial behaviours subscale	Healthy relationships	5	T1, T2, T3

3.5.1 Primary outcome

The primary outcome measure for Steps is the [Global Early Adolescent Study \(GEAS\) - Gender Stereotypical Traits \(GST\) Scale \(GEAS-GST\)](#), which is a robust and validated measure of young people's perceptions of gender norms and stereotypes. The GST captures the perceptions about gendered characteristics and expectations, assessing the extent to which individuals endorse or reject stereotypical ideas about how boys and girls should think, feel, and behave. As such, it provides a sensitive indicator of participants' ability to identify gender stereotypes and recognise more equitable and healthy gender-based roles. These constructs are central to the development of critical awareness around how gender stereotypes and misogynistic beliefs underpin and normalise GBV. Shifts in GST scores can therefore serve as a meaningful proxy for the intervention's impact on boys' capacity to question harmful gender norms, articulate how such norms sustain GBV, and support more respectful, equitable gender relations.

The seven scale items are:

1. Boys should be raised tough so they can overcome any difficulty in life.
2. Girls should avoid raising their voice to be ladylike.
3. Boys should always defend themselves even if it means fighting.
4. Girls are expected to be humble.
5. Girls need their parents' protection more than boys.
6. Boys who behave like girls are considered weak.
7. It's important for boys to show they are tough even if they are nervous inside.

The GEAS-GST uses a five-point scale, from disagree a lot (1) to agree a lot (5). Higher scores signal perceptions of more unequal gender norms.

The scale was selected because it:

- Has been developed across diverse cultural sites and it has been shown to be reliable for assessing normative beliefs in early adolescence.
- Complements violence-focused instruments by capturing gender-norm attitudes that often precede or shape violent behaviours (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2021).
- Has relevance in measuring underlying norms that can influence risk of GBV later.
- Has been tested and shown to be reliable for early adolescence (i.e. 10-14 years old) (Moreau et al., 2021).

- Has been shown to have high internal validity and acceptable internal consistency with Cronbach alphas reported in the range of .69-.80 across different sites (Chunyan et al., 2021).

The GEAS–GST was developed from qualitative work in poor urban and peri-urban sites worldwide, iteratively pilot tested using a mobile technology programme with 10–14-year-olds, and has been psychometrically verified across four culturally distinct urban samples (China, DRC, Ecuador, Indonesia), demonstrating strong construct validity and reliability for use with marginalised urban young people (Moreau et al., 2021).

3.5.2 Secondary outcomes

As well as the above primary outcome, we will measure the following secondary outcomes based on the Steps theory of change:

- Reduced endorsement of harmful online actions using the Cyberbullying Attitude Scale.
- Increased confidence and intent to act as an active bystander using the Slaby Efficacy Bystander Scale.
- Reduced emotional and behavioural problems that are associated with offending behaviour using the SDQ total difficulties score.
- Improved behaviours that support more positive interactions with friends, peers and family using the SDQ prosocial behaviours subscale.

We will collect the entire SDQ measure as this is a YEF core measure. More about each of the above measures is presented below.

Cyberbullying Attitude Scale

The Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS; Barlett et al., 2016) is an appropriate measure for assessing participants' endorsement of harmful online actions, which aligns to other outcomes in the theory of change focused on their ability to recognise misogynistic content, language, and behaviours, as well as other risky and harmful behaviours, in both online and offline contexts.

The CBAS captures attitudinal dimensions related to the acceptability, seriousness, and perceived consequences of harmful digital behaviours, including harassment, exclusion, and abuse, many of which overlap conceptually with misogynistic and gender-based forms of harm. By assessing shifts in how participants evaluate and interpret these behaviours, the CBAS provides an indirect but robust indicator of increased awareness and critical recognition of harmful online interactions. Given the central role of attitudes in shaping behavioural responses, changes in CBAS scores can therefore be used as a meaningful proxy for improved

recognition of misogynistic and other harmful behaviours following the Steps intervention. The Cyberbullying Attitude Scale (CBAS) measures attitudes towards cyberbullying.

The nine items are:

1. Teasing or making fun of others with harmful comments online is fun to me.
2. It is alright to send harmful online messages/posts to another.
3. It makes me feel good to attack others online when they deserve it.
4. I have no reservations about using technology to hurt others when they deserve it.
5. Harming others via electronic media is acceptable to do.
6. School rules will be ineffective at stopping cyberbullying.
7. Sending mean electronic messages to others is less harmful than face-to face communication.
8. Attacking others online can be justifiable.
9. Because I am not face-to-face with another person while online, I feel I can say whatever I want, even if it is mean or harmful.

Responses are on a five-point scale from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

The CBAS has good psychometric properties including internal consistency as measured by Cronbach's alpha across its two subscales (the Harmful Cyberbullying Attitudes subscale (items one to five) and the General Cyberbullying Characteristics subscale (items six to nine) ranging from 0.62 to 0.94 (Bartlett et al. 2016).

The CBAS captures boys' endorsement of harmful online actions, which includes teasing, exclusion, or verbal abuse. Within the Steps theory of change, this represents a medium-term attitudinal outcome/mechanism. This also aligns with another medium-term outcome on the ability to recognise and reject harmful norms that legitimise GBV. Because much contemporary misogyny is expressed digitally, the CBAS extends measurement into the online sphere, aligning with Steps curriculum content on media and digital respect. It offers a psychometrically robust, age-appropriate, and ethically proportionate way to detect early normative change within a six-week delivery window and to see whether any changes have developed and/or been sustained at around six months post Steps delivery, when behavioural change would not be observable during the trial period. Combined with the GEAS-GST and bystander efficacy measures, the CBAS strengthens construct validity by evidencing the causal pathway from shifts in gender-norm endorsement to heightened recognition of misogyny and readiness to act, consistent with Steps' intended mechanisms of impact.

Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale

The [Slaby Bystander Efficacy Scale](#) measure beliefs about the efficacy of violence and is an appropriate measure for assessing boys' confidence and intention to act as active bystander. The scale captures key cognitive and motivational components of bystander behaviour, including perceived competence, self-efficacy, and willingness to intervene across a range of harmful or risky scenarios. These constructs are central to the development of proactive bystander attitudes and behaviours and align closely with the intended outcomes of interventions focused on challenging harmful norms and promoting respect for boundaries. Changes in bystander efficacy scores can therefore serve as a valid indicator of increased readiness to recognise problematic behaviour and to take action to prevent or interrupt it.

The scale has eight items which are:

1. People's violent behaviour can be prevented.
2. There are certain things a person can do to help prevent violence.
3. I myself can make a difference in helping to prevent violence.
4. Doing or saying certain kinds of things can work to help prevent violence.
5. I can learn to do or say the kinds of things that help prevent violence.
6. People can learn to become someone who helps others to avoid violence.
7. Even people who are not involved in a fight can do things that help prevent violence.
8. Even when I'm not involved and it's not about me, I can make a difference in helping to prevent violence.

