



## Assessor's Evaluation for the IQM Flagship Project



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

**Head/Principal** Ms Donna Walker

**IQM Lead** Ms Donna Walker

**Date of Review** 16<sup>th</sup> December 2025

**Assessor** Ms Emily Greenhalgh-Stone

### **IQM Cluster Programme**

Cluster Group Tyne and Wear

Ambassador Ms Annette Sowden

Next Meeting 26<sup>th</sup> March 2026

### **Cluster Attendance**

<b>Term</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Attendance</b>
<b>Summer 2024</b>	24 <sup>th</sup> June 2024	Yes
<b>Autumn 2024</b>	16 <sup>th</sup> September 2024	No
<b>Spring 2025</b>	20 <sup>th</sup> March 2025	Yes
<b>Summer 2025</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> July 2025	Yes
<b>Autumn 2025</b>	18 <sup>th</sup> September 2025	Yes

### **The Impact of the Cluster Group**

Attendance at the cluster meetings is a prerequisite to maintaining Flagship status. The Link School have attended all cluster meetings in the last academic year. The school have an ongoing commitment to sustaining the IQM ethos through collaborative activities and cluster group meetings, recently speaking at the Inclusion conference in Summer 2025.

The IQM Lead, who is also the Headteacher, frequently supports other schools to become IQM schools or centres of excellence and provides ongoing provision to other schools in relation to improving their practice regarding inclusion and SEND.



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### **Evidence:**

- IQM Documentation
- School website
- Ofsted Reports and accompanying GIAS document

### **Additional Activities:**

- Tour of both school sites with the Assistant Head Teacher with responsibility for SEN and the Heads of School
- Lesson observation visits to classrooms across the school in all key stages on both sites
- Student voice with Key Stage 2 learners

### **Discussions held with:**

- Headteacher and IQM Lead
- Heads of School
- Mindfulness practitioner
- SEND staff including the SENCo and Assistant Headteacher
- Professor at Sunderland University re: Projects and collaborative working
- HLTAs in charge of interventions
- Students, throughout the day
- The Lead for Art
- Key Stage 1 Lead



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### Evaluation of Annual Progress towards the Flagship Project

#### The 'True Self' Project:

The 'True Self' Project is now embedded wholeheartedly across the school, with highly trained staff working closely with the Local Authority to positively impact on improving the life chances for students who have faced significant challenges in their early lives. The school's Mindfulness Practitioner has been systematic in 'rolling out' the training to six other schools across Sunderland, enabling more young people to have access to specially trained adults who can offer aid to students, helping them to regulate and self-reflect. Students spoke openly and at length stating: 'Coming here has reduced my anxiety – I know how it feels in my body now.' The recognition from students of their own needs, and what they can do to regulate themselves, is becoming increasingly embedded as time goes on.

Student timetables are carefully constructed to build in regulation time for students who enter school not ready to learn, with 1:1 sessions generally undertaken during the morning, and group sessions on an afternoon. There is an element of reactive practice to this work, which is necessary in the setting to ensure all students are able to access this highly skilled intervention. Behaviour data is collated over time, with the Mindfulness Practitioner scrutinising the previous day's behaviour incidents then working with the child to scaffold an approach of reflection and transformative change.

Adults who take part in this much-needed training speak of their own learning journeys, not just in improving their practice professionally, but of the personal impact the training has had on their lives and the importance of the work they do with young people. An ongoing termly network meeting for True Self leaders will guide continued professional development and ensure an oversight of the project, which is continuing to grow in implementation and impact.

#### The 'Pull up a Chair' Project:

The 'Pull up a Chair' project, in collaboration and co-production with The University of Sunderland's research department, is continuing with gusto. Project 2999 was extended to Project 4191 and will continue to Project 5038 in the near future. Sadly, the project title numbers correspond directly to the number of children and young people who are suspended and permanently excluded across schools in the United Kingdom per day. Local filmmakers and artists joined the call to action and promoted the untold stories of children and their families using a visual approach. These alarming statistics have been turned into hope; giving parents and their children a voice, and a safe space in which they feel heard. In conjunction with the National Institute for Research, a woven blanket, symbolic of the threads that tie previously unheard voices together, has toured the country, raising awareness of children who have been excluded from their school settings, and the struggles their parents have faced in adversity. The project led to a presentation at government commissioning level; students and parents joined staff from the school to travel to London, strengthening trusting relationships between Senior Leaders, carers, and young people.



