

Link Programme in action: spotlight on Kent and Medway

Jemma Blesky, Programme Manager at the NHS Kent and Medway Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), reflects on the impact of the Link Programme in her local area - and how the ethos of joint working has become their mantra as they deliver the programme across multiple areas of work.

The invitation that started it all

Our involvement in the Link Programme began with an invitation from the Anna Freud Centre to be part of phase 2 of the programme in 2018. At the time, relationships between education professionals and mental health services in our area were not fully developed.

As a CCG, we were aware that school and college colleagues were struggling to contact Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) in Kent. We believed that establishing a link between education and mental health was vital in ensuring children and young people received the care they needed, which is why the invitation to join the programme was most welcome.

The first set of workshops were well attended by colleagues in the East Kent locality, highlighting a definite need for joined-up working. Among participants, we had a range of different partners present, including CYPMHS representatives, GPs, and senior leaders from schools and colleges.

Making sure this wasn't just a one-off

The feedback we received during this phase was overwhelmingly positive, and attendees made us aware they did not want this programme to be a one-time occurrence. They needed to maintain that connection, not only to help the children and young people in their care, but to also build relationships with colleagues across the locality, as their roles can sometimes feel quite isolating.

Education professionals and children's mental health providers established a positive connection from the beginning of the programme. When one participant offered a space in their school (free of charge) for us to continue organising networking events beyond the Link Programme, it really hit home how important good interpersonal relationships are to the services in our locality.

Three years later, we still have this network running in the Canterbury area, and despite the pandemic, we are maintaining these relationships online and a virtual meet up will take place soon.

Maintaining these connections, now more than ever

The Link Programme made participants aware of other professionals in the system – be it mental health specialists, educational psychologists or education leaders – who could help them better support children and young people. The positive feedback we received was varied, but it had one common thread, that participants felt they could now finally put faces to names. The programme helped build inter-organisational bridges as attendees now know exactly who to contact when seeking help, advice or guidance.

During these local twilight sessions, comprised of 40 participants per meeting, we discuss of-the-moment topics that affect children and young people in our area, and how to shape our response to these challenges. So far, we have tackled subjects such as LGBT+ support, anxiety, vulnerability, self-harm and self-injury, and developmental trauma, in addition to discussing what's happening locally. Now, more than ever, we need to maintain these connections and support each other.

We collect feedback from every session, which informs the agenda for upcoming meetings and alerts us to any gaps in our offer. We want to ensure these sessions deliver on the expectations of participants and further promote the ethos of joint working.

In addition to the Canterbury network, we have now set up a local network in Thanet. Despite the current restrictions, we have decided to go ahead with this project and organise the upcoming meetings fully online, until we will be able to meet face-to-face again. All of these initiatives were born out of the invitation to join the Link Programme in 2018.

For us, the main message that the programme delivered was simple but significant. It showed us the true value of coming together and looking at how we can support and learn from each other. Through the workshops and continued networking, we have ensured this mantra is now weaved into our processes and the programme is progressing across multiple areas of our work.

Kent and Medway CCG took part in phase 2 of the Link Programme in 2018, and it has been delivering the Link Programme to local sites ever since. The programme is continuing online in 2021. Whether you are a Clinical Commissioning Group, local authority, mental health professional or school/college, there are opportunities to get involved. Please visit our Link Programme [website pages](#) to find out how.