Participants indicate on a five-point scale how much they agree with each item (strongly disagree to strongly agree). Scores on each item are summed to produce an overall total score (range 8–40), with higher scores indicating more positive attitudes towards the efficacy of violence prevention. The scale has good psychometric properties and internal consistency including a Cronbach's alpha of 0.86 (Butler et al., 2024).

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

The [Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire \(SDQ\)](#) is a widely used, validated screening tool and a core outcome measure recommended by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). It comprises five subscales that assess different aspects of social, emotional, and behavioural functioning in children and young people. As part of the study the full **SDQ questionnaire will be administered**, two subscales have been selected as key outcome measures aligned with the Steps programme theory of change.

- The **total difficulties score** (20 items) will be used as a broad indicator of emotional and behavioural functioning. Although not a direct measure of offending, higher scores are associated with increased conduct problems, rule-breaking, and antisocial behaviour, and can therefore serve as a proxy indicator of early offending-related behaviours. Within the Steps theory of change, this provides a distal behavioural outcome to assess whether improvements in gender-related attitudes and norms are accompanied by wider reductions in problematic behaviour.
- The **prosocial behaviour** subscale (five items) captures strengths in social functioning, including empathy, kindness, helping behaviours, sharing, and consideration for others' feelings, and will be used as an indicator of healthier relationships with friends, peers and family.

Both subscales have demonstrated acceptable internal consistency in adolescent samples, with Cronbach's alpha reported by Goodman (2021) as 0.80 for total difficulties score and 0.66 for Prosocial Behaviour. Together, these subscales provide validated, sensitive measures of change relevant to the programme's intended outcomes.

3.5.3 Compliance

Compliance for the purposes of the efficacy study will be met when year groups have been randomised and allocated into the treatment or control group. Any further compliance analysis relating to fidelity to the programme (e.g., quantity of dose) will be exploratory in nature. This is because:

- **We will take an "intention to treat" approach to analysis.** This is in line with [YEF statistical analysis guidance](#) and means that all those allocated to treatment and control conditions in the randomisation will be included. The study in its current form may not likely be statistically powered to demonstrate impact in relation to compliance measures.
- **Evidence has yet to be collected about what optimum dosage (measured by quantity) is for the programme to have an impact on boys.** We plan to conduct exploratory analysis concerning compliance as part of the evaluation.

We acknowledge that intention-to-treat (ITT) analysis may underestimate the efficacy of the intervention if some boys in either trial arm do not adhere to their assigned condition. To complement the ITT analysis, we will also conduct a Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE) analysis, which estimates the potential impact of the intervention specifically among those boys who engage with the programme in line with expectations (i.e. those who attend a minimum threshold of sessions, as defined a priori). This analysis will be exploratory and interpreted with caution, as the trial is not powered to detect effects within subgroups

defined by compliance. Our approach to this exploratory analysis will be set out in the Statistical Analysis Plan for the study.

3.5.4 Stopping rules

Throughout the trial, progress will be monitored across four core indicators:

1. Timeliness and number of schools recruited.
2. Percentage of boys completing baseline (T1) and follow-up (T2) questionnaires.
3. Quality and completeness of T1 and T2 questionnaire data across the treatment and control groups.
4. Attendance levels of boys participating in Steps sessions.

Monitoring these indicators will be used to distinguish between issues that can be addressed through mitigation and course correction, and more serious issues that may warrant consideration of stopping the trial.

Indicative thresholds will be used to trigger mitigation actions, including but not limited to:

- Targeted follow-up with schools
- Adjustments to data collection logistics (e.g. additional mop-up sessions)
- Additional facilitator or school support
- Revised timelines where appropriate

Given that power calculations assume approximately 10-20% attrition, the trial will aim for around 80-90% completion at T2. Mitigation will be initiated if there are early signs that completion, data quality, or attendance are drifting materially away from this assumption.

For example, mitigation will be initiated if fewer than 90% of schools are recruited within the planned recruitment window, if baseline follow-up questionnaire completion falls below 80%, if more than 25% of data are missing on core outcome measures, or if average attendance at Steps sessions falls below four of the six sessions.

Stopping the trial will only be considered where pre-specified stopping thresholds are met **and** mitigation efforts have not resolved the issue, such that the feasibility, integrity, or interpretability of the trial is compromised. Indicative stopping thresholds include:

- Recruitment of fewer than 75% of the target number of schools with no realistic prospect of replacement;
- Baseline or follow-up questionnaire completion falling below 60% across multiple schools;

- Substantial and systematic missing data (>40%) on primary outcome measures or evidence of differential data quality by trial arm;
- Persistently low attendance at Steps sessions (i.e. less than two of the six sessions) across intervention schools, or
- A significant safeguarding issue occurs.

Any decision to stop the trial will be made jointly by Cordis Bright, the Salford Foundation, and the YEF, informed by documented monitoring data and a clear assessment of whether continuation would remain ethical and scientifically meaningful. Should a decision be made to stop, natural stopping points are built in at the end of each school term so that all ongoing intervention delivery can be completed, maintaining relationships with schools.

Monitoring will occur quarterly, aligned with the YEF reporting cycles. The first formal review will take place after the first two schools complete Steps delivery (summer term 2025/26).

3.6 Quantitative analysis

This section outlines our high-level approach to our analysis on the primary outcome analysis, secondary outcomes analysis, sub-group analysis and exploratory analyses. The detailed Statistical Analysis Plan (SAP)⁹ will set out the full modelling strategy, including specifications for compliance analysis, treatment of missing data, handling of clustering, and robustness checks.

3.6.1 Primary analysis

All analyses will be conducted in line with the [YEF Analysis Guidance](#). The primary analysis will be conducted on an intention-to-treat (ITT) basis, meaning that all boys will be included in the analysis according to their randomised allocation, regardless of the treatment received or number of sessions attended.

The primary outcome is change in boys' perceptions of harmful gender norms and traditional stereotypes, measured using the Global GEAS-GST scale.

The primary analytic model will be a mixed effects analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) model on complete cases, estimating the effect of allocation to Steps versus control group (business as usual) on post-intervention GEAS-GST (T2) scores.

⁹ No data cleaning or analysis will take place before the SAP is published.

Given the clustered trial design (individual level outcomes, nested within classes, with school year group level randomisation stratified within schools), all analysis models will account for clustering. We will include:

- A fixed effect for allocation.
- An adjustment for baseline scores.
- Fixed effects for school reflecting stratification by school and ensuring the treatment effect is estimated from within-school comparisons.
- Year group-level random intercepts, to account for correlation among pupils within school years (the unit of randomisation).

The primary output will be an effect size (Hedges' g) with 95% confidence intervals, providing a standardised measure of impact.

Robustness checks will assess whether baseline demographic characteristics are balanced across arms; if imbalances are observed, additional covariates will be included in sensitivity models.

3.6.2 Secondary analysis

For each secondary outcome, we will mirror the analytic approach used for the primary outcome, using a mixed-effects ANCOVA model, adjusted for baseline scores and accounting for clustering at the year group and school level. Effect sizes (Hedges' g) and confidence intervals at the 95% level will be reported.

