

Using a Whole School Approach to mental health and wellbeing to support pupils return to school

#5 of the Responding to Covid-19 Series

Based on a session delivered by Pam Shaw, Principal Officer for Participation at the National Children's Bureau and Jill Brookes, HeadStart Hull School Policy and Practice Lead

What is a Whole School Approach?

A Whole School Approach (WSA) to mental health extends beyond teaching about mental health in PSHE sessions to embed wellbeing as a priority across the school environment. It is concerned with all aspects of school life from ethos and culture, to interactions with parents, student voice, as well as teaching and staff wellbeing. Rather than focusing on mental illness, a WSA adopts a positive and universal focus on good mental wellbeing for students and staff. Under a Whole School Approach, wellbeing and mental health become 'everyone's business,' with genuine engagement across staff, pupils, governors, parents and the community.

Research¹ shows that adopting a Whole School Approach leads to a number of positive outcomes, such as:

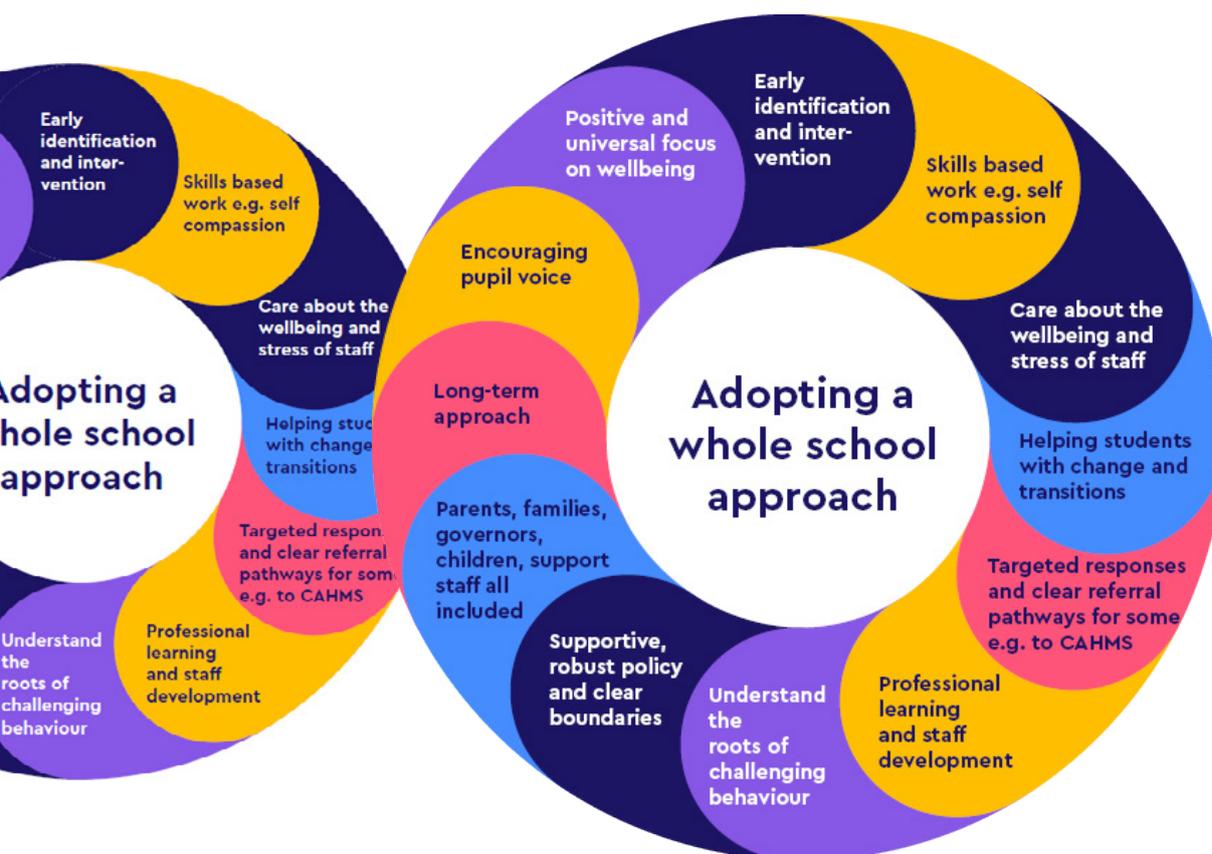
- Improved pupil wellbeing
- Improved staff wellbeing and retention
- Improved academic learning
- The development of social and emotional skills
- Prevention of mental health problems
- Improved school behaviour- reduction in fights, bullying, exclusions and absence

Figure 1 (below) shows the key components of a Whole School Approach, based on research by Professor Katherine Weare for NCB. This framework has been used to develop a school [self-assessment tool](#), an [improvement framework for schools](#) and a recent [tool to support primary schools plan for reopening](#). (If you are interested in finding out more about the Schools' Wellbeing Partnership or joining the Schools Forum, please contact Pam Shaw at pshaw@ncb.org.uk).

