

# Whole School Approach to Emotional Health and Mental Well-being in Oldham Evaluation Report

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## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS (Phase 1 Broad Scoping)

### 1.1 Aim and Scope:

- This study reports broad scoping work conducted as Phase 1 within the Oldham Insight School's case study evaluation of the Whole School Approach (WSA) to Emotional Health and Mental Well-being (EHMW)
- Adopting a broadly qualitative approach, this summary focuses on reporting data collected in one-to-one and group interviews with school staff (10 participants in total), who have been engaged in implementing the Whole School Approach to Mental Health within their respective settings (7 primary schools, 2 secondary schools). It will focus upon:
  - (i) the ways in which the WSA has been experienced by and implemented in seven primary schools and two secondary schools within Oldham;
  - (ii) what the potential and early impact of this work has been for these settings;
  - (iii) key challenges that might shape future agenda within EHMW across the Borough.
- It is hoped that these early findings will inform data collection tools within a second research phase developing detailed case studies from across eight school settings<sup>1</sup>.

### 1.2 Key Findings

Across the emerging data-set, there appear to be a number of sustained themes that consistently appear across the practitioners sampled, all of whom unilaterally report positive experiences of their engagement with aspects of the WSA, and its coordination by the EHMW team within Oldham Council, funded by the Oldham Opportunity Area. Broadly, the practitioners sampled report three pivotal points of impact:

- Effective Continuous Professional Development (CPD) training has supported education-related practitioners to develop knowledge, awareness and understanding around underlying causes, symptoms and manifestations of particular mental health conditions, as well as the graduated response system and referral routes via external providers.
- Strong relationships between the EHMW team and settings have been cultivated unilaterally, supported by cross-school mental health networks and working groups.
- Participants from secondary felt that effective implementation of particular aspects of the WSA was having a visible and significant impact on young people's mental health, wellbeing, resilience and attitude (though this is anecdotal given that tracking systems were too immature to be consulted in this Phase 1 scoping work). Both secondary schools sampled report significant changes in practice due to their engagement with training. For example, one secondary school had developed and rolled out a new, bespoke pastoral curriculum for Years 7 to 10 and monitoring data from this will be available from July to inform Phase 2. The other secondary school sampled had rolled out 'wellbeing

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<sup>1</sup> Although this Phase 1 scoping was designed to inform the development of research instruments for up to eight school case studies, Phase 2 has now been placed on hold due to Covid-19.

conversations' across their staff/student body. Again, there was no monitoring data available for this Phase 1 scoping but we hope to follow this up in Phase 2.

### 1.3 Future Challenges

Although much has been achieved in a short time, this Phase 1 data collection has revealed a number of challenges that must now be considered in order to inform the future direction of the WSA and EHMW in Oldham broadly. These include:

- 1) the logistics of releasing staff during the day while maintaining appropriate staffing levels within the setting was a difficulty for stakeholders in primary, who felt that there was 'too much, too quickly';
- 2) while practitioners in all settings and cross-phase report increased awareness and understanding around mental health as a result of the CPD provided by the WSA/EHMW team, it was only in the secondary phase that changes to practice had ensued as a result of engagement with the WSA (though it must be acknowledged that this refers to a very small sample). Primary participants felt that there was a gap between their own increased understanding / awareness of issues and ability to respond to these issues in practice with concrete strategies;
- 3) linked to issues of implementation in primary schools, ways of monitoring and tracking impact across settings and phases is a significant area of consideration for the EHMW team, going forward.

As key to the sustainability of the WSA, focus should now be on how the team might build upon and expand their already impactful work in order to further develop effective implementation in-school, as well as opportunities / mechanisms to explore, understand and track the impact that implementation is having on young people (at the micro level) and on the broader system around mental health (at the macro level). We will explore both of these 'levels' more fully within Phase 2 of this study, where school visits will be conducted, along with interviews / focus groups with young people.

## Section Two: Overview of the Study

### 2.1 Background to this Report

Following advice disseminated by the Department for Education (1): "schools have an important role to play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children by developing whole school approaches tailored to their particular needs". Although WSAs vary in scope and content, they are likely to integrate a number of distinct interventions that schools can hook into and embed within an overarching and holistic framework. In the case of Oldham (and following guidance from Public Health England – see 2), the WSA to Emotional Health and Mental Well-being has been designed at local authority level as a multi-component framework for use across schools to support positive mental health and well-being provision in relation to the following eight principles:

- (i) leadership and management;
- (ii) school ethos and environment;
- (iii) curriculum, teaching and learning;
- (iv) student voice;

- (v) staff development, health and wellbeing;
- (vi) identifying need and monitoring impact;
- (vii) targeted support;
- (viii) working with parents/carers.