The trial has been powered based on the primary outcome only. Analyses of secondary outcomes will therefore be treated as exploratory, intended to provide indicative evidence of broader attitudinal and emotional functioning change rather than definitive tests of intervention impact on GBV. Nonetheless, given the sample size and analytic model, we expect reasonable statistical power for secondary measures with similar or better measurement properties (e.g., comparable ICCs and pre–post correlations), such as the SDQ, SBES, and CBAS.

3.6.3 Exploratory analysis

We will conduct exploratory analyses to address the following questions:

- **Longitudinal analysis.** Using follow-up at T2, exploratory analysis will be undertaken to assess the extent to which any change on primary and secondary outcomes have been sustained or may emerge over time. The inclusion of a third data point allows for mixed-effects regression models that estimate both linear and non-linear change trajectories. This enables the evaluation to (1) examine the shape and durability of intervention effects

(e.g. immediate change that plateaus, continues to grow, emerges or declines), and (2) better account for within-subject variation and heterogeneity of response trajectories across individuals and subgroups. Random and fixed effects for clusters will account for intra-class correlation and repeated measures, providing a more efficient and unbiased estimate of change. The primary timepoint for the trial is T2; as such it is likely that this analysis will be underpowered and will therefore be exploratory.

- **Mechanisms of change.** T3 data collection will enable exploratory investigation of mechanisms of sustained change, examining whether early attitudinal shifts at T2 are associated with, or mediate, later outcomes at T3. This analysis will help to test key pathways in the Steps theory of change and strengthen the study's explanatory power. For example, questions including: a) Does early improvement in gender-stereotypical beliefs predict later reductions in emotional and behavioural difficulties? b) Are gains in bystander efficacy at T2 sustained six months later, and do they predict subsequent improvements in boys' prosocial outcomes? These analyses will provide nuanced insights into how and why the Steps programme achieves impact, offering valuable evidence to inform future scaling, adaptation, and targeting.
- **Race equity, equality, diversity and inclusion.** We will explore differences in outcomes by ethnic group to identify any patterns that may suggest differential experiences or impacts. These exploratory analyses will not assume a specific reference group (e.g. White British), and any grouping decisions (e.g. collapsing categories for statistical purposes) will be made transparently and with reference to the ethnic diversity of the recruited sample. This analysis is not intended to imply that ethnicity is a causal mechanism, but to support equity monitoring. Full specifications will be included in the Statistical Analysis Plan.
- **Additional sub-group analysis.** We will explore whether the impact of Steps differs across key subgroups, subject to statistical power. Planned subgroups include pupils with and without an EHCP, and year groups (7, 8, 9). Subgroup analyses will be conducted by including interaction terms in the main analytic models above. These analyses are exploratory and will be interpreted with caution given the potential for reduced power. Where power is limited, we will prioritise the most policy-relevant contrasts within categories, and present confidence intervals with cautious interpretation.
- **Compliance/dosage.** Using monitoring data, we will fit CACE/IV or dose-response models (e.g., two-stage least squares with school year level assignment as the instrument) as exploratory analyses, alongside within-arm associations of dosage with outcomes using the multilevel framework.
- **School-level variation.** We will examine whether outcomes vary systematically across schools, which may inform scalability considerations.

3.6.4 Data quality monitoring and support

We will train Steps programme staff and provide an evaluation handbook that includes guidance to support practitioners with data collection. This includes an evaluation email inbox and contact numbers so that all Steps programme staff can easily contact the evaluation team with questions which can be responded to quickly. We will also provide schools with information sheets and Frequently Asked Questions sheets to help the smooth roll-out of the evaluation.

We will conduct a data quality audit for data that has been collected following the first wave of schools. This will be conducted in the summer period of 2026. We will monitor how tools have been completed and amend administration techniques based on feedback from practitioners and boys to ensure that the data collected is high-quality and complete as possible. We will conduct regular internal data audits throughout the course of the evaluation.

3.6.5 Missing data

The impact of missing data will be addressed in line with YEF Guidance on missing data and will be detailed in the Statistical Analysis Plan.

4 Implementation and Process Evaluation

4.1 Research questions

The implementation and process evaluation (IPE) research questions have been informed by the YEF IPE guidance, EEF (2022) IPE handbook and Durlak and DuPre (2009). The primary objectives of the IPE are to:

- Understand the association between aspects of the Steps programme's implementation and successful outcomes.
- Gather data to support guidance for successful implementation of the Steps programme in future.

As such, key research questions for the IPE are as follows:

1. **Dimensions of implementation.** How effectively has the Steps programme been implemented?

- a. **Fidelity:** To what extent has the Steps been delivered as intended (i.e. in line with the programmes curriculum and theory of change)?
- b. **Quality:** How well has the programme been delivered? Was delivery engaging, safe, and clear?
- c. **Dosage:** How many sessions of Steps was delivered? How much of Steps needs to be delivered to have an impact?
- d. **Reach:** To what extent did the programme reach the intended cohort (including representation of boys from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and/or with an EHCP)?
- e. **Intervention differentiation:** To what extent is Steps different from existing practices (e.g. what is delivered during PSHE/RSE), including how the single-sex delivery model differs from, and is perceived relative to, class-wide PSHE/RSE provision?
- f. **Responsiveness:** To what extent have boys engaged with the Steps programme (i.e. as indicated by boys' levels of engagement within sessions (e.g., number of sessions boys attended), any differences between sessions in the curriculum)?

2. **Factors affecting implementation.** Which factors have acted as enablers or barriers to implementation of the Steps programme?

- a. **School-level factors:** What factors have impacted implementation at the school level? For example, level of need, readiness for change, policy, practice and funding context?
- b. **Organisational-level factors:** What factors have impacted implementation at the organisational level? For example, capacity, skills and training, experience, attitudes, coordination and resources?
- c. **Unexpected factors?** Which other factors have had an impact on implementation?

3. Experiences of Steps and perceived outcomes. What are boys' experiences of the support delivered by Steps?

- g. What are boys' experiences of the Steps programme? For example, were the sessions interesting or engaging, what were boys' views on the facilitators?
- h. How have experiences of support differed across sub-groups (e.g. boys from Black, Asian and minority ethnic background, or with EHCP)?
- i. What difference has Steps made for boys? What perceived outcomes are reported by boys and school staff?

4. Guidelines for future implementation. What are the implications for future replication, scale and spread?

4.2 Research methods

This study will use a mixed methods approach to evaluate the process and implementation of the Steps programme. The qualitative evidence captured from the IPE will be triangulated with quantitative evidence from the RCT to support evidenced recommendations concerning the ways in which Steps could improve in the future, and also potential for future development and roll-out of both the initiative and evaluation.

Table 9 presents an overview of the methods used throughout the IPE. The rest of this section outlines these methods in more detail.

