



Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



School The Link School Sunderland
Waverely Terrace
Pallion
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR4 6TA

Head/Principal Mrs Donna Walker

IQM Lead Mrs Donna Walker

Date of Review 18th November 2024

Assessor Mrs Emily Carr

IQM Cluster Programme

Cluster Group Tyne and Wear

Ambassador Mrs Emily Carr

Next Meeting 10th March 2025

Meeting Focus Careers curriculum and attendance

Cluster Attendance

Term	Date	Attendance
Summer 2023	26th June 2023	Yes
Autumn 2023	09th October 2023	No
Spring 2024	03rd May 2024	No
Summer 2024	24th June 2024	Yes
Autumn 2024	16th September 2024	No
Spring 2025	10th March 2025	

The Impact of the Cluster Group

The Link School Sunderland has struggled to attend a number of meetings over the last 12 months, due to high staff sickness absence and school safeguarding priorities. During the Assessment day, this was discussed, and suggestions were provided as to how Leaders can ensure someone can attend. The Headteacher agreed that she would allocate the role to another senior Leader to ensure someone is always able to attend if she is unable to. The option of joining online was also discussed as a supportive measure.

The IQM Lead shared that they always send their contributions to the group, such as PowerPoint presentations, and that minutes and resources are accessed, reviewed, and considered by Leaders when reflecting on their school priority areas.



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The Senior Leader who attended the summer term meeting at Academy 360, found the meeting useful, and as a result of the meeting, Link School Leaders are looking at further improving the transition offer between the Link School and Secondary Specialist provisions.

The IQM Lead is also contributing to an article and webinar for IQM, on the topic 'Creating a holistic curriculum to engage and aim for success' sharing their best practice to support other schools in the Inclusive School family and beyond.

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 range of written evidence, including:

- The school's Annual Review and Action Plan document
- School website
- School social media pages
- Ofsted report (November 2023)
- School policies
- REACH out to the Mindfulness training journal
- Mindfulness resources
- Mental Health Charter evidence folder
- Social, Emotional and Mental Health curriculum and intervention offer
- School curriculum planning

The Assessor also toured both school sites visited some classes and viewed displays.

Meetings held with:

- Headteacher
- IQM Lead
- Head of School - Springwell Dene
- Mindfulness Lead
- Mindfulness practitioner
- Teaching Assistant
- Sunderland University Associate Professor
- Art Teacher and Drawing and Talking Lead
- Behaviour Officer
- Parents and Carers
- KS1, KS2 and KS3 pupils



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Evaluation of Annual Progress towards the Flagship Project

Project Title: Re-integration and Wellbeing Support for all at The Link School Sunderland, wellbeing is a core thread running throughout and Leaders wanted to drive the wellbeing offer further through their Flagship Project. Leaders at The Link School Sunderland are committed to ensuring their pupils succeed during their time at the school and also in their future. They are determined to make a difference and give all children the best opportunity to be successful and know that wellbeing lies at the heart of this.

The Headteacher identified three target areas in this Flagship Project, linked to the school vision and development plan, to ensure learners have a clear pathway for their future and wellbeing at the core of all they do. The target areas are as follows:

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

The Headteacher (who is also the IQM Lead) shared how they aim to ensure that all learners in their care make progress throughout their time at The Link School Sunderland, both relationally and academically. Staff are acutely aware that some young people experience social, emotional, and mental health issues during their time at school. These issues can stem from both school and home. Link School staff want to ensure that they offer learners who present with social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) a clear path of guidance and support so that they can, with additional support and reasonable adjustments, make the most of their time at school and plan for their future.

Leaders identified that they could further develop their curriculum offer to embed wellbeing. The broad and balanced school curriculum provides a strong academic core of subjects underpinned by the school's REACH (Respect, Effort, Achieve, Communication, Happy and Healthy) values and vision. As they reviewed their offer and refined their thinking, Leaders aimed to ensure the curriculum was also built on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) 'self-actualization, esteem, belonging, safety needs, physiological needs.' At the start of the last academic year, staff began to further develop the curriculum and use Maslow's, which is the foundation of the school's relationships-based approach, to address individual gaps in learning and skills. Leaders have ensured that all recent developments have been rooted in Maslow's.

Whole school training has been delivered on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and how the theory underpins the relationships-based curriculum. Subject teams now understand how it runs as a golden thread throughout the whole curriculum and school culture. The Teaching and Learning policy was reviewed and updated to reflect this, and the pedagogical approach has been completed and embedded.