Oldham is not unique in its focus upon a Borough-wide WSA; there is evidence that this is a growing international phenomenon and there is a significant volume of recent international research (often reported in systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses, see 4-12). Across these studies, concrete evidence of impact is mixed. That said, there does seem to be a fairly robust evidence base suggesting that differences in implementation (in school) are a potentially significant factor in determining the impact of interventions and approaches (see 13). Yet, if implementation (in school) is indeed pivotal, it would follow that overarching systems to support schools in this implementation must be robust and considered. It is precisely on this relationship between implementation and impact, as well as wider system leadership and school leadership, that we focus upon within this broad scoping work, in order to understand:

- how Whole School Approach (WSA) has functioned as an initiative, operationally and strategically;
- how the WSA has been experienced and indeed implemented by eight schools in Oldham (six primary settings and two secondary settings);
- the early and/or potential impact of this initiative within the settings sampled (looking across the eight principles and associated interventions);
- the key challenges and/or implications arising out of the above that might shape and enhance the future agenda for WSA in Oldham.

## 2.2 Method and Sample

The scoping work reported had been designed to feed into a small-scale, qualitative case study. To explore key themes that might support the development of robust research instruments for future case studies, we conducted a series of three group interviews and two one-to-one interviews (10 participants in total) with Senior Leads representing local schools (7 primary schools and 2 secondary schools). All interviews lasted approximately one hour and explored:

- How has the WSA been implemented in your school?
- What provision have you previously made to support pupils' emotional health and mental well-being, and how has the WSA enabled you to build upon or relate to these existing strategies and actions?
- What has the approach enabled you to offer or do that you might not otherwise have been able to?
- What early impact has been noted?
- How might any identified impact feed back into future activity, strategically and operationally?

Settings were sampled using self-selection, following communication by the EHMW team within Oldham Council. All interview data were thematically analysed.

## 2.3 Limitations

The small-scale nature of this research, as well as the self-selective sampling, strategy limits the extent to which generalisations can be made; although the level of detail captured within the semi-structured interviews mean that relatability is still possible. It should be emphasised however that this scoping work was designed to feed into a broader case study and should therefore be seen as early, exploratory qualitative work that might feed into a wider, composite picture.

The following section will now report key points of impact (and how these relate to notions of implementation) for each of the settings sampled.

### Section Three: A Brief Overview of WSA in Oldham

Broadly, schools' engagement within the WSA (currently 102 settings across the Borough) begins with an in-house self-assessment to explore areas of strength and need within current provision, using the eight principles of WSA (See p.4) as a framework. This self-assessment would then be drawn upon to plan, implement, monitor and track existing, as well as develop new, well-being interventions in school. Schools are required to locate and embed any interventions using a 'graduated response system', advocated in the 2015 SEND Code of Practice (2015) as a "a four part cycle [*Assess, Plan, Do, Review – my insertion*] through which earlier decisions and actions are revisited, refined and revised with a growing understanding of the pupil's needs and of what supports the pupil in making good progress and securing good outcomes." The implementation of this cycle has three stages: universal (whole school/college interventions designed and delivered in-house), selected (whole school / college interventions delivered in-house but with the support of an external provider) and targeted (bespoke, commissioned interventions for young people with complex and specific emotional health and mental well-being issues).

Within Oldham Council, a discrete team has been formed and funded through the Oldham Opportunity Area initiative - comprising education-related professionals and psychotherapists- to support schools in developing a WSA in line with the phased approach advocated by the graduated response system. The team's activity to date has included:

- development of the role of Senior Lead for mental health in each setting as custodian of the WSA, and appropriately graduated responses within this, and as a key point of contact for the EHMW team;
- coordination of networking spaces (the 'mental health good practice group', for example) to support Senior Leads, SENCOs and pastoral leads and enable the sharing of effective practice and the building of relationships between and across settings in Oldham;
- provision of a suite of training, both whole workforce CPD that practitioners can book, as well as a bespoke training package that can be commissioned by the school/setting themselves, based on their own identified and/or emerging need;
- linked to the above, deepening and strengthening of knowledge in the system, so that practitioners have the understanding, practical tools and confidence to implement the graduated response effectively. Part of this is settings knowing when an issue can be self-managed in-house (as a universal and/or selected offer), and when a referral to an external provider (targeted offer) might be necessary.

