



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM CoE Award



School Name	The Link School Waverely Terrace Pallion Sunderland Tyne and Wear SR4 6TA
Head/Principal	Mrs Donna Walker
IQM Lead	Mrs Donna Walker
Date of Review	13 th November 2023
Assessor	Mrs Emily Carr

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group	Trail Blazers
Ambassador	Mrs Emily Carr
Next Meeting	Monday 11 th March 2024
Meeting Focus	Morning workshop on challenging behaviour and unmet needs and afternoon session on parental engagement and working with families.

Cluster Attendance

Term	Date	Attendance
Summer 2022	4 th July 2022	Yes
Autumn 2022	6 th October 2022	No
Spring 2023	6 th March 2023	No
Summer 2023	26 th June 2023	Yes
Autumn 2023	9 th October 2023	No

The Impact of the Cluster Group

Due to their commitment to networking and sharing best practice, the school hosted the final, Summer Term, Cluster meeting of the 2022-2023 academic year. The IQM lead discussed how she enjoyed hosting the group as she felt it offered her the opportunity to showcase the school's good practices and reflect on their IQM journey. She also felt staff got the opportunity to learn from them through the interactions and discussion around what had been seen in the school during the visit.



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In discussions about the Cluster group, the IQM lead was able to give examples of how the other meetings have impacted their thinking and allowed colleagues to reflect on practice but also openly discussed how they have struggled to attend some meetings due to colleagues needing to be in school to support students when staffing has been tight or due to safeguarding priorities.

The IQM lead always shares resources with other schools and is well-prepared for every meeting.

Evidence

Over the course of the one-day assessment, the assessor evaluated the school's commitment to inclusion, and progress made against their action plan, through a wide range of written evidence, including:

- The school's Annual Review and Action Plan document
- School website
- School Facebook page
- School Instagram Page
- Ofsted report
- Pupil books
- School policies
- Staff CPD evidence e.g., PowerPoint
- Documents outlining progress against targets
- School analysis documents
- Case studies

The Assessor also toured two of the school sites, viewed displays, visited classes, and observed a Mindfulness session.

Meetings held with:

- Headteacher and IQM Lead
- Head of School (KS4)
- Head of School (KS3)
- Assistant Headteacher (KS3)
- Assistant Headteacher (KS2)
- Citizenship Teacher
- Mindfulness Lead
- Mindfulness Practitioner
- Breathing Space Lead
- Associate Professor from Sunderland University
- Pupils
- Support Staff
- Parents/carers



Summary of Targets from 2021-2022

Target 1:

To develop a re-integration support package with Together for Children/SEND to support learners with re-integration into mainstream or specialist provision.

All students at The Link School have arrived having experienced exclusion in their previous educational settings. Quickly, at The Link School, students find inclusion, acceptance, and love. There is a culture of relentlessly high expectations for every child and every member of staff.

Staff work hard to meet the needs of children across Sunderland, from Early Years to Key stage 4. In order to effectively meet needs, there are a number of school sites catering to different children: 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 Key Stage 4 learners. Additionally, The Link School hosts a Behaviour Support Service and two Hub Assessment sites where the prime aim is to reduce the number of permanent exclusions within the city. One Assessment Hub is based at Hudson Road Primary School for KS2 learners, and one is at Oxclose Academy for KS3 pupils. Staff supports mainstream schools to ensure that all children and young people have access to the right provision to meet their own individual needs and have the right plan in place for their future.

As it states on the school website, 'Children often display inappropriate behavioural difficulties for a variety of reasons. Behavioural difficulties do not necessarily mean that a child or young person has a possible Mental Health problem or a Special Educational Need (SEN). Negative experiences or distressing life events can affect Mental Health in a way that brings about temporary change in a person's behaviour. A pupil that experiences frequent and persistent difficulties with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties can significantly affect their learning experience and that of their peers.