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Full curriculum reviews have been completed to ensure all pupils are provided with opportunities to debrief experiences through the broad range of offers such as mindfulness, music therapy, art therapy, counselling, and Personal, Social, Health, and Economic (PSHE). Ofsted visited the school in November 2023 and reported positively on the development of the curriculum, stating, 'Strong Leadership and Governance are bringing about many improvements to this Inclusive school. Leaders have overhauled much of the curriculum. It is increasingly broad and ambitious and equips pupils with a secure grasp of English and mathematics. Support for pupils' social, behavioural, and emotional development features in many aspects of the curriculum. This provides pupils with a strong foundation to achieve well in their time at the school and many do.'

Leaders have worked hard to further develop their mindfulness offer to tie in with their work on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, as they know children need to have their needs met in order to engage and learn effectively.

The Link School Sunderland's Mindfulness Lead, who is based at the Springwell Dene site, shared how they do a lot of supportive, targeted work with children, teaching them about 'Fight and flight to rest and digest' and giving them strategies to self-regulate and also to work with staff to co-regulate. Due to the positive impact of the work at the Springwell Dene site, the offer has also been further developed at the KS4 site. The KS4 Mindfulness Lead explained how she came to the school as a Teaching Assistant and how Leaders wanted to further develop her skills and talents to meet the growing needs of pupils. She now works with every Y10 class to offer a mindfulness lesson as well as offering 15-minute appointments throughout the day for those who need it. She explained that these sessions are child-led and that planning is provided by the Mindfulness Leader. During the Assessment day, two mindfulness sessions were observed in the dedicated rooms one at the Springwell Dene site and one at the Pallion site. During these sessions, pupils were reflective and positive about the offer at The Link School Sunderland and how the mindfulness offer has supported them. One pupil said, 'I use strategies that I have learned with Nicole at home.' Another pupil explained, 'At my last school I don't feel I got the support I needed but here I do. I feel safe in this space and coming in here helps me.' Another pupil added to this, explaining, 'If I am having a moment here, I don't get shouted at and I feel calm. It feels like being at home.'

The mindfulness team works hard to ensure a holistic approach is in place for families so that the strategies that children have learnt in school can also be used in their homes. 'REACH out to families' is offered once a half term, with workshops delivering sessions on topics such as stress awareness. Staff also promote mindfulness strategies and offer them via informal events such as coffee mornings and the school's social media.

Enhanced opportunities have also been made available for children and young people to access mindfulness and engagement activities across the school, after school, and during the holidays. When Ofsted visited, they noted the strength of the offer, stating: 'The school provides impressive provision for pupils' personal development. A well-thought-out mindfulness programme supports pupils to reflect on and manage their emotions and actions.'



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Leaders at The Link School Sunderland are keen to support other settings in learning about mindfulness and how it can support children. The Mindfulness Lead has created a CPD offer to support other professionals and the 'REACH out for Mindfulness' training programme has been further developed over the last twelve months. Three sessions across the year have been completed, with extremely positive feedback from participants, from a broad range of external stakeholders including schools, Early Help and Social Care Teams. The Lead shared how positive the feedback from participants was, with comments such as: 'These sessions have given practical knowledge as to how to approach mindfulness' and 'After being at the Mindfulness course I have transformed two offices into mindfulness and sensory spaces' and 'Best course I have been on.' Due to the demand, the school also offered twilight sessions for colleagues to attend.

It is clear that the Mindfulness offer has been further developed and enhanced since the last Assessment day and that the Mindfulness work remains a strength of the school that is having a positive impact on pupils.

The second target area of the project was to enhance the opportunities for parents, carers, and children to share their experience of exclusion from school through the impressive 'Pull up a chair and listen' project. The project aims to use pupil experiences, and current research on school exclusions, to contribute to the delivery of a unique conference with children and young people at the heart of discussions. Their agenda, their voice. The Link School Sunderland has supported all #pullupachair safe space activities including the co-production of Project 2999, a collaboration project with The University of Sunderland.

Since the last Assessment day, a giant blanket, made by parents and carers of pupils who have been excluded from primary and secondary schools, has been officially unveiled. The crocheted blanket is made from 2,999 pieces of fabric, which represents the number of children who were excluded, on average, each school day in 2021/22.

This project has gained interest on a national scale and the Link School has been involved in working with the BBC Look North and giving interviews highlighting Project 2999. The blanket tour started in September 2024 and has visited sixteen locations so far including, Redcar, Hartlepool, Birmingham and also organisations such as Power2. The project Lead updated how they are visiting the Children Commissioner for England in December.