While there is clear evidence that schools across the Borough have engaged meaningfully with the approach and the team, through widespread attendance at training events and positive

training feedback scores, it is not yet evident how and in what ways the approach has positively influenced schools, practitioners and young people concretely. Borough-wide 'Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services' (CAMHS) referral data shows a reduction in referrals by schools in 2019 to 269, compared with 287 in 2017 and 286 in 2019. This might suggest that schools are implementing the WSA, and within that their graduated response system, to better manage mental health issues in-house, though claim would need to be unpacked and explored more fully in Phase 2 of the data collection.

The following section will now report key findings as understood and experienced by the 10 participants and their 9 settings (7 primary schools and 2 secondary schools) themselves, with a discrete focus on early / potential points of impact observed in school.

## Section Four: Key Findings

Despite varying levels of engagement, all participants acknowledged that the WSA appears to have yielded broadly positive outcomes with regard to local knowledge, understanding and awareness. As for how these factors have shaped effective implementation in school, the picture is somewhat mixed. Key themes within the data analysis include: (i) building knowledge, awareness and understanding, (ii) transferring knowledge into practice, and (iii) enabling confidence through collaboration.

### 4.1 Building Knowledge, Awareness and Understanding

All the settings sampled report that their work within the WSA has sharpened and refined their awareness of, and their in-school focus upon, emotional health and mental well-being, principally through the extensive programme of CPD opportunities developed and offered by the team that are underpinned and sustained by the team's knowledge of Oldham schools and strong relationships with Senior Leads. For most interview participants, their attendance at CPD has enabled existing but often latent knowledge and understanding of issues to be recalled and refreshed. Indeed, most participants described the eight principles as a useful guiding framework to focus their attention on not only what might be working well in their school's mental health provision, but also any gaps and / or inconsistencies.

Patricia, Assistant Head and SENCo, Primary:

*"I think it [engaging with the WSA] made us realise how much we do that we hadn't kind of put under the official umbrella of mental health. I think it's [WSA] made us evaluate what we are doing and made us look at it [mental health] kind of becoming like a whole school priority."*

Point of Impact: The CPD opportunities provided to support the WSA have raised the profile of Emotional Health and Mental Wellbeing in educational settings across the Borough. This has strengthened awareness and focus through the self-assessment process.

James, Headteacher and Strategic Inclusion Lead for MAT, Primary:

*"I think the work around the framework and the support that [was given, the profile it was given, has really driven what we've done. Even though we're on that journey already, it's given us a framework."*

Eloise, Headteacher, Primary:

*“I mean I think of schools as well, a lot of the things we were doing previously, because wellbeing is always there when you’re working with children and with adults. But I think ...it’s [WSA] just pinned it all together.”*

Melanie, Assistant Headteacher, Secondary:

*“Raising awareness, raising awareness.”*

Yet, despite this apparent consensus across participants that the profile of EHMW, and awareness of discrete issues, had increased across staff in all schools sampled, it was less clear to what extent there was a strong awareness of how to concretely respond to these issues within the interviews of primary participants particularly, as the following section will explore more fully.

## 4.2 Transfer of Knowledge and Awareness into Improved Practice

### 4.2.1 Enhanced Practice at Secondary Level

Secondary participants described how they had been able to convert their learning from CPD opportunities and networking / working groups into practice. For both secondary settings sampled, part of this success was linked to two overarching factors. Firstly, both Senior Leads were concerned with locating aspects of EHMW holistically within core curriculum time/space, rather than as an ‘extra’, add-on for particular children presenting with particular traits / behaviours. In this sense, both secondary participants were focussed on building a rich universal offer within the graduated response system, in a way that was less evident in interviews with primary participants. Secondly and linked to this first point, both Senior Leads had been granted freedom to experiment and trial new, innovative strategies within school, in ways that were again less evident in primary interviews. Both had been able to identify key (teams of) staff in school that they might support and develop to enable new strategies to gain traction and buy-in from across the school community – one example being whole school staff training on having ‘wellbeing conversations’ with students, another being the development of a bespoke pastoral curriculum (where previously this did not exist) across Year 7 to 10.