Consistent disruptive or withdrawn behaviour can also be an indication of an underlying problem. Where there are concerns about behaviour there should be an assessment to determine whether there are any factors such as undiagnosed learning difficulties, difficulties with speech and language, or Mental Health issues.

Formal diagnosis should only be made by medical professionals. However, schools are well-placed to observe children and identify those behaviours that children may be suffering from, or at risk of developing a Mental Health problem.'

Together for Children (TFC) introduced the Assessment Hubs and Alternative Provision that may support during an assessment process or during a young person's current circumstances, with The Link School. The purpose of the Assessment Hubs is to provide an assessment and recommendations for educational provision for pupils who are experiencing Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties within mainstream school settings.



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Transitions into PRUs and alternative providers are often complex, involving dual registration, periods of non-attendance, and meetings with a range of services and families. When evaluating pupils' attainment and progress, leaders have considered the ways in which they have identified, assessed, and met the needs of pupils and have evaluated the progress that pupils have made since they began to attend the alternative provision. The Link School does this effectively to ensure each child has a clear pathway of support.

Reintegration officers work well in the Assessment Hubs and re-integration into mainstream schools and specialist provision is good: there are fewer pupils that return to The Link School as a result of the Assessment Hub outcomes. Over three years, only 8/116 pupils have been permanently excluded after their time in an Assessment Hub, but this was after at least one term back in their home school provision. In 2022 – 2023, 21/180 learners returned to a secondary mainstream school, and 5/180 transitioned to specialist provision. 26/66 learners returned to a mainstream primary and 15/66 transitioned to specialist provision. Leaders are keen to continue improving these figures through the work they do and the strong relationship they have with the Local Authority (LA).

The school Behaviour Support Team provides further services to schools, such as offering consultancy support, advice, and specialist training within schools to support positive behaviour management and reflective practice. The overall aim of the service is to reduce levels of disruptive behaviour and reduce exclusions. The team offers schools a range of packages of support depending on the level of need within a school.

Leaders are ambitious in their mission to support all children to be educated in the right setting for them and will continue to develop this target area further.

Next Steps:

- To extend the use of re-integration scales to all pupils on dual placements.
- To increase the numbers of children and young people who are re-integrated back into mainstream schools.



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Target 2:

Leaders will ensure that the emotional wellbeing of learners will be further strengthened across the school through the planning, delivery, and evaluation Breathing Space programme.

The Link school continues to have the needs of the 'whole' child at the centre of all they do. Mental Health and wellbeing needs are taken seriously by staff and the school has a dedicated team who ensure there is a strong therapeutic and targeted support package. Support for staff and pupil wellbeing is an integral part of the school ethos. The school currently holds a Silver Award for Mental Health and the Head of School at KS3 is working hard to move this to the gold standard.

The staff knows that behaviour is communication and have developed their knowledge of the trauma-informed practice. They have worked hard to develop an understanding of each individual child to ensure they develop into successful young people. Leaders have invested in support for children's Mental Health and wellbeing. Children are given a wide variety of opportunities to develop their character. Staff seek to identify the individual strengths and talents of each pupil and find opportunities to develop these. The school funds self-esteem and team building activities, residentials, one-to-one behaviour support, and counselling for vulnerable pupils.

Leaders have created a strong pastoral offer – this includes a dedicated Inclusion Team, and access to qualified counsellors on a weekly basis. The school values working with others and has developed excellent relationships with parents, carers, and the wider community. When the school cannot meet pupils' needs alone, they work effectively with a wide range of outside agencies. Some of these services include Educational Psychology Service (EP), Speech and Language Therapy (SALT), and Children and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