A WSA starts from a view of prevention and early identification, and provides a solid base to promote wellbeing to prevent future problems. The approach aims to develop a supportive school and classroom environment with a focus on emotional literacy, resilience, relationships, communication and the celebration of difference, and ensures that all parts of the school organisation work coherently together.

1. https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Health_wellbeing_docs/ncb_framework_for_promoting_well-being_and_responding_to_mental_health_in_schools.pdf

Fig. 1: Whole School Approach model developed by Professor Katherine Wear for NCB



Covid-19 Context

Due to Covid-19, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of supporting children’s mental health and wellbeing, and awareness and appetite from education settings to prioritise this work during the lockdown period and as more young people return to school.

The approaches to health and wellbeing taken by schools has varied hugely. Some schools have adopted a whole school approach whilst others, due to resources or other constraints, have focused instead on providing individual interventions where possible.

Despite the increase in interest, there are some common barriers to adopting a Whole School Approach. Not all teachers feel confident with discussing mental wellbeing, and a majority of teachers do not feel confident in spotting the signs of mental health issues and talking to students about bereavement and trauma². In addition, there are issues around working holistically across a school; often the school’s mental health or pastoral lead does not have sufficient influence or leverage to embed the changes and cultural shift required.

Some schools have shared that they are struggling to identify and respond to the changing needs of children and young people at this time, with research indicating an increase in young people’s mental health during the pandemic. A recent survey by YoungMinds of young people with existing mental health needs found that 80% of these young people felt the Covid-19 pandemic had made their mental health worse³. However lockdown has had a positive impact on some young people’s mental

² Chartered College of Teaching, ‘Education in times of crisis: Teachers’ views during COVID-19’, July 2020

³ Young Minds ‘Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs. Survey 2’’, July 2020

health, where for example, being at home has reduced anxiety caused by the school environment, and this may be particularly true for some young people with SEND.

In addition, there is a quality assurance issue in that schools are trying to navigate the sheer number of resources, training packages and 'whole school approaches' that are on offer from different providers and which have been advertised during the lockdown period.

For schools that do adopt a whole school approach, it is evident that a real team effort is required; teaching and pastoral staff, pupils, governors and senior leaders across the school should be involved in trying to implement the changes that are needed.

Nevertheless, for some time now there has been a growing consensus that there is a need to think about holistic ways of supporting mental health in schools. Using mental wellbeing as the foundation for good education for all children and young people, especially those with SEND, is becoming a more mainstream idea. The pandemic has provided an opportunity to think differently about how schools can respond to children who have experienced changes to their emotional wellbeing, and brought about a greater awareness about the impact of mental health on young people. A Whole School Approach can offer a great starting point for schools to prioritise mental health and wellbeing and frame this as a prerequisite for learning, particularly when more pupils initially return to the school environment.

Learning from HeadStart Hull: Tweendykes Special School

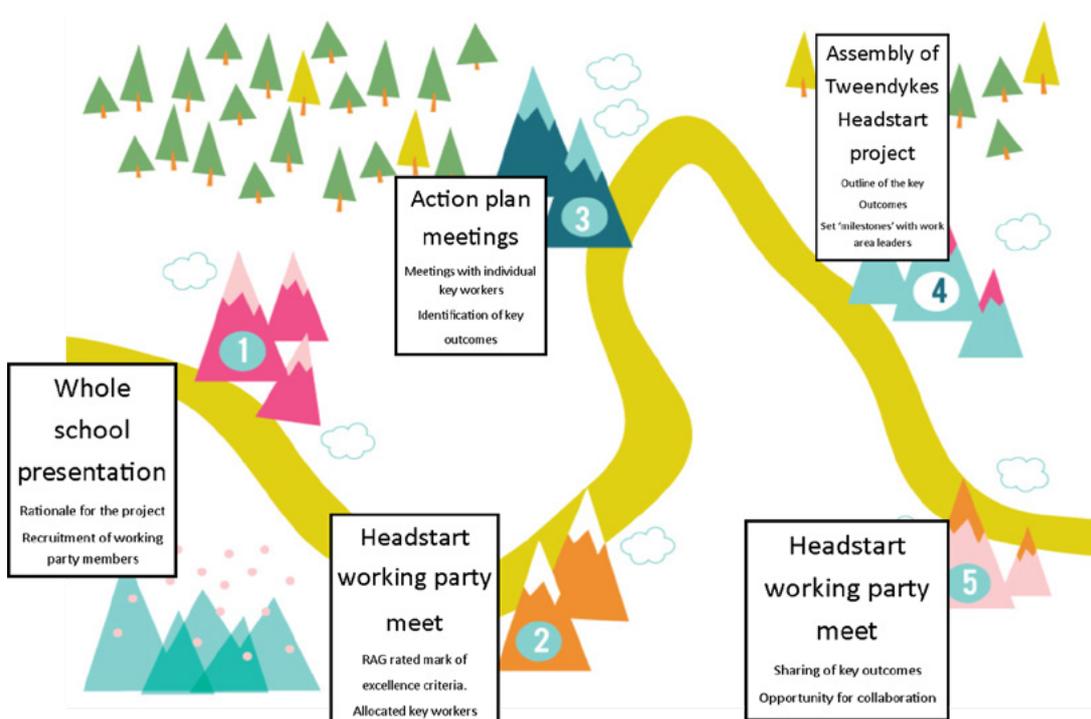
HeadStart Hull is a five-year National Lottery funded project that has been running since 2016. The project aims to support children and young people in Hull to develop good mental health and wellbeing outcomes, to 'thrive' in their communities and 'bounce back' from life's challenges. The delivery model is based around a Whole School Approach to embedding mental health and wellbeing, and the HeadStart Hull partnership has found that adopting a WSA has been one of the foundations for embedding real change.

