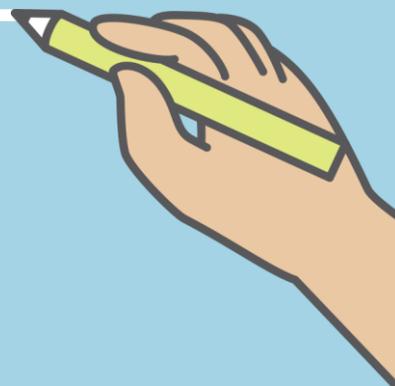


# GREATER MANCHESTER MENTALLY HEALTHY COLLEGES

School to college transition

---

WIGAN AND LEIGH COLLEGE  
SEPTEMBER 2020



Wigan and Leigh College is a large general further education college with three main centres in Wigan and two in Leigh. The borough of Wigan and Leigh has a population of 322,000. A higher proportion of the population in the borough is employed in manufacturing compared to the wider North West region and the rest of the country.

Unemployment in the borough is lower than in the rest of the region and the country. A large proportion of the population are outside the labour market due to long-term sickness.

The population in Wigan and Leigh has a lower proportion of people with qualifications at level four and above, and a higher proportion with low qualifications, than other boroughs in the region and the rest of the country.

## School to college transition

This is part of the Greater Manchester Mentally Healthy Schools and Colleges programme. Due to the concentration of student numbers in a relatively small number of education settings and the short timeframes involved we recognised that a more bespoke approach to further Education colleges would be needed.

The aim of this project was to:

- Develop the capacity of further education and sixth form colleges in Greater Manchester to collaborate in support of the mental health and wellbeing of their staff and students
- Identify good practice that can be shared across the system.

There are 21 colleges in Greater Manchester (9 general further education colleges and 12 sixth form Colleges) and approximately 90% of 16 to 18yr olds in Greater Manchester are in colleges. During an academic year approximately 51,000 out of 56,000 16-18-year olds will study at these further education and sixth-form colleges.

The Association of Colleges (North) was awarded funding for 12 months in March 2019 to deliver a project to raise awareness and support development of the mental health agenda within individual colleges. Two main providers are supporting the project, Charlie Waller Memorial Trust and British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapists.

Our aim was to facilitate the creation of a safe space for employers and assessors who have subject specialisms and had identified a need to develop skills and the confidence to support students presenting with poor mental health. We wanted to provide a space to allow them to discuss concerns and ask questions of experienced professionals to enable them to fully support the students/employees in their care.

## Our students

Our student cohort consisted of apprentices from a range of disciplines from Catering, Engineering, Construction, the Hair and Beauty sector and professional and Management Studies. Some apprentices attend college one day per week and others are purely work based with no college attendance. For the purposes of this project we only included 16 to 18-year-old apprentices.

Apprentices who attend college have access to the same extensive wellbeing support as full time learners, i.e. access to the Wellbeing Team, the College Counsellor and the College Chaplain.



## Our challenges

- Find ways to ensure that those apprentices who don't attend college have the same access to this support.
- Examine, and sometimes alter, the culture inherent in some of the teams and industries who worked directly with these young people in the workplace.
- Develop the confidence of assessors and employers to empower and equip them with up to date information about the support available to young people who present with poor mental health.

## What we did

- We completed a training needs analysis with employers and assessors. This allowed us to identify gaps in knowledge.
- We held focus groups with apprentices. Several apprentices explained their reluctance to disclose poor mental health to their employers in case their need for support was interpreted as weakness or unreliability. The training needs analysis with employers did not substantiate this fear but did confirm a lack of knowledge of support available, acceptable language to use when attempting to support young people, and often the fear of making things worse through not being professionally trained to deal with such issues.

## What we offered

- Visits to employers from the College support teams and assessors to support students and incorporate employers into the discussions.
- Scheduled training updates around mental health for assessors in team meetings, incorporating role play.
- Human Libraries were developed and made available on topics such as mental health, LGBTQ+, BAME, faith and identity.
- Leaflets and booklets developed for assessors to give out on site to employers and apprentices. These included signposting to useful contacts, information on spotting the signs etc.
- Employers and assessors reported they particularly liked the booklets and fact sheets giving up-to-date and local contacts for support, plus helpful tips for managing wellbeing.
- A conference and marketplace event allowed assessors and employers to speak to professionals working in this field. The timing of this was crucial with twilight sessions proving necessary to accommodate employers.
- We held weekly drop-in sessions and scheduled guest speaker events. These were publicised in the booklets to allow students to plan ahead.

- iPads, pre-loaded with wellbeing apps were made available for use onsite and these could also be booked out by assessors and apprentices.