A continuing strength of the school is the mindfulness offer, which has been further developed since the last assessment day. The school is now offering a one-day CPD course for other settings, called: *'Reach out for Mindfulness'* and the first course is full! Leaders are keen to share best practices and allow children in other settings to benefit from the great mindfulness work that is taking place at The Link School. On the day of the assessment, the children talked with passion about the mindfulness sessions they had. One child, who only joined the school recently, stated, *'At first, I was not sure about this, but now I love coming to the Mindfulness sessions. I know more about myself and how to help myself when I am angry.'* Other pupil comments are: *"I am grateful that mindfulness has taught me that it is ok to talk about things"*, *"Mindfulness has helped me so much, especially when feeling angry"*, *"Meditation has really helped to calm me down, especially before going to sleep"*, *"Mindfulness is a place where I don't feel judged"*, *"During mindfulness, I feel free"*. The Mindfulness Lead talked about how they work creatively with trauma and use every opportunity to give children, and their families strategies to support themselves and experience success. Her passion, knowledge, and skills continue to have a positive impact on the school.



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To ensure that the school offers even more support for pupils and their wellbeing, staff continue to develop the Breathing Space project, which is a whole-family model, designed to offer joined-up support and create positive opportunities for families with children at The Link School. The Breathing Space project gives pupils the opportunity to engage in extra-curricular activities that allow them to develop their social skills. It also develops their Cultural Capital. The objectives of Breathing Space are:

- To create additional respite provision with a preventative focus on reducing the risk of education placement breakdown and escalation to higher-cost educational provision.
- To connect systems to provide joined-up support for families.

Since the last IQM Assessment Day leaders demonstrated how they have continued to develop this offer and effectively illustrated that the project continues to be a success. Over the last academic year, Breathing Space engaged with 22 KS2 learners, 17 KS3 learners, and 19 KS4 learners. This project provides opportunities for pupils to join in a range of activities and social events after school and in the holidays to support them with their SEMH difficulties and develop strategies to support themselves. In addition, last year, the school supported over 55 parents/carers, pupils, and their families to attend Derwent Hill as a short break. Feedback from the families was overwhelmingly positive.

Staff talked with passion about the project and how they work hard to ensure children have the opportunity to access a wide offer based on their needs and interests. Children have participated in a range of activities such as: visiting Durham Cathedral, enjoying meals out, and participating in a ceramics workshop. Staff are keen to give children new experiences. One staff member articulated this, saying: *"We try hard to link visits to different areas of the curriculum and allow students to consolidate learning. We also aim to provide new experiences and give children the opportunity to try new foods and visit places they have never been to."* Another staff member explained the importance of these sessions in allowing children to build strong relationships: *"Children develop life skills and social skills. Through engaging in the various activities, relationships between peers and staff have strengthened."*

At The Link School, learner voice is an important part of the continuing improvement journey. The latest pupil survey (July 2023) highlighted:

- 85.5% of pupils state they enjoy coming to school.
- 96.4% of pupils say staff at school expect them to do their best.
- 96.4% of pupils say there is someone they can talk to when they are worried.
- 92.7% of pupils say they feel safe at school.
- 96.6% of pupils say the school does not tolerate bullying.
- 96.4% of pupils state the school expects behaviour to be good.

It is clear, from the evidence presented throughout the day, that the wellbeing of pupils is a key driver at The Link School and that the Breathing Space programme is supporting pupils, and their families.



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Target 3:

To enhance the opportunities for children and young people to share their experience of exclusion from school through the 'Pull up a chair and listen.'

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) at The Link School is forward-thinking and outward facing. They value partnership working and use this to reflect, develop, and grow. A strength of the school is how it looks outward to develop strong networks and positive relationships with a wide and varied range of specialists within and beyond the community. New ideas and strategies are rooted in research and data. Leaders ask the right questions, challenge a wider dialogue with others, and are passionate about breaking the myths about what they do, which is to combine the very best academic and social interventions to allow pupils to thrive and succeed in the future.

The Link School has a strong partnership with the University of Sunderland and Together for Children and worked hard as a partnership to investigate the factors that impact upon social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people from 3-16 years, which lead to exclusion from school. In 2018, Together for Children commissioned Sarah Martin-Denham at the University of Sunderland to investigate the factors that impact upon social and emotional wellbeing of children and young people from 3-16 years, which may lead to exclusion from school. 174 participants took part in the research, including 55 children previously excluded from school, 41 of their caregivers, and 78 education and health professionals. Sarah has 12 publications that give an insight into this complex world.