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### **The 'Breathing Space' Project:**

The 'Breathing Space' Project, previously funded externally by grants, has been instrumental in creating impactful change for children, young people, and their families. Working closely with the Mindfulness Practitioner to develop a bespoke and therapeutic offer that touches on the interests of every child, it is obvious that students love to take part in this nurturing part of the extended school day. The school recognises the positive influence short breaks and familial support have on improved outcomes for their students and parents alike. Opportunities such as the Healthy Parent Carer programme wholeheartedly contributes to wellbeing within the home, providing time for self-reflection, increasing resilience, and strengthening relationships.

Students partake in a variety of activities led by staff who work with them during the school day; the familiarity is key to the approach the school uses, to allow children to experience and maintain a healthy and safe life. Visits include (but are not limited to) walking expeditions, forest schools, farm animal care, gardening, and sports-related activities. A healthy meal, before travelling home to parents, is provided for all who take part. Importantly, 'Breathing Space' has allowed children to access required mental health support by trained staff, make new friends and travel to places that would be impossible without the project continuing. Staff speak of the significant impact the extended project has had on students, and both children and adults spoke of the pride in winning a Young Achievers Award, with the prestigious event recently held in the County Hall.

The Headteacher's relentless determination in careful budgeting to allow the project to continue, despite a question over funding continuation, shows the school's restless energy to providing opportunities for all at the forefront of their practice. They know that, without 'Breathing Space' children and young people will be systemically setback, disadvantaged and not have equitable opportunities as students in a mainstream setting would have. The Leadership team aim to secure funding to continue and sustain family engagement in this project during and after school, including during holiday periods.

### **Development of Link School Interventions**

The Link School are determined in their continuous improvement and are confident in the approach they use to supporting the most vulnerable children and young people in society. During the last two academic years, interventions have been tailored further, ensuring that all students make both academic and social progress throughout their time in the school, and beyond. Most students who attend the school have recognised social, emotional and mental health needs, yet the school staff team do not 'rest on their laurels' when it comes to early intervention, providing ongoing support and guidance that follows students as they return to their host educational setting.

The Assistant Headteacher, leading on the provision of special educational needs across the school, has, in collaboration with his staff team, developed an interventions tracker that directly links to costed provision mapping, identifying needs and outcomes for all students who require further support. Using the data to assess student's profiles on entry, the staff team develop targeted intervention, beginning to narrow the gaps between young people and their peers in mainstream settings. The interventions team



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are vivacious, forward-thinking, and tenacious in providing the very best on offer for all students. A member of support staff shared; 'When I go home at the end of the day, I know I've made a difference.' This intuitive approach, scaffolded by reliable data and teacher assessment, mean that all children feel that they belong, matter, and are included in the school individually and collectively.



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### Agreed Actions for the Next Steps in the Flagship Project

- The tracker created by the Assistant Headteacher is continually being developed and is already making positive strides in the targeting of specific interventions on a plan, do, review and action cycle. This process enables leaders to have a 'whole school overview' in the important work teachers and support staff are completing with young people that informs the costed provision map, alongside tracking impact and outcomes. The key features this year will be to continue to develop and embed the programme of interventions tracker across both sites, and all key phases to demonstrate relational and academic progress for students therefore, evidencing a clear pathway of support in relation to social, emotional, and mental health needs. The data produced by the tracker will inform teacher planning, leader strategy in terms of staffing, and prepare the school for the new Education Inspection Framework and subsequent inspection process.
- The Headteacher has plans to organise and co-produce a conference of inclusion, supported by the Local Authority and the SHINE project. The day will be led by students, parents and carers utilising a collaborative model, showcasing the tireless yet optimistic work around the 'True Self' programme, where their voice and their agenda will be the driving force of the day. The conference will be attended by colleagues from other schools both across the region and nationally, giving voice to children who have been permanently excluded from mainstream settings. This important work, closely supported by the University of Sunderland education research team, will celebrate, highlight and validate the ongoing commitment the school has to ensuring all vulnerable families are heard, giving them a sense of hope and community before, during and after their experiences of permanent exclusion.
- The school will work closely with the University of Sunderland and the National Institute of Health Research to co-produce a bid award, enabling the school to take part in a controlled trial relating to key health indicating factors resulting in student exclusions, namely substance misuse and vaping. Utilising Governor and Researcher support, the school have been approached to take part in a long-term research-based project focused on the ongoing issues of substance/drug misuse and vaping related to young people being permanently excluded and/or suspended. The ongoing relationship between governors, the University of Sunderland, and school leaders who know their community well, will ensure positive outcomes in relation to health and will reduce exclusion data across the whole of the Local Authority.



