



## Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM CoE Award



**School Name:** The Link School  
Wavery Terrace  
Pallion  
Sunderland  
Tyne and Wear  
SR4 6TA

**Head/Principal:** Donna Walker

**IQM Lead:** Donna Walker

**Date of Review:** 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2020

**Assessor:** Max Kelly

### **IQM Cluster Programme**

Cluster Group - Trail Blazers

Ambassador – Max Kelly

Date of Next Meeting – 8<sup>th</sup> December

Next Cluster Group Meeting Focus: COVID-19

### **Sources of Evidence during IQM Review Day:**

- Discussions with the Headteacher re COVID-19 via MS Teams
- Discussion with the Headteacher re previous targets via MS Teams
- Interrogation of key documentation supplied electronically by the school
- Interrogation and analysis of annual review and action plan supplied electronically by the school

### **Summary of Targets from 2019-2020**

**Target 1 - Leaders will ensure that emotional well - being of staff and learners will be further strengthened across the school.**

**Intended Outcome -To raise the profile of mental health awareness across the school and develop a team of staff and pupil Mental Health Ambassadors.**

School Evaluation:



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Emotional Wellbeing action plan has been developed; all staff attended the CWMT training.

Feedback from staff was that 96% of staff felt the training met the objectives.

CPD programme to develop pupil 'Wellbeing Warriors' and 'Mental Health Ambassadors' is being developed in partnership with CWMT.

School holidays are a time when the most vulnerable pupils struggle with their emotional wellbeing and often display anxious and challenging behaviours in the home environment. This can lead to instability in the home and impact on a pupils' self-esteem and self-image. This is often highlighted more at Christmas time with the focus being on family.

Mindful moments programme was developed, the aims of this project were to provide a two day 'drop-in service' at our Springwell Dene site, during the Christmas holidays to support pupils who were struggling with their emotional wellbeing and could come into school and use 'creative mindfulness, meditation and relaxation techniques to bring a sense of calm and balance'. To strengthen the offer, we added a 'touch base' phone call sessions between 9am-3pm on those days.

The service was provided by our Mindfulness Worker who has a wealth of mindfulness expertise and is currently completing a Level 3 Counselling qualification.

- Impact of reduced numbers of safeguarding referrals into school (internal or external).
- Improvement in behaviours upon return to school and reduction in behaviour incidents.
- Pupils feel supported in gaining support with their emotional wellbeing.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the focus of the Wellbeing Warriors and Mental Health Ambassadors. We extended the mindful moments programme to allow pupils to access this provision throughout the lock down period.

Mental Health Silver Mark across the school in the process of accreditation. High-quality work can be seen across all areas, with classrooms being vibrant, nurturing spaces where children are recognised for the unique qualities they bring and engage in as many opportunities as possible to gain life experiences and mitigate the circumstances of adverse childhood experiences. The principles of nurture are evident here, in the delightfully resourced Reception unit to the KS3 provision and calming sensory spaces.

### Assessor Evaluation:

The target around mental health and wellbeing started with a focus on the staff and then evolved to encompass the pupils as well. Mindful can mean becoming aware of our thoughts, feelings, body sensations and surrounding environment. Mindfulness



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activities help us deal with our emotions in a range of ways, creating coping strategies that can be used throughout our lives.

During the assessment the Headteacher talked through a case study describing how a member of staff developed a mindfulness programme for children based on the principles above. This included activities such as visiting local civic amenity sites and finding items which could be 'upcycled'. Of course, the real purpose of the activity was not based in recycling, it was about the conversations and the relationships that were developed in this time.

The programme has had a positive impact leading to mindfulness featuring in the curriculum across all key stages. Creative Mindfulness has become very popular amongst the staff and pupils at The Link School. The pupil's access weekly sessions and drop-in appointments are available to those pupils who request them. Meditation sessions for staff are offered online. As the Headteacher remarked during the IQM assessment, "Your staff are your most valuable resource! This is why we focus on well-being."

