

## Link Programme in action: spotlight on Norfolk and Waveney

*Anna Sims, from Norfolk County Council Children's Services team, reflects on introducing the Link Programme and the positive changes they've implemented as a result - from enabling a communication flow across the locality which they'd not experienced before, to finding new ways to support staff and introduce proactive measures in schools and colleges.*

### A period of transformation

In Norfolk and Waveney, our main priority in 2018 was the Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) transformation, with a specific focus on improving service communications. We were also setting up the building blocks for a local programme entitled 'The Link Project', which was similar in name to the Link Programme but it came before! We viewed this transformation process as an opportunity to get colleagues from different backgrounds together to engage in collaborative working. However, in the early days of this initiative, we struggled to find a direction and felt we needed a clearer steer.

At the time, education colleagues were concerned about access to CYPMHS, and confused about what was available. In addition, CYPMHS felt like a separate entity which they did not know how to interact with. Mental health leads in schools and colleges felt uncertain about the right professionals to contact. They could find themselves adopting a 'scattergun' approach, by getting in touch with multiple CYPMHS colleagues at the same time, further adding to the confusion.

During this time, we were fortunate to come across the Link Programme led by the Anna Freud Centre, an organisation which could come into this as a helpful third party to bring an urgency to the work. We believed this was an ideal moment to engage and bring positive change to our area.

### Finding a guided way forward

By November 2020, we had engaged with the Link Programme (both face to face and online), including the interim arrangements during early lockdown. We believe these initiatives helped us to implement systemic change and successfully navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Through the facilitated conversations and exercises based on the **CASCADE framework**, Link Programme trainers offered us much needed guidance in moving forward. They stressed the importance of engaging senior leaders from schools and colleges to join the Link Programme workshops. This meant that members of senior leadership teams were now able to directly interact with mental health services professionals and put faces to names. They became familiar with the wide variety of services on offer in Norfolk. Thanks to the Link Programme, we built a 'bridge' across the locality and enabled a flow of communication we had not experienced before.

Moreover, we adopted two vital tools which Link Programme trainers introduced us to during the workshops. We use the CASCADE framework to evaluate and monitor the impact for the transformation of CYPMHS, and the '5P's of formulation' model as part of our multi-agency single referral and assessment form for children and young people.

## A unified approach across Norfolk and Waveney

The Link Programme served as inspiration for various activities which we decided to run at the same time. We had two clear objectives in mind - to relieve some of the pressure on CYPMHS, and to ensure that mental health leads in schools and colleges knew exactly who to contact to better support children and young people. To achieve these goals, we needed a unified approach across Norfolk and Waveney.

As part of the Link Programme, we organised a 'speed dating' style session, where colleagues from voluntary agencies and CYPMHS had under 5 minutes to share details of their offers. Events such as these helped us to build a community of practice and encouraged mental health leads to seek support more confidently. Moreover, we empowered education staff to take control and introduce proactive measures themselves - finding new ways of supporting their staff, implementing a mental health and wellbeing curriculum, or becoming more aware of local initiatives. Ultimately, our goal was to encourage schools and colleges to have a vision for emotional mental health and wellbeing that would materialise in the form of a whole school approach.

The Link Programme has inspired us to implement joint working across all sectors. In our locality-led programme, we bring together colleagues from universal settings (education and GP surgeries) as well as Mental Health Services and the voluntary sector, to take part in 2 days of Mental Health Champion training and additional surgery sessions. Participants can bring anonymised cases for discussion, getting advice and support from their peers. To bring about system change, we've prioritised referral pathways and a consistent approach to outcome measures, so these are understood and adopted by the main actors in the locality.

We have used a local successful website, **Just One Norfolk**, and dedicated phone line, **Just One Number**, that education staff can ring to get advice and support. This has helped to circumvent forms and additional bureaucracy, in favour of a direct approach. We are also committed to building people's knowledge, including via newsletters for both primary and secondary schools/colleges in Norfolk and Waveney that informs them of good practice examples, latest services such as **Kooth**, and new resources available both locally and nationally.

## Honest conversations lead to real change

The great part about the Link Programme is that, unlike other mental health initiatives, it does not simply give a wealth of information to participants, but it allows for interaction between mental health services and education staff. It creates space for us to catch our breath and think critically about next steps. Schools and colleges are overwhelmed with resources and materials, but the Link Programme offers a critical point of view. Not all information is created equal, and not all initiatives will work for us.

The programme empowered Norfolk and Waveney education and mental health professionals to really work together and select the most optimal initiatives that complement our specific circumstances. It has given us the confidence to pursue these projects, providing a platform for holding honest conversations with education staff and implementing real change. When we are all on the same page, we can achieve so much more.

*Anna Sims is Lead Coach and Trainer for the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) programme. This is an evidence-based social and emotional programme for all pupils aged five to 11, run by Norfolk County Council Children's Services team.*

*Norfolk and Waveney CCG is currently taking part in the Link Programme. They began their engagement with the programme in 2018. Whether you are a Clinical Commissioning Group, local authority, school/college or mental health professional, there are opportunities to get involved. Please visit our **Link Programme website pages** to find out how.*