On the Assessment day, Sunderland University Associate Professor, Sarah Martin-Denham shared how at the events she gives the context and research, and the parents and carers give the lived experience. One parent passionately explained how they are representing parents, families, and children and how they aim to have an impact on decision-makers. They shared how they feel that training for teachers in mainstream schools seems to be lacking in terms of their understanding of how to meet the needs of children who are struggling and have additional needs.

Due to the success of this project, they are now working to develop the next part of it fund the '4191 tour' and share interventions to stop children from becoming excluded/suspended. They want to encourage staff working with children to intervene as soon as there is a change in a pupil, with family-led intervention, and not wait until a pupil is at crisis point.

The collaboration between the university, The Link School Sunderland and parents and carers is testament to the commitment Leaders at The Link School Sunderland have to



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ensuring the voices of children are heard and that they can have an impact on a national scale.

The final, third strand of the project was to further develop the Breathing Space programme. At the Link School, the Breathing Space programme is a key offer to support children and to allow them to participate in a wide range of experiences. 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 and to connect systems to provide joined-up support for families. Leaders have used the programme to strengthen the emotional wellbeing of learners and to allow them to have opportunities to participate in community activities and gain cultural capital outside of school hours.

One Year 6 pupils shared how they find the programme exciting and how they have been able to participate in activities such as trampolining, visiting a gym, eating in restaurants, and trying new foods. He also shared how they had been on a residential trip to Derwent Hill with family members attending too. One of the Breathing Space staff shared how the programme gives children new opportunities and allows school staff to strengthen relationships with families. During the Assessment day, children and staff began planning for future trips linked to pupils' interests, considering a visit to Legoland.

Leaders shared how their focus now is to look at developing the sustainability of the Breathing Space project. Leaders have identified a number of key actions and next steps to ensure this flagship project continues to be a success and are committed to working with the wider community to enhance the project further.

Next steps:

- To further engage with 'Pull up a Chair' parent voice activities in school to promote the work both regionally and nationally.
- To support the planning of #project 2999 activities and to evaluate the impact of the #project 2999 and share with the stakeholders.
- Journey to the Children Commissioner's Office to deliver the blanket and raise awareness on a national level.
- To continue to engage with the Breathing Space Project in school, to support learners and their families with emotional wellbeing and improve relationships within the household and school, in addition to working with the steering group to focus on the sustainability of the project.
- Head Teacher to take part in a steering group to further support DFE funding opportunities for Years 4 and 5 of the Breathing Space project.
- To further enhance the opportunities for mindfulness engagement outside of the school day and holidays.
- To embed the SEMH programme of interventions focusing on all learners making progress through their time at The Link School Sunderland both relationally and academically. Key staff to be trained in the delivery of SEMH interventions.
- The SEND Team to develop a programme of age-appropriate expectations for KS1, KS2 and KS4. These will be focussed on: Routines and direction, Social Situations, Anxiety, Self-Regulation and Resilience.



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Overview

The Link School Sunderland continues to be a school with a person-centred approach. Leaders Lead with a moral compass and are passionate, driven, and committed. They continue to be outward-facing and committed to partnership working and having an impact on a wider scale.

Due to the positive reputation of the school and the impact they have, they support other settings. Across the last academic year, the school supported eight schools (primary and secondary mainstream and PRUs), with a mixture of school improvement days and internal CPD support for staff. The Headteacher is also going to be part of the Westminster Insight national conference in Newcastle, in January, which is focussing on sharing the next steps for Alternative Provision and strategies to improve AP services and placements. This conference will bring together mainstream schools, PRUs, AP providers, and Local Authorities. The Headteacher will be sharing The Link School Sunderland's takeaways for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment and designing bespoke curriculum pathways with relevant therapeutic input, as well as how to embed a culture of 'mindfulness' across organisations.

Across the school, there is a sense of love, nurture, and family. All staff know their pupils and this dedication allows them to ensure children are happy, well-rounded, and achieving. Throughout the Assessment day, the focus on nurturing and developing children, and staff, was apparent. Leaders have thought carefully about how to ensure the well-being of staff is in place so that they can deliver high-quality support to pupils. One staff member shared, 'This place is like a breath of fresh air. It is more relaxed and nurturing than previous workplaces, and Leaders care about staff.' Leaders continue to provide a strong offer for their staff that allows them to enjoy work and experience success. Staff continue to be proud to be part of the Link School family.