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### Overview

The moment students enter the Link School, they belong, are heard, and matter. Staff are tireless in their energy and approach to providing a safe space for all and are committed to the important work they do on a daily basis. The school's REACH values are intricately woven through all they do. At the heart of the school is deep and effective connection to their students, staff, and stakeholders. Leaders ensure that student information is safely shared between all staff who encounter children, who therefore can make an impact on each child, individually. This was evidenced when the reception team warmly and enthusiastically greeted a child and their parent on entry into the building during morning registration. This approach is aided by open, transparent communication between all who are involved in the school, and led by the energetic and restless Headteacher, supported by an enthusiastic and experienced leadership team, who all bring their own diligence, personality and focus to the staff team.

The school has a varied 'Cultural Calendar' which is closely linked to a clear and functional personal, social, health education curriculum and supports the development of the self, alongside raising awareness of key themes such as British Values, mental health needs (such as suicide prevention), different world religions and spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects of the diverse society in which young people reside. Students take part in the opportunities this offers across the whole school, and gain life-changing experiences as a result of a scaffolded and carefully crafted, bespoke curriculum.

In the lower key stages, the roll out of the 'One Goal' scheme has developed student Mental Health Champions, who are becoming increasingly aware of their own self-regulation strategies required to help them stay safe, and that of others, who they are tolerant and supportive of in times of crisis. Students work together to develop corridor workstations specifically focused on regulation activities and improving wellbeing. Students have many opportunities to see the local area and partake in activities they would not have access to outside of school. Key stage one, on a trip to Durham city centre during the day of the IQM assessment, spoke of the 'huge bridges with trains,' were overwhelmed with 'the castles and the towers' (Durham Cathedral's turrets) and their time at the pantomime in the city theatre. Children are taught explicitly to see the wonder, experience awe, and spiritual connection to the world, and to those around them. In key stage one, staff are aware that students require a 'slower, softer start' to the day, and have planned carefully the logistics this involves so that sensory seeking behaviours are reduced and young children can begin to regulate safely.

When decision making is required, staff ensure that the child's voice is a fundamental aspect of the process, being paramount and central to the desired outcome. This is evident across the whole school and all key stages, and especially prevalent when coupled with the high expectations the Head of the KS4 school articulates as older students move into next steps. The excellent (and reducing) NEET figures are again testament to the strategic work undertaken in key stage four, where all students have an academically strong, bespoke offer, relevant to their needs, which is delivered by teachers who genuinely love what they do, and are united in what they set out to achieve. Mutual and respectful relationships are modelled by staff, allowing students to gain first-hand experience of integrity and positivity in the workplace. One member of staff said, 'staff don't ever need to be directed. They just know what to do, and they just



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do it.' Staff feel overwhelmingly valued at the Link School, sharing 'the Headteacher gave me autonomy to be who I am' and 'I feel respected, valued and grateful to be here.' A number of staff spoke of a continuous 'open door policy' where, in actuality, the door is never shut. Staff have access to Senior Leaders, and the visibility in said leadership means that all staff have a voice, and their voice is included in key aspects of decision making at all levels.

The mindfulness offers in key stages one, two and three, is exemplary. This is a school that 'thinks outside the box' and takes calculated risks so that all children and young people can taste success, in many different formats. Students were observed happily comfortable in each other's company, taking on leadership roles within the wellbeing space, meditating to music, and enjoying a sound bath activity. The Mindfulness Practitioner is trained and accredited in breathwork, counselling and talking therapies, is a Reiki Master and uses crystals to support students in healing, grieving, and sharing their thoughts and anxieties. The powerful energy she possesses is inextricably linked to improved outcomes, is carefully monitored and strategically targeted across the school using the behaviour logs and data made available to her and the team.

This, coupled with an outstanding art therapeutic offer and an accredited course to GCSE level, alongside utilising the drawing and talking programme, ensures that anything is open to being shared and considered to enable all to be part of their own, and each other's, successes.

The school 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: Ms Emily Greenhalgh-Stone**

**Findings confirmed by Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd:**

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**Joe McCann MBA NPQH**  
**Director of Inclusion Quality Mark (UK) Ltd**