Melanie, Assistant Headteacher (Teaching & Learning), Secondary:

*“Having all staff trained on a two hour basis, on the first inset day in September, on wellbeing conversations for me was a massive hit because it was convincing the head that two hours on an inset day dedicated to that, was important... I feel like that really pushed the agenda forward with staff... So that was quite a highlight and the staff gave amazing feedback.”*

Point of Impact: Secondary participants felt well equipped to transfer their learning from CPD/networking groups into practice. This was in part enabled by increased capacity within school to support and sustain innovation within core curriculum time/space, as well as supportive leadership.

Harry, Deputy Headteacher (Pastoral), Secondary

*“The new curriculum is one change... we would have audited and tightened up in certain areas, but I don’t think we’d have properly changed our curriculum, and I think that was from our conversations [with the EHMW team]. The CPD training stuff was kind of a bonus to shape the curriculum...”*

#### 4.2.2 Uncertainties around Practice at Primary Level

It is perhaps striking, however, that primary participants did not share this professed ability to transfer learning into practice. Indeed, there was consensus across primary participants that while overall awareness and theoretical understanding of EHMW had increased, practical ways of translating this understanding into concrete action was still lacking overall despite the CPD opportunities provided. This suggests a pivotal future challenge for the EHMW team and perhaps indicative of the potential utility of increasing networking possibilities across school phases (see 4.2) to ‘join up’ activity across primary and secondary, where possible. For some primary schools, these issues of implementation (which appear to constrain any wider impact) are shaped by lack of capacity to be able to engage meaningfully with the range of opportunities on offer.

Patricia, Assistant Head and SENCo, Primary:

*“I think it was the practical element that was kind of missing out of a lot of the courses, and I don’t mean practical as in the course, but actually what do you take back to school that is ..., if you’ve got a child where you’re seeing this, you could try a, b or c. And we’re working with teachers that have got a high workload anyway and busy lives, and actually what we need is like – almost like a bank of things that they can... dip into.”*

Eloise, Headteacher, Primary:

*“There’s quite a lot of training all at once. It was sometimes hard to release the staff to go on absolutely everything, because it just all seemed to be quite clumped together. There’s only so many days they [staff] can be out and if it’s a few days running consecutively at a time, it’s then the impact it has on the children because they’re not there.”*

Natasha, Headteacher, Primary:

*“As a head teacher I seem to get an email nearly every day offering some sort of mental health training and I think for me that was the switch off at that point, because I thought we can’t keep going to these things...particularly like the pastoral team, they would have never been in school... And that again I think’s an issue of too much because to be able to implement something properly, you need time, don’t you?”*

Harry, Deputy Headteacher (Pastoral), Secondary

*“[At secondary, it is] easier to delegate and is less of a time inconvenience for the staff and they can see the impact of it. So it was me being able to deploy my team basically, whereas at primary school you don’t have the luxury because you don’t have the bodies.”*

Melanie, Assistant Headteacher (Teaching & Learning), Secondary:

*“I think one of our frustrations as a secondary is that primary are able to have the capacity to manage those situations because they have more staff and they’ll have a TA in each class and they’re able to have somebody manage and then they come to secondary school very much undiagnosed. And that’s when the problems start, can start.”*

### 4.3 Enabling Confidence through Collaboration

Future Challenge: Primary participants have gained knowledge and understanding but this has not yet informed the implementation of practical changes to provision / activity in all settings due to lack of perceived training and/or capacity issues.

Key Questions to Guide Next Steps:

1. How might CPD support the practical application and effective implementation of new learning in primary schools?
2. How might cross phase support groups / pipelines of activity to support a positive transition into secondary?

Across primary and secondary participants, networking/working groups were found to be crucial spaces in which new knowledge, understanding and awareness might be developed through collaboration and discussion, drawing upon expertise and experiences from the EHMW team, external agencies in Oldham and other practitioners in similar contexts and with similar challenges. These networks have resulted in two potentially significant points of impact. Firstly, this culture of sharing good practice has resulted in increased practitioner confidence, particularly with regard to demystifying the graduated response in terms of clarifying what might be usefully done in school (universal / selected offer), or where a referral (targeted offer) might be necessary. Secondly, the networks themselves have resulted in strong relationships between the team and settings, as well as across settings themselves, which has potentially resulted in a shared sense of community around mental health within the Borough. However, this sense of community did not cut across the primary / secondary phases and this might be a key area of future work for the EHMW team in Oldham.

