

Link Programme in action: Spotlight on Bolton



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Sarah Whitehead, Commissioning Manager at Bolton Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG), discusses her area's participation in the Link Programme in the Autumn term of 2021. The Link Programme in 2021/22 offers increased flexibility to sites and is comprised of an optional survey of education settings, a strategic consultation meeting, up to three tailored support sessions and review meetings at three and six months. Read on to find out how the strategic consultation meeting helped Bolton shape its long-term strategy for children and young people's mental health provision

Here in Bolton, one of the long-term priorities set out within our Local Transformation Plan is to further develop and enhance the links between children's mental health services and education settings in the area, in order to offer better mental health support to children and young people by need. We want to help education settings better articulate their mental health offer by connecting them with the appropriate services.

Colleagues in other localities of Greater Manchester had frequently mentioned how helpful they found the Link Programme, so when applications for the programme were open in Summer 2021, we submitted an expression of interest form and were accepted onto the programme in Autumn 2021. The timing was right, as we had recently appointed excellent staff in key positions to help us take our joined-up working vision forward.

The great thing about the revised Link Programme is the strategic consultation meeting. That helped us get a bird's-eye view of what education colleagues encounter 'on the ground', what support they already have in place and where extra help is needed.

During our strategic consultation meeting in September 2021, we had good representation including schools, the local authority, the CCG and statutory and non-statutory mental health services across Bolton, with fantastic contributions across the board.

The session helped colleagues embrace each other's point of view, as participants displayed a willingness to understand different ways of working. Put simply, colleagues felt valued and seen.

The CASCADE Framework was essential in moving things forward and working in groups ensured we all contributed and scored the letters independently. This allowed us to see how each organisation truly feels about how things are run across Bolton. It created space for a transparent and necessary conversation about positive change and moving things forward.

Together, we developed three goals in the consultation meeting: one aspirational, one strategic and one operational.

Goal number 1: *By 2022/23, all schools and colleges in Bolton will have an allocated Senior Mental Health Lead who is appropriately trained. This includes the development of a whole system approach ensuring leads have access to network opportunities and up to date resources/service information. By 2023, we endeavour to have a Senior Mental Health Lead in every school in Bolton, in accordance with the Green Paper.*

We used our first tailored support session as an opportunity to identify whether this goal is feasible, and if so, what extra support is needed to achieve this. Together, we developed a planning process to identify how to create a sustainable approach across schools and colleges so that multiple staff are trained around mental health awareness.

With the help of the Link Programme, we took the national objective of the Green Paper and applied it locally, adapting the goals to fit our current capacity and resources.

Goal number 2: *By the end of Q3 2021/22, a full review of Bolton's Children and Young People's Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Transformation Group will be conducted. This will include how information is disseminated across wider groups and forums, with a view to streamlining how resources are shared from one central place of information.*

In terms of strategy, our goal is to build higher levels of engagement between services. We have a Children's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Transformation Group that meets every 6 weeks, with a distribution list that is significant in size. This group produced our local transformation plan, with a view to driving and delivering on our agreed priorities.

Our next step, going forward, is reviewing the membership of the group, the terms of reference and the way this group is working. In 12 months', we want to be able to evidence how we've met our local priorities and the impact and outcomes we've achieved in the area.

Goal number 3: *By the end of Q3 2021/22, Bolton's mental health training offer for professionals working with children and young people will be coordinated and promoted in a range of formats.*

When coordinating our mental health offer, we began planning engagement sessions and questionnaires to understand what our colleagues across Bolton are looking for. The overarching feedback was clear: our colleagues don't know where to find clear and concise information about mental health training and services, so strategically sharing information in the right places is paramount. We need to ensure the information is filtering down to anyone working with children and young people; particularly those colleagues in education settings, so they can support children and young people who would most benefit from it.

In response to other feedback that came out of the strategic consultation meeting, we developed a series of communications assets that focus on our current mental health offer and cascaded this across our channels. We delivered and recorded presentations on our mental health offer through virtual bite size sessions and worked with our Safeguarding Board to share this further.

We are very fortunate in Bolton to work alongside a fantastic group of young people from the Healthy Minds Youth Project and have launched a mental health campaign called [Be Kind to My Mind](#) (BKTMM). The aim of BKTMM is to reduce stigma around mental health and help children and young people find services available to support them. We are in the process of expanding the website to create a central information source for professionals and parents/carers.

Overall, the Link Programme has given us a governance framework to help us deliver on our goals. Having the Anna Freud Centre facilitate that process has given us an opportunity to engage with a number of settings that we normally would have never approached.

It helped bring the NHS, the local authority and schools and colleges together in a facilitated, coordinated way.

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council is one of 52 upper tier local authorities taking part in the Link Programme across the academic year 2021/22. They began their engagement with the programme in the autumn term of 2021. 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.