Table 9. IPE methods overview

Research methods	Data collection methods	Participants/ data sources (type, number)	Data analysis methods	Research questions addressed	Implementation/ theory of change relevance
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with boys	40 boys who have received Steps. This will involve a range of ages, compliance, and ethnicities. We will aim to ensure the interview sample broadly reflects the overall intervention group with representation from diverse ethnic backgrounds and boys with EHCPs, within the limits of voluntary participation and practical feasibility.	Thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: Dimensions of implementation. How effectively has the Steps programme been implemented? • RQ2: Factors affecting implementation. Which factors have acted as enablers or barriers to implementation of the Steps programme? • RQ3: Experiences of Steps and perceived outcomes. What are boys' experiences of the support delivered by Steps? • RQ4: Guidelines for future implementation. What are the implications for future replication, scale and spread? 	Dimensions of implementation; factors affecting implementation; experiences of support; and guidelines for future implementation.
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with Steps programme stakeholders	10 programme stakeholders.	Thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: Dimensions of implementation. How effectively has the Steps programme been implemented? • RQ2: Factors affecting implementation. Which factors have acted as enablers or barriers to implementation of the Steps programme? • RQ3: Experiences of Steps and perceived outcomes. What are boys' experiences of the support delivered by Steps? • RQ4: Guidelines for future implementation. What are the implications for future replication, scale and spread? 	Dimensions of implementation; factors affecting implementation; experiences of support; and guidelines for future implementation.

Research methods	Data collection methods	Participants/ data sources (type, number)	Data analysis methods	Research questions addressed	Implementation/ theory of change relevance
Semi-structured interviews	Interviews with school staff	20 school staff.	Thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: Dimensions of implementation. How effectively has the Steps programme been implemented? • RQ2: Factors affecting implementation. Which factors have acted as enablers or barriers to implementation of the Steps programme? • RQ3: Experiences of Steps and perceived outcomes. What are boys' experiences of the support delivered by Steps? • RQ4: Guidelines for future implementation. What are the implications for future replication, scale and spread? 	Dimensions of implementation; factors affecting implementation; experiences of support; and guidelines for future implementation.
Data analysis	Activity and dosage data collected by Steps programme	All boys who have received Steps and those in the control group	Simple descriptive statistics (e.g., univariate statistics, frequencies, means, percentages) and comparisons as appropriate (e.g. measures of association and effect sizes, statistical significance)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RQ1: Dimensions of implementation. How effectively has the Steps programme been implemented? 	Dimensions of implementation

4.2.1 Interviews with boys

We will conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 40 boys receiving support from the Steps programme.

We will aim to conduct interviews with four boys per school, across 10 schools. These will take place throughout the trial (from September 2027 until December 2028). Sampling will be iterative, allowing us to adjust which participants are invited over time to help ensure we speak to boys from a range of backgrounds, e.g., from different ethnic backgrounds and mix of learning needs (e.g. EHCP status)

We will gain informed consent from both parents/carers and boys to take part in the interviews. This will be sent to the selected eligible boys, rather than the whole cohort to manage expectations.

Interviews will be conducted by a member of the Cordis Bright research team who is experienced in conducting sensitive research and interviews with boys. Interviews will take around 30 minutes and will be conducted either face-to-face or remotely via telephone/video call (Microsoft Teams) during the school day.

For online interviews, schools or the Steps facilitator will provide access to suitable technology and a quiet, private space within the school for the pupil to participate. A Steps facilitator or member of school staff will support the logistical arrangements (e.g. setting up the device or video call), but will not be present during the interview itself unless requested by the boy. We will work with the Steps facilitators and school staff to agree and arrange the most practical method of conducting these interviews to ensure the boys can take part in a quiet and private environment. Boys who take part in an interview will receive a £20 Love2Shop voucher as a thank you for their contributions. Where interviews take place in person, the voucher will be given out directly. If the interview takes place online, the voucher will be provided to the boy via the Steps facilitator or a member of school staff, who will distribute it directly to the pupil at school.

To minimise bias, the interviewer will be external (i.e., from Cordis Bright rather than Salford Foundation). If in-person interviews are chosen, these will **take place during the school day** in a safe and private space. The Steps facilitator will not be present within the room with the young person while the interview takes place, unless requested by the young person. However, they will be on hand to provide support. If interviews take place by telephone they will take place **during the school day**. They will be conducted at a pre-agreed time and location in the school that ensures safety and privacy.

If any safeguarding concerns arise during interviews, the interviewer will discuss these promptly with the Steps facilitator and the school's designated safeguarding lead. They will

follow the safeguarding policies of the school, Salford Foundation, and Cordis Bright, as appropriate.

To support boys' wellbeing, a trusted adult (for example, a teacher or Steps facilitator) will be briefed in advance and available for an immediate post-interview debrief with each participant, even where no safeguarding concerns are raised. This provides an opportunity for boys to reflect, ask questions, or share any feelings of discomfort related to the topics discussed. Interviewers will also remind participants that they can pause or stop the interview at any time, and will monitor for signs of distress throughout. Where ongoing distress or support needs are identified, the interviewer or trusted adult will signpost or refer the participant to relevant pastoral or wellbeing services in line with the school's procedures.

Topic guides for all interviews will be designed by Cordis Bright and will explore the key IPE research questions mentioned above in section 5.1. We will discuss and refine the guides with Salford Foundation, YEF colleagues and boys who have received Steps previously as part of our participative approach before use in the field. We will draw upon Salford Foundation teams' knowledge of the boys they support to ensure that interview guides are as accessible as possible and can be easily understood by boys, including those with SEND and/or literacy support needs. We will also use [Cordis Bright's internal Equality Diversity and Inclusion Toolkit](#) to ensure that all topic guides are designed with racial and cultural sensitivity and are accessible to all participants.

4.2.2 Interviews with Steps programme stakeholders and school staff

We will conduct in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 10 Salford Foundation Steps staff and wider stakeholders (i.e., Education Consultant supporting Steps programme), and 20 school staff representatives (i.e. at least one per school). These will be conducted virtually, either by video call, telephone or in-person, and will take around 45 minutes to one hour. To minimise any impact on staff workload, interviews will be scheduled flexibly at times that are convenient for participants. For school staff, this may include times during the school day where the school is able to allocate time for participation, or outside the school day if the participant prefers this. Participation will be entirely voluntary, and schools will be informed about the expected time commitment during the onboarding process so that appropriate arrangements can be made.

Topic guides for the semi-structured conversations will be co-designed with colleagues from Salford Foundation, boys who have experienced Steps as part of our participative approach, and the YEF. These conversations will explore the dimensions of implementation, the factors affecting implementation, and guidelines for future implementation. Stakeholders will also be asked about the perceptions on the perceived outcomes for boys.

We will ask at the start of interviews if the Steps team, wider stakeholders and school staff consent to the interview being recorded. If they do, we will store the recording for six months

after we have delivered the final report. If they do not consent, or if the interview is taking place via telephone or in person, we will not record the interview and will take contemporaneous notes. We will also take contemporaneous notes if the interview is being recorded. These notes will be stored on our secure server and only accessible to research team members, i.e. they will be password protected. We will delete the notes six months after we have delivered the final report.

Insights from the interviews will inform our understanding of implementation and support future replication, scale and spread of both the evaluation and intervention.