Point of Impact: Through their facilitation and coordination of working groups and networks, the EHMW team have positively impacted, and indeed increased, practitioner confidence as to how to develop effective practice within their settings WSA. This links not only to increased knowledge and understanding around key issues (See Themes 1), but also a sense of community through collaboration with the team and other practitioners across settings.

Melanie, Assistant Headteacher (Teaching & Learning), Secondary:

*“I went today to the Task and Finish group and I was like, listen can anybody help me, my head has decided that a mental health counsellor is needed in school, we’re looking at how we can sort this post out, what are the options, and everybody there helped me out.”*

James, Headteacher and Strategic Inclusion Lead for MAT, Primary:

*“And I think one of the things which the opportunity has done and the learning festival last year, was actually when the day was around mental health, was actually sharing expertise...”*

*sharing expertise of colleagues around what that looks like... So actually it's around that one community."*

There was an acknowledgement from some primary participants that attendance at many of these working groups, and in particular, the 'Primary Mental Health Good Practice Group', was constrained by being after-school and hence in participants' 'own' time. Some felt that locating such groups within the core school day and providing funds to attend might be a possible way forward – though it would inevitably feed into issues of capacity as outlined in Section 4.2.2. Increasing funds to support the work of Senior Leads more broadly and enable work that is flexible, agile and responsive, is also an identified future challenge.

Future Challenge: Sustaining interest in EHMW in schools and encouraging attendance at networking / working groups, particularly where these eat into participants' afterschool time or are an add on to their core in-school responsibilities.

Key Questions to Guide Next Steps:

1. How might networking/working groups support the practical application of new learning in primary schools be incentivised and scheduled in a way that maximises attendance and engagement?

Natasha, Headteacher, Primary:

*"Funding could be used for would be to release people, you know, to pay for supply so they're not doing it after school...so they're actually doing it in the school day, but schools have got enough money to pay for a supply to cover that person's class when they're doing that sharing of good practice and sharing ideas. I think people would get a lot from that."*

Melanie, Assistant Headteacher (Teaching & Learning), Secondary:

*"I'm very resourceful I use people who are interested [in EHMW] and I have a working group, anyone who's interested and then I use them to help me out. They're not getting paid, they do it, like anything in education, they do it as their own free will. And goodness of their own heart. And I try and, you know, use that to push the agenda forward. But there needs to be a dedicated person...with a dedicated little team ..."*

## Section Five: Summary of Phase 1 and Implications for Phase 2

There is no doubt that the WSA is shaping practitioners' and hence schools' knowledge, awareness and understanding of EHMW broadly. Although there is some evidence of potentially effective implementation within the two secondary schools sampled for this scoping work, the picture is much more mixed at primary level. Where primary schools did mention potentially impactful work and/or interventions, these were not linked into the WSA per se (and in all cases pre-dated the approach). However, much important work has laid strong foundations and there is much that can now be valuably built upon as the approach is further embedded and secured across the Borough:

*“it’s [WSA] just been fantastic from start to finish – well, not to finish because it’s not finished and I suppose that’s the point...”*

Moving forward, effective implementation at primary level is a key area of focus. If implementation is indeed crucial, as broader research suggests, then ensuring that primary settings have the confidence and capacity to transfer knowledge into practice is a key future challenge. Developing robust systems to capture and track impact across all settings and phases is also a key concern. While there was some evidence of potentially effective implementation within the two secondary settings sampled, tracking systems were not yet mature enough to know what impact this was having on young people’s outcomes. Better understanding impact will be a key focus within Phase 2 of this evaluation, where we will continue to explore issues of effective implementation and impact, and the intersection of these notions, using the eight principles outlined in the WSA. In developing rich case school case studies, we will accord a particular focus to monitoring and tracking in relation to young people’s (i) attainment and progress, (ii) behaviour and attendance, and (iii) emotional health and mental well-being holistically. This rich qualitative school-level data will be triangulated with broader Borough level data in ways that aim to develop a complex picture of holistic outcomes at the macro level (within a self-improving system).

## Section Six: References

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