

# Innovative Mental Health Intervention

## Fir Vale School

We are a large, oversubscribed secondary school positioned in not just the most deprived area of Sheffield, but one of the most deprived areas in the country. Our school aims to truly serve the local community and to improve the life-chances for all our young people and their families. Our demographic is complex, both in terms of ethnicity but also in terms of the level of trauma our children have experienced in their lifetimes, leading to many cases of adverse childhood experiences.

There are 1024 children on our roll. 57% of our children are classed as pupil premium and 77% have English as an additional language. We welcome children from all over the World, regardless of language, religion, circumstance and race. 42% of our population are Roma Slovak children and our other significant group is of Pakistani origin (30%). However, we have a significant number of children who are refugees and asylum seekers, often experiencing significant trauma. A large number of our children lack the skills required to self-regulate and many show signs of attachment disorder and delayed development. As a result, 123 pupils are included on our Special Needs register for Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs.

Many of our children not only have English as an additional language, but arrive to us new to the country, the area and the language. Some are new to education completely!

We have a significant number of children, who would benefit from support from specialists and outside agencies but we also serve a community who lack trust in outside professionals. We felt we needed to provide support for our families and children beyond what most mainstream secondary schools offer.

We have a dedicated, incredible staff team, who work tirelessly, beyond the requirements of the job, to ensure our children have the best experience in school and to ensure our children achieve the best life-chances.

We have developed several areas of our school to provide outstanding support for our children's mental health. It cannot be attributed to one single intervention or provision. I have outlined the key elements that contribute to our whole school innovative mental health intervention.

**The LINK**

We recognised that we have a high proportion of children with SEMH and felt that our children really needed therapeutic support to help them with their wellbeing, access their learning and develop valuable skills required to cope with the adverse experiences they have and continue to face. For these reasons we developed 'The LINK'. This is a centre designed by professionals in our setting to offer a safe haven for our children, a counselling space, an area for children to access support with bereavement and a nurture space for our most vulnerable. We built a sensory environment, sectioned into zones and wellbeing spaces. The space also replicates the key areas of a child's life –creative zones, social spaces, areas for food and drink preparation, quiet zones, mini classrooms and regulation spaces. We recognise that this space is extremely unusual for a mainstream setting but we feel we have a great deal to learn from special schools and primary colleagues, where we gathered ideas and inspiration to form this multi-purpose space. The space is staffed by three outstanding professionals, who are all specialists in their own fields. We have Dominic Dawkins, who is a champion for supporting children who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences and works tirelessly to help children develop anger management techniques and regulation strategies. Rebecca Fennell is a bereavement counsellor, who works with many of our children, who have suffered a loss and have no physical grave to visit to mourn their loved ones due to their immigration history. Rebecca also works with our children who are suffering with mental health issues caused by low self-esteem, body dysmorphic disorder, eating disorders and self-harm. Eyvonne St Clair provides nurture support for our most vulnerable, helping them to develop social skills and build confidence, whilst simultaneously ensuring their basic needs are met each day.

### **Introduction of Electives**

We also recognised that so many of our children lack the cultural capital that their more affluent peers are exposed to. We felt the need to offer our children something beyond the curriculum. Every Wednesday afternoon, every child in school chooses an elective from a list of activities offered by staff. These range from decoupage to Japan Club, from Cadets to Gardening Club and from Mindful Art to Theatre Maker's Club.

### **Wellbeing at the heart of everything we do**

It has been our aim over the last three years to build a culture of wellbeing at the heart of everything we do; it is not enough to simply offer token events when our children need an environment where every member of staff is mindful of the wellbeing of our children. We are a 'Trauma Informed School'. This means that every single member of staff in school has received CPD to help them to become

emotionally available adults. Staff on duty during social times play games with our children, ask quiz questions and spend time speaking to our students about their lives. We employ classroom strategies that foster a culture of restorative conversations with children and educational conversations when things 'go wrong'.

### **Cultural Capital –creating opportunities**

This is one of our core values at Fir Vale School and we strive to create opportunities beyond the curriculum for every child in school. This isn't just the standard offer of extra-curricular programmes found at a standard secondary school! Our children are visited by inspirational speakers and are taken on trips that help them to build their cultural capital. We also take every opportunity to provide our students with the chance to contribute to a cohesive school community. This involves children spending time on meaningful activities, getting to know peers from other ethnic backgrounds. This helps to create an environment of mutual respect and improves the wellbeing of our children.

### **Support for families and the wider community**

We are a community school and our job does not stop with the children in front of us. We recognise the need to act as advocates for our families and improve our local community. We have provided planters for our local area, offer help with translation, host paediatric clinics at our school and support our families far beyond our remit. Throughout the pandemic we delivered food parcels, liaised with food banks and conducted welfare checks through home visits. Litter picks have helped our community to see the work of our children and to set the standard on what is expected for the wider community. We also operate a community walk every morning to support families to get their children in to school on time each day.