Leaders have further developed their supportive offer to ensure children's needs are met. They have a child-centred approach through innovative Assessment processes and supportive packages that tap into the complex needs of pupils. The KS4 Behaviour Officer talked passionately about how The Link School Sunderland, has a culture that is about students first and never giving up. Staff know their children and their families and prioritise building positive relationships and making connections. He shared how communication is a key factor in the school, there is a team meeting every morning and evening to allow staff to be clear about what is happening to update on children and to swiftly put support in place.

A recent key piece of work that has been completed, has been mapping out a graduated SEMH Behaviour curriculum and bespoke SEMH interventions. Leaders are passionate about using early intervention techniques to try and reduce negative behaviours. The Behaviour Lead and pastoral team look at key data on a Friday afternoon and use the data to inform the next steps and identify children who need further support. A wide range of interventions have been pulled together to provide targeted support on topics such as anger management and safety planning. Pupils learn how to manage their feelings and emotions. Pupils experience a range of activities which are aimed at developing their social and emotional skills. There is now an intervention tracking spreadsheet to show which children have accessed what and to analyse the impact.



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Ofsted commented positively on the work that had been completed when they visited, in November 2023, stating, 'Pupils receive the support that they need to manage their behaviour. Staff model the positive attitudes they expect of pupils' and 'Leaders establish a precise knowledge of each pupil's academic, behavioural, and emotional needs. Leaders also identify accurately the needs of pupils with SEND.' The Behaviour Lead shared how they are constantly reflecting and reviewing and will continue to refine this offer and evaluate the impact.

One of the targeted interventions that has been introduced is Drawing and Talking. Evidence shows this intervention helps children to process trauma and Leaders were keen to embed it as part of their offer due to being a trauma-informed school. The Lead participated in initial training last year and is due to complete advanced training this year. He explained that he currently has a caseload of four children per week and how he creates a safe space for children to explore different emotions. The course is designed for 30-minute sessions, per week, over 12 weeks.

The primary provision has now a dedicated KS1 sensory room. Staff shared how this space helps children de-escalate and how they have seen a reduction in incidents and the need for team teaching. On the review day, children happily showcased the room and shared different features such as the tunnel and the lights.

The school achieved the Mental Health Charter Mark, in the autumn term, and was accredited with the Gold Award with the report stating that Leaders have 'Created an organisation that has a relational culture.' This award reflects the key focus the school places on mental health and wellbeing and the strong package of support that they offer. Attendance remains a school priority, particularly at KS4. The KS4 data has increased by 3% for the same period last year and staff are continuing to build on this. Leaders are continuing to work with families and are also looking to recruit a Family Support worker to develop their supportive offer further.

Staff work hard to ensure that parents, carers, and guardians feel well-informed about their children's learning and progress and how staff are supporting them within school. High-quality opportunities exist for parents to engage with staff to discuss the needs of their child at different stages. Staff across the school work tirelessly to identify needs early and share this with parents, ensuring the right professional advice and services can be accessed to support their child. During the Assessment day, parents were positive about this school and how it has supported their children and them.

Curriculum developments have continued as Leaders are continuously reviewing and refining their offer. They now offer fine art GCSE. The art Lead talked about how they had some real GCSE success stories, this year, with children leaving with strong grades. He also proudly shared how they have recently gone to see a previous pupil's college show to celebrate their success since leaving the Link School.

Further developments have taken place on the literacy and English curriculum, due to the high importance Leaders place on this key area. There is now more of a focus on phonics in KS3 and KS4, for those who need it, using ELS, Essential Letters and Sounds. They have also continued to ensure that the curriculum is based on books to ensure children are immersed in literacy.



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Staff are knowledgeable about their school and their students and are tireless when it comes to ensuring children achieve their best and have successful pathways in place. At the Link School, inclusion is more than a policy; it is a way of life. The culture of inclusion is woven into every aspect of the school and ensures that all of the community feels a sense of belonging and can achieve success.

It is clear from the review process that the staff team at The Link School Sunderland continues to be fully committed to inclusive practice. They have proved their commitment to inclusion over their years of IQM accreditation and they continue to have the passion and expertise to continue to drive the inclusion agenda in their own school and beyond. 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 improved their attendance at this.

The Link School Sunderland continues to move from strength to strength in terms of its superb inclusive practice and I am firmly of the opinion that the school fully meets the standard required by the Inclusion Quality Mark to maintain its status as a Flagship School. I therefore recommend that the school retains its Flagship Status and is reviewed again in 12 months. The next review will look closely at how the school has interacted with its Inclusion Cluster and promoted continuing outreach. Evidence of cluster working will underpin the capacity for the school to maintain its Flagship status.

Assessor: Mrs Emily Carr

Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:

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