4.2.3 Activity data analysis

Data collected through the above methods will be triangulated against activity and dosage data collected as part of the impact evaluation. Analysis of this data (including number of sessions, topics covered) will be used to assess the dimensions of implementation, including fidelity, dosage, and reach. This data will be collected for the intervention group only.

4.3 Analysis

The qualitative evidence captured through the IPE study will be recorded in a matrix, mapping responses against the research questions in Section 5.1. We will undertake reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019). This approach involves a systematic, recursive process of familiarisation, coding, theme development, and refinement, guided by the research questions and the Steps theory of change.

We will use a combination of a priori codes (derived from the IPE research questions and theory of change) and inductive coding to capture new or unexpected insights. Analysis will be iterative and reflexive, with codes and themes refined through repeated engagement with the data and team discussions to enhance interpretive rigour. This ensures that findings are both systematically organised and closely grounded in participants' accounts, while acknowledging the researchers' active interpretive role.

The quantitative evidence will be analysed in SPSS/Excel using descriptive statistics and bivariate analysis, i.e., frequencies, percentages and cross-tabulations.

Evaluation reports are strongest when a range of evidence is used to answer each evaluation question. To ensure that data is not presented in 'silos,' we will take a rigorous approach to triangulating both qualitative and quantitative data. We will map both quantitative and qualitative data against the research questions to assess how effectively Steps has been implemented and the extent to which experiences of support have differed across groups. Collectively, this information will inform decisions around future scale, replication and spread, and whether progression to an Effectiveness Study will be practical and useful.

5 Cost data reporting and collecting

5.1 Principles

Our approach to cost data collection, analysis and reporting will be informed by YEF guidance on cost reporting (available [here](#)).

Our approach will be rooted in the following YEF cost reporting principles:

- Estimates are the costs of delivery only.
- Cost estimates will be derived using a ‘bottom-up’ approach.
- Cost estimates will be informed by the perspectives of all organisations involved in delivering the intervention.
- Estimates will capture the nature of the resource used, the quantity and monetary value in delivery of the intervention.

5.2 Capturing cost

We intend to work with Salford Foundation colleagues to report on the pre-requisite, set up and recurring costs of Steps. In line with YEF guidance, we anticipate the primary sources of information to inform these calculations to be:

- Salford Foundation’s delivery budget.
- Discussions with key Salford Foundation staff.

In line with YEF guidance, Table 10 presents examples of information which will be used to report against each category. We will continue to work with Salford Foundation colleagues to deliver and refine these over the course of the efficacy study.

Table 10. Cost estimation overview

Category	Information to be used for analysis (upfront, recurring, total costs)
Staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Steps programme staff budgets, e.g., for managers and Steps facilitators.• Training costs.• Administration and preparation costs (may be costed as zero if delivered as part of base salary).
Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cost of providing a programme handbook (i.e., printing costs if hard copies provided).• Cost of any software and licenses required for the delivery of the programme.• Travel to appropriate settings for boys.

Category	Information to be used for analysis (upfront, recurring, total costs)
Building and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Costs of buildings and facilities needed to deliver the Steps programme.
Materials and equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost of printing any handbook materials. Equipment used to record monitoring data.
Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any incentives provided by Salford Foundation to encourage sustained participation in the programme.

5.3 Reporting costs

We will take the following approaches to reporting cost information in line with YEF guidance:

- All costs relating to both evaluation and programme development and adaptation will be excluded from cost estimates.
- All costs will be adjusted to constant prices using GDP deflators, using 2026 (the year in which delivery begins) as the base year. This will account for any data around cost being collected at different points across the efficacy study period. We will not discount cost estimates based on time preferences.
- Any costs relating to durable inputs will be pro-rated in line with the proportion of project participants who have benefitted. However, we do not anticipate that there will be durable inputs with benefits to those outside the project.
- All cost estimates will be generated assuming full compliance (i.e., that all participants attend all Steps sessions).
- Each estimate will be disaggregated into prerequisite, set-up, and recurring costs.

Total costs will be presented for a cohort of boys that will be agreed during evaluation set-up. Total costs and average cost per participant will then be presented for set-up, recurring and total costs using the mandatory tables in the YEF guidance, i.e. all assumptions and estimates will be set out in full.

6 Race equity, diversity, and inclusion

We are committed to embedding racial equity, diversity and inclusion (REDI) at every stage of the study, as a core principle underpinning our evaluation approach. Our [Equality, Diversity and Inclusion \(EDI\) Strategy](#) and [EDI project toolkit](#) ensures that REDI considerations are central to our research and evaluation activities, from design and delivery through to reporting. These resources set out our commitments, principles and approaches to ensure our work is accessible and inclusive. We commit to:

1. Providing equal opportunities in all aspects of employment and ensuring that we do not discriminate in recruitment or employment on the basis of a protected characteristic or any other characteristics or identities.
2. Opposing discrimination in all its forms, be it at a structural or institutional level or an inter-personal level. This includes direct discrimination, indirect discrimination, discrimination by association, discrimination by perception, victimisation, harassment, and bullying.
3. Seeking to build our understanding of the barriers created by discrimination and inequality, and to ensure fair, equal and inclusive treatment for our staff, clients and the people whom our work aims to support. We will also reflect on any barriers or exclusions identified through the evaluation itself and use these insights to inform recommendations.

In line with these commitments, and to ensure REDI in this efficacy study, we will adopt a proportionate and meaningful approach to REDI that reflects our role as an independent evaluator of a universal programme delivered to boys in school years 7–9, addressing issues around GBV, identity, online harms and healthy interactions. Our approach includes:

- Designing the evaluation to be inclusive, welcoming and accessible. The evaluation has been co-designed with Salford Foundation colleagues to be inclusive and accessible to all boys in years 7-9 in secondary education in Greater Manchester. Key features of this approach include:
 - Accessible language, young person-friendly evaluation materials, including content developed with input from Steps facilitators and boys who have experienced Steps.
 - Clear, accessible information so that boys and their parents or carers from all communities can understand what it means to participate in the study and can make an informed decision to opt-out or withdraw.
 - Digital and paper formats available for questionnaires, with trained Steps facilitators offering neutral support where needed. While digital completion will be the default to ensure data quality, paper copies will be available where this format is more accessible or appropriate for a participant.