#SeeMe #pullupachair was led by Sarah with funding from the UKRI Policy Support Fund 2021/2022 and the University of Sunderland, Interdisciplinary Research Network: Adverse Childhood Experiences. This project engaged 130 children aged 5-16 years in a creative arts project with four local artists. Of these, 68 shared their views on school exclusion. A further 28 children aged 5-16 years, previously excluded from school, took part in a creative arts project, funded by the University of Sunderland interdisciplinary research network: Adverse Childhood Experiences 2021/2022, contributing to this resource.

This led to the school's involvement in the #SeeMe #pullupachair project, engaging 130 children aged 5-16 years in a creative arts project with four local artists. Of these, 68 shared their views on school exclusion. The first part of the project allowed some of the Link School's KS4 learners to attend the University of Sunderland to create the first of 9 videos.

The school has been part of a project since 2015, with Sunderland University looking at SEN across the city and children presenting with having SEMH needs. As part of this ongoing collaboration, pupils have had the opportunity to have a voice and be part of a series of powerful films that make children visible and give the viewer an insight into their world – a lived experience. This project is allowing children's needs to be met and is all about creating a holistic approach to education.



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As a result of this work, learners are actively involved in the Children's Commissioner Advisory Board, where the aims are to *'Amplify the voices of children in England and across the world and ensure children's voices are embedded into recommendations for policy makers, decision takers, and Government.'* Learners are championed as the voice of those children who are excluded from school.

During the assessment day, Sarah Martin-Denham was inspiring in her passion for the project talking about how the programme has now expanded to promoting parental engagement through #pullupachairparents and will be further developed to include professionals through the #pullupachairprofessionals project. Sarah described how the parental aspect of the project has proved to be a success, stating: *'Parents said it was the best thing they had been involved in. Parents had a chance to talk to each other and engage with us. They did not want it to end so we now offer meetings, once a month, which the Link School hosts.'* The team is keen to shine the spotlight on the issue of exclusion, with Sarah talking about how 2999 pupils were excluded in 2022 and the impact this has on a child and their families. Part of the project is now creating a crochet blanket of 2999 squares to represent each excluded child. The blanket will be going on tour and will culminate in a big conference to create a meaningful conversation about exclusion.

This project is not only enhancing opportunities for the children of the Link School but also having an impact on a national scale.

Next Steps:

- To work with parents/carers to develop #pullupachairsafespace.
- To work with professionals to develop #pullupachairprofessionals.



Agreed Targets for 2022-2023

The Headteacher and IQM lead has identified three target areas, linked to the school vision and development plan, to ensure learners have a clear pathway for their future and to have wellbeing at the core of all they do. Leaders are keen that the following outcomes are achieved:

- Enhanced opportunities will be available for children and young people to access mindfulness and engagement activities across the school, after school, and during the holidays.
- Pupil experiences, and current research on school exclusions, will be used to contribute to the delivery of a unique conference with children and young people at the heart of discussions. Their agenda, their voices.

Target 1

To build the curriculum on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), (self-actualisation/esteem/belonging/safety needs/physiological needs) which is the foundation of the schools' relationships-based approach to address individual gaps in learning and skills.

Agreed actions:

- CPD delivery on Maslow and how the theory underpins the relationships-based curriculum.
- Subject teams to understand how Maslow's runs as a golden thread throughout the whole curriculum and school culture.
- Curriculum reviews for all pupils to provide opportunities to debrief experiences through mindfulness, music therapy, counselling, and Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE) curriculum.
- Review of Teaching and Learning policy to reflect Maslow and the pedagogical approach.
- Development of REACH out for Mindfulness training programme for other schools.