### **The Literacy Hub**

As our school grew in the number of children who required initial English language development, we felt we needed to support our children in a unique way. Our work started during the pandemic on a very small scale and now we act as a welcome centre for a child new to city and help them with their initial language acquisition and understanding of the education system in the United Kingdom. This is provided through The Literacy Hub. This is a provision staffed by TEFL qualified staff and designed to teach children in small groups until they are confident and competent enough to join full time mainstream lessons. This provision compliments their mainstream timetable and has proved to be highly successful. The pupils who have accessed it feel that it helps them make rapid progress and build their confidence. We are very proud of this provision and feel that it has had an enormous impact on

the wellbeing of our new arrivals. We also work in collaboration with The Refugee Service in Sheffield to ensure the families of our new arrivals are fully supported.

Each time an external visitor steps foot in to Fir Vale School, they remark on how innovative The LINK space is and how skilful the staff are at offering meaningful interventions to support the most vulnerable children and families. This academic year we have seen over 400 children from all year groups access our LINK space in some capacity. This may be in the form of regular, timetabled mentoring sessions, inclusion in nurture provision, support during social times or ad-hoc regulation support/self-referred drop ins.

Our Electives programme is innovative because it covers every child in school. For other schools, who have offered Enrichment opportunities during curriculum time, they have shied away from offering these experiences to Key Stage 4 students for fear of reducing traditional curriculum time. We felt very strongly that our Key Stage 4 children needed this just as much (if not more) than our Key Stage 3 children. We found that they could learn transferrable skills that could be used to strengthen their learning in their Key Stage 4 subjects and that they needed to experience some learning opportunities that were not exam driven; this was another opportunity to help our students to improve their mental health and take part in something they are interested in and enjoy.

We have provided our students with the most unique experiences to promote positive mental health and develop cultural capital. These have included: working with a graffiti artist to improve our school environment; listening to Gina Miller describe how she, a Guyanese-British woman, challenged the political decisions of a government to bring about change; visit the British seaside to experience something that many of our families have never experienced; sing outside a residential home for the elderly during the pandemic to bring joy to the isolated local community; deliver presentations on climate change to our local MPs and receive a standing ovation for their thoughts and proposals; make face masks during the pandemic and deliver them to health care workers, who were in desperate need of PPE.

The impact can be seen on the improvements our children make and their improved academic resilience. In a recent pupil survey (609 students) 76% stated that they felt that school cares about their mental health and 85% stated that they knew who to speak to if they felt worried about themselves or a friend. This is overwhelmingly positive and demonstrates the impact of our work. 87% of the surveyed children stated that they felt safe during social times and we feel that this is directly linked to our innovative approach to social time duties and the range of activities we offer to

improve our children's wellbeing. This collegiate effort has resulted in a climate that contributes greatly to the wellbeing of the children in our school.

The impact of our Electives programme can be seen in the way it provides every single child in school with the opportunity to learn a new skill and enjoy something beyond the traditional curriculum. It has proved to be hugely popular, with 89% of children stating that they enjoyed electives. Children change their elective every 6 weeks, giving them the chance to experience a range of new skills throughout the academic year. We have seen an improvement in the wellbeing of our children and a rise in attendance on Wednesdays. We are dedicated to developing the whole child and not just the academic aspects.

The greatest testament to our impact has been captured in the words of our students. When asked how the wellbeing provisions at Fir Vale School helps them they said:

"They stay with me when I'm worried. They calm me down."

"I get food"

"They make you feel like someone cares."

"I enjoy the quietness of The LINK at break and lunch times. It's not overwhelming or flooded with people like the dining room or hall. I also feel calmer in The Link, because I have a space where I can collect myself and think more rationally without intrusive eyes or voices."

"The LINK helps with my mental health. It's a relaxing place to be if you have any issues. People like Ms Fennell, Mr Dawkins and Ms St Clair help a lot and support the students at Fir Vale. As a student who has GCSEs, I come here often to relieve my stress. Everyone in The LINK is so welcoming."

"I like to come in to The LINK because you help me and I stay out of trouble."

In terms of The Literacy Hub and the impact on our New Arrivals, it is clear to see just how much our children benefit from accessing the provision. Our unique provision provides English language support to our children in a safe learning environment, where they of course learn English literacy skills but also how to interact, how to ask for help and most importantly, how to help themselves with their own learning. We have included a snapshot of progress. 30 children accessed the provision between January and April. According to the assessment data, every one of these children have made significant progress and the data indicates that they are

also making significant progress in their mainstream classes. By breaking down the language barrier that many of our children face, they are growing in confidence and discovering what a joy learning can be. It is an honour to be a part of such a dedicated learning programme and a pleasure to see just how much our children are thriving. The impact on their wellbeing is immeasurable.

It is evident that a combination of our wellbeing provisions and activities is having significant impact on our children across all year group, background, ethnic origin and ability. We are very proud of our team effort, approach and innovation.