

Link Programme in action: spotlight on Telford & Wrekin

Andy Cooke, Service Delivery Manager in Pupil Support Services at Telford & Wrekin Council, reflects on the impact of the Link Programme in his locality.

The way things were

In Telford and Wrekin, our principal goal was to align our existing mental health support for children and young people with the objectives outlined by the Government's Green Paper.

Services to support mental health and neurodevelopmental needs across the borough were not seen as effective. They were viewed as a separate entity, and perhaps not as an ally. Education staff referred children and young people into the service, but did not have any engagement with them beyond this. Consequently, there were concerns raised by schools and colleges regarding this existing support.

This represented the catalyst for change and enabled us to implement a series of initiatives which the Link Programme helped bind together into a comprehensive offer.

The importance of belonging

As part of a review of behaviour across the borough, we published 'The Belonging Strategy', a paper highlighting the importance of children and young people feeling like they belong in their education settings. The mental health and wellbeing of young people was one of the key priorities in the strategy and this set the tone for future change.

We identified a need to upskill education staff and build relationships between schools, colleges and mental health professionals, so we used the Link Programme workshops to bring them all together. This was really effective in putting education staff in touch with the 'main people around the table'.

This set the basis for the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Panel, a safe space for schools and colleges to bring cases anonymously and seek the advice of professionals from health and social care.

Building networks for joint working

The Link Programme arrived at a very opportune moment, as we were also successful in our bid for Mental Health Support Teams. As a result, the programme was essential for building those relationships between mental health and education colleagues. This was the main outcome we were looking to achieve from the programme, and it was thoroughly delivered.

Most recently, we have used the Link Programme in conjunction with the Government's 'Wellbeing for Education Return' (WER) initiative, as we felt the two complement each other. Based on the joint working model set up by the Link Programme, we used some of the funding from WER to design a cluster-based group supervision model for mental health leads. This group is led by the Education Psychology Service and meets every half term.

In addition, schools set up an education network meeting called E2O (which stands for Emotional Health to Outcomes) for mental health leads. This group meets regularly and is supported by a Yammer group open to all participants, to engage with each other and share ideas.

Pathways for change

As a result of the Link Programme and its joint working strategy, we are now able to define clearer pathways for referrals into the service. This, coupled up with the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Panel that was set up as a result, means that we can confidently provide early help and support for children and young people.

We now filter those referrals that do go through to the CAMHS service, effectively reducing the number of referrals and ensuring that everyone is signposted to appropriate early help and support. The Link Programme helped get everyone on board with the new pathways, so the process is much more proactive and streamlined.

Keeping the momentum going

Arguably, we could have implemented all these measures separately. However, had it not been for the programme, we would not have been able to bring professionals from all these different backgrounds together. This helped us to achieve a joint understanding of our objectives and the best strategies moving forward.

Without the programme, we don't think the importance of joint working would have been apparent. We're pleased to say that 95% of the schools and colleges in Telford have taken part, and the high rate of uptake was partly due to this being organised within the Education Directorate of the council. Ultimately, we feel that the Link Programme was the last piece in the jigsaw to bring all these professionals together and really unify our activities in Telford and Wrekin.

Right now, we are focusing on keeping the momentum going beyond the Link Programme.

Telford and Wrekin Council took part in the Link Programme between January and October 2020. Whether you are a Clinical Commissioning Group, local authority or school, there are opportunities to get involved. Please visit our [Link Programme website pages](#) to find out how to get involved.