Tweendykes is a special school in Hull that has worked with HeadStart Hull to successfully adopt a Whole School Approach to mental health and wellbeing. Tweendykes based their Whole School Approach on Public Health England's eight principles of promoting emotional health and wellbeing in schools (Figure 2), which closely align with the aspects of a WSA detailed in Figure 1. It is important to note that leadership and management is at the heart of this approach.

Fig. 2: Eight principles to promoting a whole school and college approach to emotional health and wellbeing from Public Health England guidance



Adopting a WSA to mental wellbeing is a process which involves a number of phases. In Tweendykes this journey was summarised in the figure below:



Initial phase: get staff on board, recognise strengths and weaknesses and build on existing good practice

Firstly, the whole school and staff team were presented with the rationale for the project. Initial discussions with the whole staff team involved person-centred planning tools to examine the strengths and difficulties of the school environment. This was a key step in the journey; it was essential to get everyone on board with the project and for the school to set priorities together. It was established that staff were already adopting many of the eight principles in their work, but the key difference was that they were not doing this together as a whole school. HeadStart Hull's work with Tweendykes focussed on developing leadership that would support and amplify these efforts to promote emotional health and wellbeing.

The burning issues for the school were identified as staff morale, support for parents, and curriculum support for pupils. Working party members were then recruited.

Set a clear action plan and identify key outcomes

The Headstart working party, which consisted of members of SLT, HR, teaching staff, PSHE leads and parent liaison practitioners, met to develop a RAG rated criteria and to allocate key workers responsible for each area of the plan.

This was followed by a number of action planning meetings to identify the outcomes and set milestones with the key workers for each work area. Finally, the working party met again to share the key outcomes and provide a further opportunity for collaboration and input.

Throughout the whole process, a person-centred planning approach was used. This was a helpful way of looking at what Tweendykes wanted to achieve in its specific school environment, and the outcomes identified included:

- Improved mental health outcomes for young people
- A model to listen to staff
- A clearly defined pastoral team
- Quick, effective referral routes
- Systematic review of interventions
- Improved staff confidence in augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) approaches
- A renewed and well-functioning PSHE curriculum
- A representative school council
- Highly engaged parents, with an improved Leading Parent Partnership Award⁴, to allow parent/carers to connect to support

This work gave Tweendykes school a good platform upon which to build their Whole School Approach.

Working with leaders

Working with school leadership was identified as the key to influencing change.

Overall, the priority outcomes have been successfully achieved as a result of this work and there was felt to be an improvement in leadership and in the culture of the school.

Responding to Covid-19

HeadStart Hull are collating information on the impact of the lockdown and the Covid-19 pandemic and are consulting with schools to inform the city's plan for 0-25s.

4 <https://www.awardplace.co.uk/award/lppa>

HeadStart Hull have continued to work with Tweendykes school to consider how to use the WSA to meet the needs which have arisen from the pandemic.

Since the beginning of lockdown, the partnership adapted to provide additional services which fit with the holistic, cross-system approach to wellbeing in a WSA. Additional support included:

- One off group sessions on managing stress
- Bereavement support
- Additional support regarding transitions, whether from primary to secondary or from secondary into EET
- Additional support for parents to help re-establish routines with CYP
- Additional staff wellbeing support
- Adapted PSHE support to include issues emerging from the current system

A key theme that emerged was the need for robust welfare support. HeadStart Hull therefore provided clear guidelines for staff on how they should support wellbeing during this time. This work included:

- A robust RAG-rated monitoring system
- Home visits – more parents were willing to accept help earlier
- Work with the whole school team on pastoral responsibilities
- Consultation work with pupils, parents and staff

Social media and the school website were developed as key communication tools and as learning platforms for students and parents during this time. This investment formed part of the school's ongoing work on adopting a WSA but was particularly valuable during lockdown as it provided a 'go to' platform with resources for the whole school community and increased parental engagement.

The Whole School Approach is being used to set priorities for the Autumn-term recovery, including:

- Continued support for staff and parents
- Continue to develop a sense of community, with a focus on supporting families
- School staff will measure success based on how children and young people *feel* when they return to school: are they happy, have they settled into their environment?
- Develop a platform to support parents' needs
- Adapt PSHE support to include issues emerging from the current situation

