

SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING SERVICE FULFILLS VITAL NEED

FUNDED BY: The Place 2 Place project was funded by Greets Green Partnership for three years, from March 2006 to March 2009. It was delivered by Murray Hall Community Trust, a registered charity and voluntary sector organisation set up to serve the social, health and welfare interests of people across Sandwell.

PROJECT BACKGROUND: The Place 2 Place project was initially set up to support approximately 150 Greets Green pupils each year, aged 10 to 12 years, who were going through the transition period from primary to secondary school, during the summer term of Year 6 and the autumn/winter term of Year 7.



George Salter Collegiate Academy.

It was centred on the five primary schools in the Greets Green area – Ryders Green, Newtown, Lyng, Lodge and Guns Village – plus George Salter Collegiate Academy.

The aim was to help Greets Green pupils move from primary to secondary school by raising their confidence and communication skills. Classroom-based workshops and community-based summer holiday activities based on creative arts were planned to help children adjust to their new school as easily as possible.

Place 2 Place also helped young people and their families to address any difficulties faced as a result of the transition, including social, behavioural and mental health problems, in an attempt to avoid these escalating at a later stage.

Working with the schools' pastoral care service, the project provided support for parents and families under stress, through advice sessions and individual, group and family therapy and counselling.

This supplemented the existing borough-wide Head 2 Head Counselling and Therapy Service already based at Murray Hall, which is aimed at children and young people aged from five to 18.

The project aimed to promote partnership working between schools and between parents and schools to improve the effectiveness of support for young people and families.

PROJECT IN PRACTICE: Place 2 Place fun week-long summer schemes were organised at George Salter Collegiate Academy where pupils from the different primary schools in Greets Green could meet others who'd be starting with them at secondary school. This meant that new friendships could begin before the first day at their new school.

Pupils were also able to familiarise themselves with George Salter so that turning up at the start of the new term would not be so daunting.

During the summer schemes, two sessional counsellors were on hand at any time if any of the youngsters wanted to talk to them. They were also involved in wrap-around activities half an hour before the scheme started and during an hour at lunchtime, providing art therapy-type activities, and half an hour afterwards.

At the 2008 summer scheme, a total of 50 children accessed the counsellors during the week and a number of them have gone on to be seen by the in-school counsellor in Year 7.



However, the first independent, external evaluation of the project in 2007 found that its initial aims were wide-ranging, over-ambitious and difficult to measure. A second evaluation in 2008 again concluded that it was difficult to measure success against the original project aims.

Yet it was also noted that, over the time of the project, there had been a significant increase in the demand for counselling sessions at George Salter Collegiate Academy. This had led to an individual Head 2 Head counsellor being based at the school for two days a week and developing a school-based counselling service.

It was recognised that although it isn't really transition that's the issue for most young people, it's a very vulnerable time for them and it can bring to the surface a lot of other issues.

The original focus of the Place 2 Place project was, therefore, shifted to concentrate on the counselling aspect.

THE COUNSELLOR: Forty-nine young people, including 37 boys and 12 girls, have been seen by in-school counsellor and former teacher, Geoff Cox in a two-year period since March 2007.

The students range in age from 11 to 15 years old, with an even spread across the year groups.

Students are invited to an assessment appointment with Geoff, after which they can take part in a flexible number of follow-up sessions, each lasting up to an hour.

Any students who would prefer to see a female counsellor are referred appropriately through Head 2 Head.



School-based counsellor, Geoff Cox.

Geoff says: "I've always been interested in the idea of a school-based counsellor and I clearly saw the need for it as a teacher. However, I recognised then and I'm a firm believer now, that you can't have a dual role and be a teacher/counsellor.

"I believe that using an outside counsellor within the school is the way forward and I think every school should have one.





Local primary school children.

“I’m full of admiration for the response I’ve had from the young people I’ve met. I feel I’ve genuinely been able to establish a relationship with them, which is the most important aspect of the process.”

“I always begin by asking them whether they want to be there and I have only ever had one young person who struggled with that question and who did, in fact, choose to leave.

“The relationship I can have with the young people is very different to the ones they have within the school. I can think of one young man who didn’t have a good relationship with any adult in his life, but I felt I struck up a very positive relationship with him and I know from feedback that his behaviour within school has changed.”

Young people are generally referred to Geoff for counselling by George Salter’s Pastoral Managers.

Although the young people are usually referred as a result of behavioural issues in school, the reasons for those problems can be wide-ranging and are often rooted at home.

Geoff explains: “The symptoms are school-based and are centred around their attitude in school, but the underlying issues often involve a disruptive home-life, relationships with parents, if they exist, and the environment at home.