- Trauma-informed and culturally competent communication, underpinned by Salford Foundation's expertise and Cordis Bright's internal EDI guidance and toolkit.
- Using processes and materials that adhere to good practice guidelines, including the YEF's and the Government Social Research Unit's, to ensure materials are accessible, inclusive, and culturally sensitive.
- Where possible, ensuring programme delivery and evaluation activity take account of religious holidays and other significant events (for example exams or school-wide celebrations) in recognition of the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of participants. We will be guided by schools in identifying any such dates during recruitment and onboarding, to avoid disruption and support inclusive participation.
- With Salford Foundation, identifying schools across Greater Manchester that will ensure our sample size will be diverse. This will include prioritising schools with a higher proportion of pupils from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, in line with our target for approximately 30% of participants to be from these groups. This is broadly in line with the Greater Manchester population, whereby the Census 2021 data reported 34.0% of children and young people (0-24 years old) in Greater Manchester are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, compared to 25.9% for England.
- Wherever possible and where they exist, ensuring that validated outcomes measures which are selected for use in the efficacy study have been developed and validated with young people from racially marginalised backgrounds to ensure that they are valid for use with the Steps target cohort. The primary outcome measure (GEAS-GST) has been validated with early adolescents in multiple cultural contexts internationally (Moreau et al., 2021). Its cross-cultural validation provides a strong basis for use.
- Piloting outcomes measures with young people to ensure that administration techniques are accessible and inclusive. We will provide training and guidance to the Steps team as required to enable them to support questionnaire completion from boys from different groups.
- Ensuring that boys from a range of racially minoritised backgrounds, and those who may face marginalisation (e.g. having special educational needs) are sampled as part of our approach to qualitative interviews through the IPE. The topic guide will invite all participants to reflect on how inclusive and fair they found the Steps programme and whether any aspects felt more or less relevant to their experiences. The topic guide will use open-ended questions designed to encourage discussion of barriers and facilitators for all participants, allowing

issues such as race equity, belonging, or other dimensions of inclusion to emerge naturally, without directing questions toward any specific group.

- Monitoring key demographic and sociographic information of all participants in the treatment and control groups, including ethnicity, year group and whether pupils have an EHCP. This will enable us to analyse any differences in school recruitment, retention, and completion, and to assess whether they are representative of similar cohorts in the education system and wider society.
- Conducting exploratory subgroup analysis of differences in outcomes achieved by different demographic and socioeconomic groups, including by ethnicity, year group and EHCPs.

These features aim to ensure the evaluation is engaging, ethical, and empowering for all boys.

- **Ensuring lived experience is central to both the programme and its evaluation.** This will be reflected through our participative evaluation approach including:
 - The involvement of the Steps team and boys who have experienced Steps in developing evaluation materials and shaping evaluation design decisions.
 - The inclusion of boys' voices through qualitative interviews, ensuring their feedback directly informs conclusions and recommendations.
 - Co-designing REDI features in the trial pathway (e.g. the tone and style of consent conversations, the presence of trusted adults, and accessibility of language used).
 - Working with boys who have experienced Steps to share learning about the co-design process, for example through podcasts, blog posts and social media content.

This approach ensures that the evaluation is not only about boys in the study, but with and for them.

- **Accommodating support needs.** The evaluation design accounts for potential additional needs by:
 - Offering flexible pacing and delivery of data collection activities.
 - Using interpreters or translated materials where needed and appropriate to support accessibility and understanding. Translation may be used, for example, to support parental opt-out consent. Core outcome measures will be administered in English to maintain consistency and validity.
 - Providing accessible options for boys with an EHCP, including paper-based questionnaires (where preferred for accessibility reasons), and one-to-one support from the Steps facilitator/ member of school staff where appropriate.

- Building in re-engagement strategies to minimise attrition, such as “mop-up” session for boys who miss baseline(T1) or follow-up (T2) questionnaires.

These strategies reflect our ethical responsibilities and a commitment to producing valid, inclusive evidence.

- **Drawing on the training and experience of the evaluation team.** The evaluation team includes researchers with direct experience of:
 - Delivering research with racially minoritised communities and boys facing marginalisation related to poverty, special education needs, exclusion from education, involvement with statutory services, or other systemic barriers.
 - Using culturally competent, strengths-based and trauma-informed approaches in both qualitative and quantitative research.
 - Designing and delivering REDI-focused evaluations for youth justice interventions.
 - Cordis Bright researchers also receive cultural competency training and have access to guidance materials and tools to support inclusive and ethical evaluation.

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, we will discuss and reflect with Salford Foundation and YEF colleagues on the most effective ways to conduct research and evaluation in as equitable, inclusive and accessible a way as possible. We will also engage with the YEF-appointed race equity associate to draw on their expertise and insights to further refine our proposed approach. In particular, we would welcome their input into the accessibility and framing of participant-facing materials (such as consent materials and information sheets), the communication and relational aspects of the consent and data collection process, and the interpretation of findings through a race equity lens.

7 Ethics and registration

Ethical approval has been independently reviewed and given a favourable opinion by the University of Portsmouth Research Ethics Committee (approval ID: 25/ETHICS/018). This involved submitting a detailed ethics application (alongside research tools and consent tools) which was also subject to review and scrutiny from the YEF and Salford Foundation colleagues.

No delivery of the project will take place prior to ethical approval being obtained and confirmation of this provided to YEF.

The trial will also be registered on the International Standard Randomised Controlled Trial Number (ISRCTN) website.

8 Data protection

Cordis Bright are the controller of personal data throughout the evaluation, as specified in [YEF data guidance](#). Cordis Bright will deliver the evaluation in line with our full Data Protection and Information Governance Policy when storing and handling personal data (available [here](#)) for the evaluation. Cordis Bright are also registered under the Data Protection Act, have Cyber Essentials Plus accreditation and are registered under the NHS Data Security and Protection Toolkit.

Cordis Bright will conduct a Data Protection Impact Assessment and agree and sign a Data Sharing Agreement with Salford Foundation (and schools as appropriate) before accessing activity and monitoring data.

For this evaluation, we have:

- **A clear legal reason for sharing data with us.** This includes legitimate interest/public task.
- **A robust process to transfer data.** Salford Foundation will transfer data by secure methods such as secure email (CJMS) or using Switch Egress.
- **Secure storage of data.** Data will be saved on Cordis Bright's secure, cloud-based Microsoft 365 servers. Personal or sensitive data will have additional encryption with access only to designated/authorised members of the evaluation team. Participants will be informed that all information about them will be stored in this way. All personal data will be separated from questionnaire data and stored separately.
- **Secure survey software.** Outcomes measures will be collected via [SmartSurvey](#). This stores all data both in transmission and at rest in an encrypted, secure, UK based server in line with GDPR. While paper copies may be used in some exceptions, Salford Foundation will scan these and securely send them to Cordis Bright via Switch Egress.
- **Anonymisation and pseudo-anonymisation** where possible including separating personal data from questionnaire data and separate storage. All participants will be assigned a unique ID number, and pseudonyms will be used for interview notes. Where feasible, boys involved in interviews will be invited to choose their own pseudonym, and if they prefer not to, one will be allocated by the research team. Published reports will not identify the research participant at any time.

Participants (boys and their parents/carers) will be informed, through the privacy notice shared during recruitment, about their data protection rights and how their data may be used and shared for the purposes of the evaluation. Under the opt-out process, they will have the opportunity to decline participation and data sharing before baseline data collection. The information materials will clearly explain how, and up to what point, they can withdraw from

the study or request that their data are not shared. Once the final evaluation report has been signed off, Cordis Bright will share the data with YEF for data archiving in line with [YEF guidance](#). Cordis Bright will then anonymise all data (by securely deleting names and other personal data) and hold it on the Cordis Bright server until six years after the final report has been submitted to the YEF.