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Target 2

To enhance the opportunities for parents/carers people to share their experience of exclusion from school through the 'Pull up a chair and listen' project.

Agreed actions:

- Meet 'Pull Up a Chair and listen' stakeholders to identify project aims, based on the success of #SeeMe.
- Engage with 'Pull up a Chair' parent voice activities in school (to include groups from all key stages).
- Support the planning of #pullupachairsafespace.
- Evaluate and impact of the #pullupachairsafespace and share with the stakeholders.

Target 3

Leaders will ensure that the emotional wellbeing of learners will be further strengthened across the school through the planning, delivery, and evaluation of the ongoing Breathing Space programme.

Agreed actions:

- Engage with the Breathing Space Project in school, to support learners and their families with emotional wellbeing and improving relationships within the household and school.
- Expand the opportunities for regular family events.
- Head of School to take part in a steering group to further support DFE funding opportunities for Year 3 of the project.
- Enhance the opportunities for mindfulness engagement outside of the school day and holidays.



Overview

The Link School continues to be a school with inclusivity at its core. The Headteacher is inspiring and determined. She is unrelenting in her drive to secure the very best life chances for all young people at the school. This vision flows through the school. Leaders have worked hard to create this ambitious culture within the school. All staff have high expectations of pupils and their academic outcomes. Senior leaders are focused on raising pupils' aspirations and ensuring they are happy and successful.

The Senior Leadership Team (SLT) is clear about their moral purpose, vision, and the strategic direction for the school. They are reflective practitioners who listen to their team, and current research, to ensure they continue to drive forward to get the best outcomes for all.

There is a broad, balanced, and ambitious curriculum offer that is driven by the desire to meet pupil's needs and support them in their pathways. At the start of this academic year, leaders have begun to further develop the curriculum and build it on Maslow's hierarchy of needs: *'self-actualisation/esteem/belonging/safety needs/physiological needs,'* which is the foundation of the schools' relationships-based approach to address individual gaps in learning and skills. As well as experiential learning and the development of cultural capital being key, leaders have ensured that all recent developments have been rooted in Maslow's. The KS3 Assistant Headteacher explained, *'Our school values of REACH are embedded in the curriculum and the Maslow's hierarchy of needs ties in with this and what we already do. We work hard to address children's needs, from the bottom up, so they are ready to engage with academic learning and make progress.'* Leaders have worked hard to ensure that the build-up of knowledge and skills is rigorously sequenced through a spiral curriculum and that children have the time they need to internalise and become secure at each step. Continuous Professional Development (CPD) has taken place, and this is a key focus area of the academic year. The KS2 Assistant Headteacher demonstrated how as well as further embedding Maslow and Mindfulness in the curriculum, they have also been looking at 'Early Excellence' and offering continuous provision in KS2 to allow the children to develop 3 key elements: engagement, motivation, and thinking skills.

Key to driving the curriculum forward is the school's work on subject leadership. Leaders have focused on developing subject leaders' knowledge, skills, and expertise of understanding and analysing data and progress. By organising into key stage teams, leaders are ensuring that all the skills subject leaders need are being given to them through high-quality support and CPD. It also means that those working in the teams broaden their knowledge across a range of subjects and that the leadership and monitoring of each subject is not dependent on one person, thus ensuring consistency and succession planning.

English and maths are taught daily. Subjects are taught discretely; however, teachers are very experienced at developing skills, and cross-curricular links, through a range of other subjects. Staff are constantly refining and improving their cross-curricular approach which is driven by reading: creating as many links between subjects as possible. The school is committed to creating students who are life-long learners who read for pleasure. Throughout the school, the importance of reading was seen, as all spaces have books in them and displays to encourage reading and showcase reading work.