“Although there won’t always be an immediate response as a result of the work I do with young people, I like to think I’ve been able to have an impact on the lives of the young people I’ve met.”

THE SCHOOL: Rachel Cooper is Assistant Principal for Inclusion at George Salter Collegiate Academy. She says: “The counselling service is based in the school’s Centre of Inclusion and, in terms of student response and parent response, everyone has been really pleased with it.



“From a staff point of view, we’ve found it invaluable to have somewhere to refer young people who need additional support and who need to talk to someone confidentially who’s outside the remit of the school.

“As teachers, we might say you can tell us anything, but we’ll still come with the hat that says discipline.”

Rachel says the school-based counsellor has been accessed by students from all year groups, including those who have recently made the transition from primary school, for a variety of different reasons.

She adds: “Because of the baggage a lot of our young people come to school with, they need someone to talk to about it, someone to off-load to. The school-based counsellor has very effectively fulfilled that role.”

THE YOUNG PERSON: J is thirteen. He lives with a foster mother who also has her 21 year old son living with her.



Pupils at Lodge Primary School.



J doesn't remember his mother and he sees his father, who lives in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, infrequently.

J's behaviour has been problematical both at school, where he's been disruptive with outbursts of anger, and at home where he's been aggressive towards his foster mother. As a consequence, he's been diagnosed as having ADHD for which he's been prescribed Ritalin.

J's relationship with his foster mother has been very difficult, partially due to him considering that she's looking after him 'just for the money'.

He appears to be frequently let down by his father who doesn't always fulfil his promises to visit. His father has also promised to buy him a new phone, so he can contact him, but this has yet to materialise.

Although he did have contact with a Teaching Assistant, J lacked a meaningful relationship with any adult.

Counsellor, Geoff Cox, attempted to address that issue and gradually, with the use of art materials, chats and discussions, developed a relationship which they both valued.

"J's aggression got better and he attended sessions promptly and would always enter with a broad smile on his face," explains Geoff.

"In the sessions he made a birthday card for his father, another card for his foster mother and one for the taxi driver who brought him to school. He appeared to be appreciating that although relationships may not be perfect, they may be valuable, enjoyable and worthwhile.

"It was important for J not to become dependent upon me. We planned the last session to end at a break in the school term with the knowledge that, if J felt it necessary, a new course of sessions could be arranged."

PROJECT IN ACTION: Laura Nott, author of an analysis of the Place 2 Place school-based counselling service commissioned by Murray Hall Community Trust, has nothing but praise for way the service has worked in practice.

She says: "The feedback from George Salter Collegiate Academy has been very positive.

"From the school's point of view, it's very helpful for the staff to have someone to whom they can refer issues that are concerning them in the classroom.





Pupils at Guns Village Primary School.

“From the young people’s point of view, they’re able to access counselling support on a confidential basis and, if they’re aged over 13, it’s not necessary to obtain parental consent.

“There can be instances where there are problems at home and a parent may refer the child for counselling, but the commitment from the family isn’t there and they won’t actually see it through.

“With a school-based counsellor service, if a young person wants to talk to someone, it’s so easy for them to access.”

Other ways of enabling pupils to refer themselves to the counsellor are currently being looked at, such as having a mailbox for the counsellor within the school.

Laura says that counselling services typically have a low-take up within black and minority ethnic communities.

“It’s often not a case of the young people not wanting those services but of a cultural stigma associated with accessing mental health services. With a school-based counselling service, the young people can make that decision for themselves.”



FACT FILE

- 49 young people have accessed the school-based counselling service at George Salter Collegiate Academy since March 2007.
- Of these, 37 were boys and 12 were girls.
- The students ranged in age from 11 to 15.
- Students had between one and 13 sessions with the counsellor, each lasting up to an hour long.
- Issues raised by the young people include bereavement, fear, guilt, self-esteem, child/parent relationship and attachment issues.

For more information about the Place 2 Place project, contact Sally Sandel, Health Theme Leader at Greets Green Partnership on 0121 612 1957.

Greets Green Partnership was awarded £56 million in 2000 to deliver a 10 year regeneration programme under the Government's New Deal for Communities (NDC) initiative. It has funded over 340 projects throughout the area, covering community services, crime & community safety, health, housing & urban form and jobs & skills. The Partnership area, which is adjacent to West Bromwich Town Centre, is home to just over 12,400 residents living in 4,900 households.

For permission to publish this case study and to request photographs, please call Brian McKinstrie, Greets Green Partnership's Communications & PR Manager on freephone 0800 953 0215 or email brian_mckinstrie@sandwell.gov.uk

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