9 Stakeholders and interests

This section provides information about the Salford Foundation Steps programme delivery team and the evaluation team from Cordis Bright. There are no conflicting interests which we are aware of that may be perceived to influence the design, conduct, analysis or reporting of the trial.

The approach to evaluation is being led by Cordis Bright and takes a collaborative approach with input from Salford Foundation and YEF. Details of key Salford Foundation Steps programme delivery and Cordis Bright evaluation team members are presented below.

Salford Foundations' delivery team

Phil East, CEO, Salford Foundation is the senior relationship manager from Salford Foundation with the YEF and Cordis Bright. He has responsibility for overarching implementation design and delivery with Greater Manchester public sector partners including relationships with key partners such as the VRU, the Deputy Mayor, GMCA and reporting to strategic boards. He chairs the project's Strategic Steering Group.

John Damen, Senior Operations Manager, Salford Foundation has overarching responsibility for project delivery and for the effective implementation of the evaluation from the Salford Foundation side. He leads on data sharing ensuring all processes are GDPR compliant. He is responsible for project learning and dissemination across Greater Manchester and beyond. He line manages the Project Manager and has overall responsibility for budgetary control and reporting to YEF. He has senior responsibility for safeguarding and risk management.

Joanne Meekin, Senior Team Leader, Salford Foundation is responsible for the mobilisation of the project in each local authority area, including liaison with the key public sector partner managers. She is responsible for ensuring the project is set up and implemented with fidelity to the agreed model. She will work with Cordis Bright to ensure successful randomisation, and school allocations and is responsible for management information, data entry and quality assurance. She is responsible for recruitment, induction, line management, supervision, training and support for Steps facilitators. She is responsible for the further development and implementation of project resources, and administration of evaluation questionnaires.

Three full-time Steps facilitators (Youth Workers) provide support to boys in the Steps programme (treatment group) and are also responsible for the initial meetings and subsequent administration of outcome measures tools with the intervention (treatment group) and the control group. They ensure that the project tools, questions and methodology are implemented consistently and effectively.

Educational Consultant. The education consultant will work closely with Joanne Meekin and the project coordinators. She is a former head teacher with extensive experience across

Greater Manchester and membership on the GMCA's VRU/GBV education board. The consultant will provide regular non-management supervision, lead staff training, ensure quality assurance and support the development of best practices

An Education Consultant, GBV Education Strategy Group, and Operational Professional Teachers Group will support delivery and implementation and provide quality assurance.

To ensure the programme is governed by diverse perspectives, Salford Foundation have a Strategic Group, which is frequently refreshed to ensure representation. This group provides critical oversight from a range of external parties across Greater Manchester that have the capability to liaise with other forums for consultation including REDI.

Cordis Bright's evaluation team

Dr Stephen Boxford, Principal Investigator and Project Director, Cordis Bright. Responsible for ensuring the evaluation is delivered to a high standard and specification.

Dr Jade Farrell, Co-Principal Investigator and Project Manager, Cordis Bright. Responsible for overseeing day-to-day project delivery and acting as the main point of contact for the YEF and the project delivery team.

Professor Darrick Jolliffe, Co-Principal Investigator, University College London. Responsibilities include evaluation design, shaping approaches, designing tools, and conducting analysis and quality assuring evaluation outputs.

Camilla Antrobus, Co-Principal Investigator, Cordis Bright associate. Responsibilities include supporting evaluation design, access to and liaison with secondary schools, methods including participative methods, conducting fieldwork, and QA of all tools and outputs.

Emma Andersen, Co-Principal Investigator, Senior Consultant, Cordis Bright. Responsibilities include RCT design and trial approach, statistical analysis plan, impact analysis and reporting.

Madeleine Morrison, Co-Principal Investigator, Consultant, Cordis Bright. Responsibilities include supporting project management, evaluation design, fieldwork, analysis and draft reporting.

Caitlin de Souza, Researcher, Cordis Bright. Responsibilities include ongoing support to Steps practitioners and schools with administration of the evaluation tools, conducting fieldwork and drafting analysis and support with report drafting.

10 Risks

Table 11 summarises some key risks to delivery of the efficacy study evaluation and proposes strategies to mitigate these. We will develop this risk register and use it to support project management to ensure smooth delivery of the evaluation.

Table 11. Summary of key risks and mitigation approaches

Risk	Likelihood and Impact	Mitigation
Lack of clarity around theory of change and project pathways	Likelihood low. Impact high.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working closely with project team and YEF to co-design the theory of change. Mapping participant pathways. Understanding entrance and exit criteria.
Lack of school buy-in to RCT.	Likelihood medium. Impact high.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working with Salford Foundation to explain the benefits of RCTs to schools. Meeting with schools with Salford Foundation to clearly explain the programme and evaluation and discuss the benefits for the schools and the pupils. Designing resources and information sheets for school staff to ensure smooth delivery of the evaluation.
Recruitment and attrition	Likelihood medium. Impact high.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confirming data collection and delivery expectation with Salford Foundation and schools during set-up, ensuring schools understand their commitments before randomisation. Clear processes for information provision and opt-out consent process for parents/carers. Clear processes and safeguarding procedures for boys concerning taking part in the evaluation and completing surveys. Reviewing data capture progress regularly and addressing emerging barriers to maximise response rates. Identifying potential reserve schools so that, if a school withdraws prior to randomisation, an alternative school can be mobilised quickly without affecting trial integrity. Conducting mop-up sessions to collect baseline, T2 or T3 questionnaires for absent boys, ensuring high data completeness within participating schools

Risk	Likelihood and Impact	Mitigation
Data collected not addressing the questions	Likelihood low. Impact high.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-design approach and data collection tools. • Participative approach to support tool design with boys who have experienced the programme previously. • Piloting of tools. • Early analysis to assure fit-for-purpose.
Project and evaluation not being delivered in line with YEF and Cordis Bright's commitment to REDI.	Likelihood low. Impact high	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We will work with YEF and Salford Foundation to ensure the project and evaluation are delivered in line with the commitments outlined in our strategies, plans and EDI project toolkit. • We will analyse data and evaluation findings through the lens of REDI. • Where we think practice can improve, we will raise, discuss and support the implementation of actions with YEF and Salford Foundation.
Safeguarding, public safety or data breach	Likelihood low. Impact medium.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take actions as agreed with YEF and project protocols. • Ensure that there is learning across the team about what happened and what steps could be taken to avoid in future. • If required: introduce additional training; re-visit methodology; re-allocate team members. • Agree an appropriate communications strategy.
Illness or attrition in the evaluation team	Likelihood: medium Impact: medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project team includes multiple team members to avoid reliance on an individual. • Contingency plan is (1) Re-deploy other members of the team to undertake tasks. (2) If absence is longstanding, draw on wider team members/network of associates and agree with client before doing so (details available on the Cordis Bright website). (3) As a last resort, consider extending timescales.

11 Timeline

Table 12 outlines the key activities, timings and roles and responsibilities for the efficacy study.