## What we found

The impact of the project was assessed via feedback from employers, apprentices and assessors:

- After the training assessors reported increased confidence and told us that, where necessary, they've adapted their language and style of communication to be more responsive to the needs of the young people in their cohort.
- Employers and assessors told us that they value and regularly use the resources provided by the college in preparation for, and during, supportive meetings with their apprentices. They were also more confident that they had the correct information so felt more able to pre-empt a conversation or discussion with their apprentices.
- The safeguarding and wellbeing team have witnessed an increase in contact from employers, assessors and apprentices (including parents of apprentices) requesting advice and support. This increase in communication has contributed to an improvement in retention and outcomes for the apprentices and the apprenticeship team.
- Improved communication between college teams and stakeholders has led to a narrowing of the gap between the support available to apprentices and full-time learners at the college.

## Next steps

We intend to build on the success of the project and increase our work with employers. This was the most challenging aspect logistically and we're researching ways we can develop this. It's likely that one way will be incorporating an increase in remote interaction. The resources are continually being updated as demand for these remains high.



## Case study 1

Apprentice A was starting to show signs of a lack of enthusiasm towards her qualification and work that had always been on time and of an excellent standard was now late if completed at all and of poor quality. As a result of gentle questioning, she went on to tell her assessor about her parents deciding to separate and how she felt responsible for her brother, but also about the effects to her mental health that her secure family home had now become a place of arguments, separation arrangements and a diary system of who would have her brother when. It was taking its toll on her and her constant desire to hide her feelings and smile to the world, her colleagues and employer meant that her work was suffering in all areas.



*I didn't even realise my work had changed so much I just couldn't be bothered there was so much going on and I didn't know what to do. My mum leaving us and my dad focusing on my brother made me just feel invisible and even if I was feeling upset or alone or anxious nobody cared enough to notice. I felt embarrassed at first talking to my tutor at 18 and crying like a baby but the help that followed made me so glad I had. I finished my apprenticeship got a full-time job and a pay rise and speak to a think positive counsellor each month. I think if my tutor hadn't put the branch out to me I possibly would have lost my job and gone deeper into depression" Learner*

A asked her assessor to speak with her employer and the assessor gave the employer information regarding support available and how best to support A.



*As tutors we develop rapport with our apprentices at every visit, and in between are available for them to speak to and of course check that they are safe and well. The training encouraged us to look deeper and not to just ask the standard questions but to spot warning signs for complex mental health issues. Because the training had taught us about common mental health conditions I was able to spot the signs of depression and anxiety from the changes in the learners behaviour and personal appearance. Assessor*

A later joined the discussion. The employer made it clear to A that she would be supported with time off for doctor's appointments and reduced workload during this stressful time. They also made it clear that there were people within the company and college that A could speak to if she needed to talk to an impartial individual and explained the resources available.



*I was glad that A felt she could speak to us and since getting the help and support she needed has gone from strength to strength in the company and had an exciting future ahead. The college were invaluable in their advice and support on an issue that has had for so long a stigma surrounding it and as a company we have put many new policies in place to ensure our team have the support they need. Employer*

## Case study 2

Learner B is a 16-year-old apprentice from a difficult background. She was taken into care in her early teens before transitioning to live with grandparents. This impacted on her attendance at high school and ability to achieve. The learner built up a relationship with a local pre-school through a work placement and was offered an apprenticeship.

She struggled with the demands of a professional role and suffered a set-back in her personal life by her niece being taken into care. This brought up past trauma and resulted in anxiety and depression which impacted her ability to focus, achieve and develop within her working role and study.

Due to the training her assessor had received on supporting learners with mental health she was able to help B identify apps to download on her phone eg the student health app and the stress and anxiety companion which has breathing exercises, relaxing music and games to help calm and change negative thoughts. We worked on these breathing and calming techniques before every workplace session to help her focus and be in the right frame of mind to focus on the topic.

Her assessor worked with the employer to develop a support plan. This included:

- B having a contact person with whom she could discuss how she was feeling in a confidential manner
- A weekly welfare check-in
- A safe space to work on her qualification at work as it was identified that home was not a good environment for this.



*I feel supported and not alone, I know I can talk to someone at work if I am struggling and the team at college are there if I need them. Learner*

Her manager also incorporated the calming techniques as a team exercise before the start of the day as a benefit for all staff. B was reminded of the support teams and resources available through college.



*Including the breathing exercise every morning helps staff to take a few minutes before a busy day to relax, prepare for the day and feel calm and focused. Employer*

# GET IN TOUCH

[gmhscp.gmmhprogramme@nhs.net](mailto:gmhscp.gmmhprogramme@nhs.net)

0161 625 7463

<https://hub.gmhsc.org.uk/mental-health>

 @GM\_HSC

 @GMHSCPartnership

 @GMHSCPartnership