The school has also achieved accreditation as a Silver Award Mental Health Chartermark which is a fantastic accomplishment. This is evidenced in vibrant classroom displays, carefully constructed nurture spaces in classrooms, high quality resourcing and staff training. The Link School's commitment to and focus on, mental health is admirable and the school can be considered a leader in this field.

Other significant achievements in terms of evidenced progress towards this target include:

- Development of a Mindfulness Instagram page.
- Drop-in mindfulness appointments offered outside of term time to staff and pupils.
- Mindfulness Worker being supported by the school in pursuit of a counselling qualification.

This target has been fully met by the school.

**Target 2 - Leaders will further development of the Careers and Information guidance programme across KS3 and KS4 will improve the quality of provision and reduce the number of NEETS at KS4.**

**Intended Outcome - All pupils receive quality age-appropriate careers advice and guidance in line with careers policy and Gatsby Foundation Benchmarks. Destination data analysis shows that the programme is effectively moving towards eliminating NEET learners.**

### School Evaluation:

The school is currently working with 7 learning providers: GM training, Bell Group, The



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Army, Bella Marie, Learning Curve, Chameleon training, Pinnacle Training and North East Resources.

Post 16 NEET Figures Percentages 2015 (57.7%) and 2019 (14.2%)

The AP cohort, a significant proportion of whom are in Year 11 are already vulnerable and at greater risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) than their peers. These risks have increased since schools closed for most pupils and without substantial transition support, many of the current Year 11s in AP are at heightened risk this year of becoming NEET.

Becoming NEET limits life chances and engagement in education is a protective factor from a range of harms. Bespoke, needs-based interventions are required to support these Year 11 pupils to successfully transition to Post 16 pathways.

An AP transition action plan has been developed to support the transition of Year 11 pupils into Year 12 destinations.

Actions that are being completed:

- To ensure that all current Year 11 have identified and applied for a Post-16 pathway.
- To support the autumn term transition into Post-16 pathway

August 2020 – Current data indicates that 48/54 pupils have destinations identified.

Fortnightly SLT meeting (one hour) with Together for Children NEET Service to discuss Year 12 destination updates.

KS3 pupils have accessed and started their actions plans, KS4 have just been granted access to them. These will be a focus for this term's activities.

### Assessor Evaluation:

- The Link School has made excellent progress towards this identified target. The school is currently working with several learning provider and has quality assured these providers itself.
- The school looked at its curriculum and its breadth at GCSE to improve its offer. This, together with additional funding for alternative provision, which was accessed during lockdown has resulted in The Link School supporting Year 11s as they transition into Year 12 destinations and avoid becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training). In fact, The Link School is very proud to be able to say that it has succeeded in getting the vast majority of student's post-16 placements during lockdown which is absolutely fantastic.
- At Key Stage 2 this becomes all about 'preparation for adulthood' which is delivered through key life-skills lessons.



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- The Link School is now involved in a research project with The University of Sunderland, looking at the effects on PRUs, the use of booths etc. This draws from the work of Lisa Cherry (Trauma and Resilience Trainer) and is now built into the IQM action plan going forward.

This target has been fully met by the school.

### **Target 3 - Leaders will develop further opportunities to improve parent/carer engagement with the school in their learning.**

#### **Intended Outcome - Feedback shows that parents/carers are actively involved in improving outcomes for their children.**

##### School Evaluation:

Texting and APP service has increased the profile of communication. There are many positive comments from parents and carers recorded on the routinely administered questionnaire.

Development of social media such as Link School Facebook page and #Link2020 Instagram page devoted entirely to mindfulness and emotional wellbeing.

Recent parent survey (July 2020) shows that 95.7% parents/carers agree/strongly agree that the schools work hard to keep their children safe.

94.3% of parents/carers would recommend the school to other parents/carers.