Table 12. Project activities and timeline

Months	Delivery (Salford Foundation)	Evaluation (Cordis Bright)
January 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shortlist potential schools. Identify small group of boys that have previously taken part in Steps to provide feedback on questionnaires and information sheets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Draft information sheets, privacy notice and questionnaire layout. Draft ethics application.
February 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruitment meetings with prospective schools, specifically to secure two schools for delivery in summer term 1 and three for summer term 2. Co-facilitate interactive workshops with boys with experience of Steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit Ethics application to University of Portsmouth. (may take eight weeks) Develop evaluation handbook for Steps practitioners administering tools. Provide support for monitoring data systems. Co-facilitate interactive workshops with boys with experience of Steps. Amend materials following feedback.
March 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to meet with prospective schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure ethics approval. Training on tool administration delivered to Steps practitioners. Finalise efficacy study protocol.
April – May 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mobilise two schools to prepare for delivery in summer half-term two. Continue to recruit schools for next academic year and/or keep in touch with schools already recruited. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design, pilot and test randomisation approach in a school. Amend process where necessary. Support with school recruitment and iron out any potential issues with delivery model ahead of summer half-term 2.
June – July 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver Steps to two schools. Continue to recruit schools for next academic year and/or keep in touch with schools already recruited. 	

Months	Delivery (Salford Foundation)	Evaluation (Cordis Bright)
August 2026		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct an audit to review process (e.g. randomisation, delivery, monitoring data, questionnaire data).
September 2026 – December 2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver Steps to remaining schools, including the rollout of outcome measures (T1,T2 and T3 questionnaires). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support Salford Foundation with delivery when issues arise. • Conduct fortnightly updates to track progress. • Draft statistical analysis plan (SAP). • Complete IPE data collection.
January – June 2028	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the collection of T3 questionnaires. • Capture cost data for the programme. • Share monitoring data with CB. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect T3 questionnaires. • Review cost data.
July – October 2028		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis including outcomes, monitoring and IPE data. Triangulate analysis. • Draft report.
November 2028 – January 2029		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report reviewed by YEF, peer review and Salford Foundation. • Amend report.
February 2029		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submission of final report. • Prepare and submit data to the YEF data archive.

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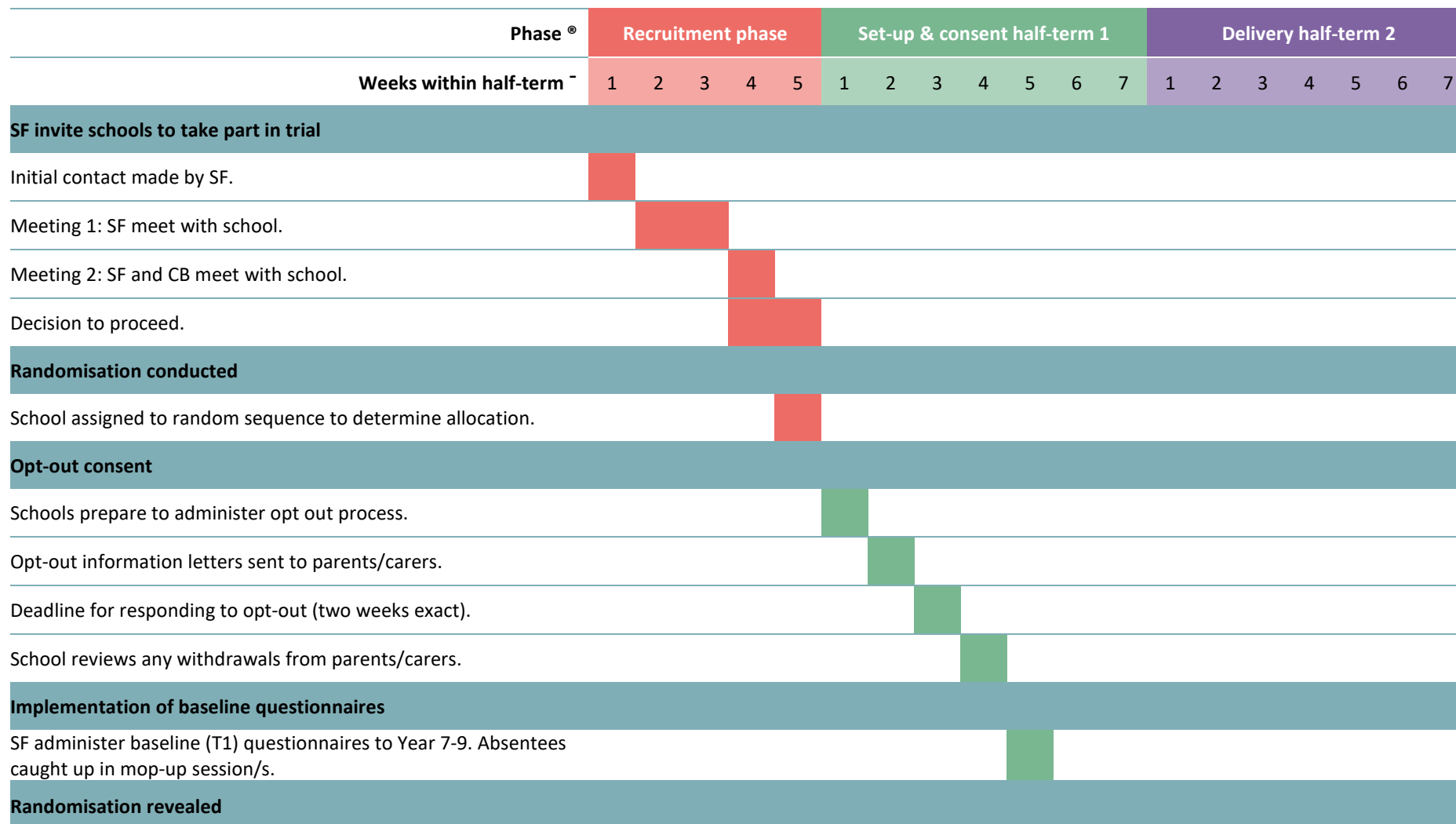
13 Appendices

13.1 Appendix 1: Steps curriculum



Adobe Acrobat
PDFXML Document

13.2 Appendix 2: Trial timelines per school example



Phase [®]	Recruitment phase					Set-up & consent half-term 1							Delivery half-term 2						
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Year group blinding revealed to SF and school.																			
Schools prepare for implementation	[Teal bar]																		
SF and school finalises delivery plans (i.e. when and where).																			
Delivery of Steps begins	[Teal bar]																		
Week 1:																			
Week 2:																			
Week 3:																			
Week 4:																			
Week 5:																			
Week 6: SF administer follow-up questionnaires (T2) to all boys (intervention & control group).																			
Safe exit with schools	[Teal bar]																		
SF provide schools with ongoing support for remainder of term.																			

Note. We've not included follow-up T3 into this table which will take place 6-months later as the purpose of this table is to provide step-by-step insights into school recruitment, set-up and delivery.



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