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Leaders are relentless in their determination to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of all and allows children to have a strong post-16 pathway mapped out. Due to the diverse range of needs across the school and sites, the curriculum has been designed to cater to a range of pupils, providing equal opportunities for all. Students benefit from elements of vocational education and some students attend external providers to access a vocational offer, which is regularly quality assured. Practical lessons are underpinned by theory lessons which are engaging and linked to the wider world of work. Children can participate in vocational lessons on site, such as gardening, painting, and decorating, nail art, music, sports, and fitness. The school building has been developed to allow children to engage in meaningful learning, with dedicated classrooms for these spaces such as the gym and the music room. If needed, children can also access vocational placements off-site, through well-established relationships with alternative education providers. These placements are quality assured regularly with two strands: a termly check on the academic progress, which is conducted by a senior leader, and also a weekly check by the Family Support worker to ensure children are safe and engaged. The KS4 Head of school talked with passion about how they, *'Work hard to get the right balance between safety, attendance and safeguarding and engagement, the right curriculum and academic achievements.'* Students have a wide range of enrichment opportunities on site. Every second of the school day is used to maximise student experiences.

The focus on achievement, expectations, and aspirations has given rise to many success stories at The Link School, across all sites, which are living proof of the positive impact of their inclusive ethos. Assessment across school is rigorous. There is a clear assessment schedule in place. Pupil Progress meetings take place regularly. These support in ensuring rapid progress is made and gaps are closed. On the day of the review, KS4 pupils were engaging in their mock exams. Children were focused and completing their work.

There is a strong culture of safeguarding which is highly effective, with staff receiving regular training on key areas of need. Attendance is a key focus and is monitored closely as the leaders recognise the relationship between attendance and progress as well as the emotional and social development of the pupils. If there is an attendance issue with any pupil, the issue is raised sensitively and with the support of the pastoral staff.

Staff wellbeing remains a high priority. Wellbeing needs are taken seriously by the school. One teacher articulated how *'Moving from mainstream to this school is the best thing I ever did. The leaders really care about us and check in with us. The Headteacher writes every member of staff a personalised performance management letter at the end of every academic year!'*

Transitions are well managed. The nature of the cohort means that students join them at different times of the year and often late in their school careers. Staff at The Link School have worked hard to develop a robust admissions process and structured transition program to help students move from their past traumas and educational experiences to a fresh start and a future filled with hope.



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Pupils at The Link School were keen to tell me that they enjoy being part of their school. They talk openly about their experiences at The Link as being positive. One young person said, *“Staff are great and make the school good. They are approachable and care about us.”* Another pupil explained, *“I can talk to the staff here, but I could not in my last school. They try to help me achieve and look at my curriculum to make it work for me.”* Throughout the assessment day, a number of children discussed how they knew the staff really care about them.

The parents and carers of the school are seen as partners. They are welcomed and valued. One parent explained, *“This school is like fairy dust. Staff really listen to us and children become more settled here.”*

The Link School is an example of a school committed to meeting the needs of its pupils and is inspiring in its commitment to, and implementation of, inclusive practice. The whole school community has an enthusiasm and passion for their part in enriching the lives of the pupils at the school. Staff provide a caring environment for pupils where high expectations have a huge impact on their progress and wellbeing. They have created a school that is friendly, welcoming, and aspirational. The relentless drive to ensure every child who arrives at the school makes progress – academically, socially, and emotionally - underpins every decision made. Staff strive to close gaps and prepare pupils to transition successfully, and happily, to the next stage of their education.

It is clear from the review process that the team at The Link School continues to be fully committed to inclusive practice and they successfully demonstrated the positive impact of their work towards the IQM Centre of Excellence targets over the past 12 months. They have proved their expertise over the years of IQM accreditation and I believe they have the passion and capacity to continue to drive the inclusion agenda in their own school and beyond. Therefore, I recommend that the school be awarded Flagship School Status. The next review will look closely at how the Leaders have fulfilled the objectives outlined in the Flagship Project and how they have interacted with the IQM Cluster Group, and other schools locally (and nationally), to promote their inclusive vision and work.

Assessor Mrs Emily Carr

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:

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