##### Assessor Evaluation:

Through conversation with the Headteacher it was evidenced that:

- The Link School benefits from a recently created Instagram page. This account is concerned with mindfulness and emotional wellbeing and is well supported/ followed by members of The Link School community.
- The school's Facebook page has really taken off. This page is visual, up to date and fun. It has over 350 followers and is a popular and effective way for the school to communicate with its community including students and parents.
- A texting service has been introduced which is exceptionally useful and has proven to be popular and effective for the school to communicate with its community including students and parents.
- An online parental survey achieved high levels of engagement. The quality of response was also shown to be better than previous paper-based surveys and the school attributes this to moving to an online space.

This target has been fully met by the school.



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### Agreed Targets for 2020-2021

In addition to the detailed self-evaluation of its own progress towards its targets, the school has produced a thorough action plan showing the developments planned for in the 2020-21 academic year. The assessor agrees with and endorses the school's action plan, especially with regard to the continuation of a developing a post-COVID recovery curriculum and retaining the strong focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing. The school should also consider additional developments around upskilling the staff so that they can more effectively work with parents and continue the innovative exploration of training Team Teach through a blended model.

The Link School should commit to continue in the IQM Cluster Programme and should continue to build evidence of IQM processes within their recorded impact log. The Link School has much to offer schools in the IQM family, especially with regards to staff well-being and mental health support.

### The Impact of the Cluster Group

The Link School has also been a very active contributor to the Trailblazers IQM cluster group to which it belongs. Indeed, one of the more recent cluster meetings (pre-COVID) was hosted at The Link School.



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### Overview

The fifth annual Centre of Excellence review for The Link School took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis at a point where young people had been allowed to return to school following the first national lockdown period, but also where new local restrictions had been instigated alongside an expectation that schools would remain open. The review was conducted online through meetings on the MS Teams platform.

The Link School had managed to make so much progress towards its 12 month action plan is highly commendable and no easy task when one considers the unprecedented disruption to the school year caused by the global pandemic. The Link School is an alternative learning provider working with young learners and their families across the City of Sunderland. There are two sites; The Link School, Springwell Dene which works with learners across Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 and The Link School, Pallion, which provides education for learners at Key Stage 4. The school has a roll of 127 students.

During the original national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic The Link School focused on delivering a 'family package' of support which extended beyond teaching and learning. This included a focus on a 'mindful' approach to remote learning and the mindful moments programme. This programme was developed with an aim to provide a two-day 'drop in service' at the Springwell Dene site to support pupils who were struggling with their emotional wellbeing. The idea was that these pupils could come into school and use creative mindfulness, meditation and relaxation techniques to bring a sense of calm and balance. Although the project was conceived pre-COVID, the pandemic changed the focus and the programme was extended to allow pupils to access this provision throughout the original lockdown period.

The school also rolled out a programme of wellbeing phone calls during lockdown. Whilst pupils were contacted and spoken to, a distinctive feature of The Link School's approach was a focus on parental wellbeing and ensuring that parents felt supported.

Alongside the emotional support package which encompassed pupils, parents and families), The Link School has a comprehensive Remote Learning Plan. Whilst the plan has evolved out of the experiences of setting up a remote learning offer due to the COVID-19 crisis, it is evident that The Link School is innovative in this space and changes, adapts and refines in the light of their ongoing experiences. This is reflective practice and a hallmark of inclusive schools which are open to learning and improving. For this, The Link School is to be congratulated.

The comprehensive remote learning plan stipulates that teachers will set appropriate work in-line with The Link School's current curriculum, primarily supplemented by a range of resources provided by Century Learning, White Rose Maths and Oak Academy. Children will remain in contact with their Class teacher/Teaching Assistant or 1:1 tutor through Microsoft Teams (MS Teams), (after taught sessions) and Century Learning where work can be monitored and recorded by staff. The Link School has worked through initial safeguarding challenges posed by online learning and report that live lessons via MS Teams do now work well.



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The challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic were extreme for the whole education sector; The Link School can be rightfully proud of the fantastic way it was able to rise to the occasion. Notable successes include:

- The Link School remained open throughout the entire period including holidays, where they worked out of their Springwell Dene site as the primary based provision.
- For the first four weeks of lockdown, all pupils and their families received daily welfare phone calls, this was then reduced to two per week for all pupils and three per week for those on the vulnerable risk assessment.
- There were 54 Year 11 learners on roll; throughout the lockdown period the school worked with the pupils, their families and external stakeholders regarding Post-16 provision. In August 2020, 48/54 had secured Post-16 destinations.
- Risk assessments were written and continually updated to reflect Government and Public Health Guidance for each site, conference centre and specific areas across the school. Individual risk assessments have been written for individual staff following OHU advice and returning from shielding.
- A full remote learning strategy has been developed which all pupils are now able to access in the event of self-isolation or a partial or full lockdown.
- Website online learning area has been updated to add parent/carer and pupil support videos and help information.
- Regular communication has been given to parents/carers and pupils throughout the lockdown period, emotional wellbeing bags have been delivered.
- An Instagram account and Facebook page were developed during lockdown.
- A home learning email account was developed to allow pupils to share their work/pictures and experiences.
- Videos were developed and shared to share their experiences.

The Link School has also found the positives in amongst the changes that a COVID-19 response forced. The Headteacher is clear that the blended learning model is here to stay for Key Stage 4 given how successful it has proven to be. Staggered starts to the start and end of the school day have been very successful and will remain and PPA arrangements have moved to a Friday afternoon for all staff. The pupils go home at 12.00 which allows for the sites to undergo a thorough deep clean and the staff are enjoying the up sides of being released at the same time which enables better collaborative and joined up working. The arrangements have also enabled staff to clear a lot of their workload before the end of the week, which benefits positively on their own wellbeing. Parents, too, have reported their preference for these new PPA arrangements: during the original lockdown, some parents told the school that they had been enjoying the increased opportunity for 'family time' that isolation brought. Now they get this opportunity again on Friday afternoons.



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The Link School has an impressive array of communication platforms which helps to ensure it stays connected to the community it serves. A comprehensive website is available which is user friendly and easy to navigate. The Link School brochure is a lovely document featuring photographs of the school's own pupils and quotes and testimonials from the parent base. This document is colourful and welcoming; immediately inclusive and quashes from the outset any perceived negative stereotyping that may exist around alternative provision.

The Link School has also been a very active contributor to the Trailblazers IQM cluster group to which it belongs. Indeed, one of the more recent cluster meetings (pre-COVID) was hosted at The Link School.

This was a very enjoyable assessment in a highly inclusive school. This report recognises that The Link School is an incredibly inclusive setting, and acknowledges the work in relation to COVID19, emotional well-being of staff, careers information and guidance, and parent/carer engagement. The self-audit paperwork was most thorough and indicated the care and seriousness with which the staff at the school have devoted to IQM and developing their inclusive practice and provision.

In summary, the review has been undertaken successfully. The Link School clearly demonstrates its ability to respond to initiatives and to build the capacity essential to moving further on the Inclusion journey. The entire staff team should feel proud that their commitment and dedication is so evident and clearly impactful in a positive way on The Link School community.

Having discussed the progress made since the last IQM review and the school's plans for the future, I am of the opinion that the school should continue to hold Centre of Excellence status and be reviewed again in 12 months' time. There is an additional expectation that the school will: -

- Provide an updated action plan/self-evaluation of progress against targets to be sent to IQM three weeks before the next review.
- Continue to commit to the IQM Cluster Programme and to show evidence of IQM processes with a recorded impact log.

**Assessor: Max Kelly**

**Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:**

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Joe McCann MBA NPQH  
Director of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd