

Case Study: Birmingham Social and Emotional Mental Health Pathfinder

A systems-change approach to supporting social and emotional mental health in Birmingham schools

Sarah B Davies, with insights from Rob McCabe, Senior Social Worker and founder/strategic lead for the SEMH Pathfinder

Supported by Lankelly Chase, the Birmingham SEMH Pathfinder is a multi-agency, collaborative approach to working with children and families with multiple complex needs.

Background

Birmingham is the largest Local Authority in Europe. Some areas of Birmingham are among the most deprived in England and there are more children experiencing poverty than anywhere else in the country.¹

Research conducted in 2012 and 2014 by Senior Social Worker Rob McCabe identified that many young people in Birmingham were being expelled from schools and placed in special education for Social and Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs, without a real understanding of the reasons behind their poor behaviour. In some cases, these young people were found to be experiencing trauma and mental health problems, rather than special educational needs.² There was a growing recognition that this may arise from poverty, violence, addiction or unstable family situations, experienced whilst at home or in care.³

This research highlighted that the current system may only exacerbate disadvantages.⁴ Analysis showed that there were a number of systemic concerns:⁵

- lack of understanding of multiple and complex needs (and trauma)
- lack of meaningful engagement with families
- services working in isolation and fragmenting young people's needs
- time-limited support from services did not match the need

¹ Eric Pickles' [ministerial statement on the independent review of Birmingham City Council](#).

² 'Re-thinking family interventions from an ACE perspective' by Clare Wightman and Rob McCabe, in Addressing Adversity, Youth Minds, 2018 (p.336-343)

³ <https://lankellychase.org.uk/project-summary/birmingham/>

⁴ <https://lankellychase.org.uk/project-summary/birmingham/>

⁵ 'Re-thinking family interventions from an ACE perspective' by Clare Wightman and Rob McCabe, in Addressing Adversity, Youth Minds, 2018 (p.338-339)

Timeline of development

In his own words, Rob McCabe reveals the process behind, and evolution of, the SEMH Pathfinder.

DISCOVERING THE CHALLENGE

Pre-2010 *"I noticed I was returning to the same schools in some of the most deprived areas. In one SEMH special school in particular, there were lots of young people going into the Criminal Justice System. The school had a mix of 'high tariff' serious offenders as well as children with ADHD. I wanted to explore what resources were at the school's disposal to support these children and their families but found that the school was lacking in additional resources, in an educational system where resources are put into attendance and attainment. This piqued my interest. I approached the Local Authority to see if there were any additional resources but found little available."*

ANALYSING LOCAL INFORMATION

2010-2011 *"I conducted a research audit of data, cross-checking the number of children in this particular school against the Criminal Justice System records. I found that 45% of the school population were known by the Criminal Justice System for committing serious offences. This meant that the remaining 55% were susceptible to criminality. I was also able to put a unit cost as per the National Audit Office for justice costs. This was a game changer for me."*

MAKING THE CASE

2012 *"The report was released to the Director of Children's Services at the Local Authority. There was recognition for the work and the levels of risk and concerns raised, but little action was taken straight away. The recommendations were to review the whole system and the way these young people and their families are supported. What we're describing as special educational needs is actually a lot to do with institutional disadvantage and deprivation. We are labelling students with ADHD but a lot will have post-traumatic stress disorder and very quickly get these SEN labels."*

"In 2013 I went back to the school and asked the headteacher if I could be based at the school and build a multi-agency panel to lever in support. I spent years knocking on doors and asking people, please put some resource into this!"

REINFORCING THE CASE

2014 *"A lot of strategic conversations were happening in the Local Authority but the recommendations were not being acted upon. I wrote a second report based on the same school, this time looking at Social Services records, and found that 91% were known by Social Services: Most were known from birth, and their families were also known. I was looking for any significant life events, which I was calling Exceptional Complex Needs, now better known as Adverse Childhood Experiences, and found these children were experiencing a lot of trauma, challenges and deprivation in their home and life events. Parents will tell you 'I've had 15 different social workers and I've had to tell this story so many times, but I've had no additional help, I've just had scrutiny or judgement. The service is not designed to help us'."*

"The report contained new recommendations based on a common-sense, humanistic approach: it is the classroom assistant who really supports these young people and develops good relationships with them. Why don't you release these school-based workers for one day per week, to work with the kids on a one-to one approach but more importantly to work with the families. There is a huge difference between a social worker knocking on the door and saying 'we've got a concern about your child and we might remove your child into care', and a classroom assistant knocking on the door to say 'we are part of your school and we've come to learn more about your child and what we can do better in school, to understand how things are at home.'"

"I asked the school: if they could release their assistants I would work with the school to support them with a multi-agency team for their families' specialist needs. The relationship wasn't there, the trust wasn't there. So it was about building that up."

GAINING TRACTION

2015 *"I went to 6 schools with the idea. The headteachers agreed and I built the multi-agency team. I contacted Lankelly Chase as I wanted to push the model and recommendations."*

BIRMINGHAM SEMH PATHFINDER IS ESTABLISHED

2016 *"The 'SEMh Pathfinder' officially began. We began by training the assistants from 6 special schools."*

2017 An additional 6 mainstream schools joined the initiative

2018 4 more schools join the initiative. *"We now have a strategic board with the Chief Executive of Birmingham's Children Trust, senior police officers and senior education officers. It is now becoming a bigger systems-change piece."*

About the Birmingham SEMh Pathfinder

Three key values shape the SEMh Pathfinder to create a model of 'relational support'⁶ which underpins the programme, building strong and trusting relationships with families:

- Shared authority: a new approach that moves away from the traditional client-agency imbalance of power, and instead recognises the value of co-production, the expertise of lived experiences and the importance of a non-judgmental approach, built upon a relational model of working. Encouraging parents and young people to create formal structures that can shape practices and policies.
- Nurture: working with compassion, empathy and positive regard.
- Commitment to social justice: elegantly challenging systems that disadvantage families

A core team of multi-agency professionals works with young people and their families, identified by the schools. The team facilitates a greater understanding of the adverse experiences and the wider circumstances of each family. This informs personalised support structures to enable families to use their strengths to overcome challenges affecting their lives.⁷

"One of the features of our work is we never close a case. We work with those families for years and years. We have an ongoing relationship with them. Some families we can work really intensively with, but once their initial needs are met, we keep the community going. We have a parental engagement project and training to bring forward a Parents Manifesto and we keep a connection with the community. What we've seen is they've wanted to work with other families and share their experiences. We are reimagining a new children's service model"

⁶ <http://www.lumenchristi.org.uk/Birmingham-SEMh-Pathfinder/>

⁷ ['Re-thinking family interventions from an ACE perspective'](#) by Clare Wightman and Rob McCabe, (p.340)

Who is involved?

By 2018 there were 16 'Pathfinder schools' in Birmingham: SEMH schools and mainstream schools. They are each supported by a core team including 8 full-time workers and a multi-agency team comprising:⁸

- Pathfinder Family Support Workers in each school
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) 2x Mental Health Youth Workers
- Senior Practitioner from Aquarius substance misuse agency
- Special School Nurses
- Domestic violence and abuse specialist from Birmingham and Solihull's Women's Aid
- DWP Employment Advisers
- 16+ Co-ordinator
- 16+ Sova Mentor
- Partnership with Child in care (CiC) Nurse team
- Senior assistant Psychologist
- Partnership with Anti-Social Behaviour officer Birmingham Youth Officer

Rob, the Senior Social Worker, and a dedicated partnership manager also supports schools. Pathfinder Associate staff are drawn from West Midlands Police, West Midlands Fire Service, West Midlands Combined Authority, Birmingham Early Help & Think Family Support Teams and the Youth Offending Service.⁹

"Where you are located is important. We are now based at Kings Norton Fire Station. We have use of a community building at the station, and we run boxing sessions, cookery and parent meetings and workshops. The parents can come in and have a cup of tea. It feels like it belongs to them. The Station Commander is happy because he can fulfil some of the fire service's community functions."

Resourcing the programme

Direct funding and resourcing of the programme has been piecemeal, there is not yet core funding from the Local Authority, although this is the ambition. Support so far includes:

- Contribution from the Police in support of finding alternative solutions for criminality;
- Schools' in-kind cover for release of teaching assistants;
- Fire Station in-kind community base;
- Local Authority pays half the salary of the Senior Social Worker and will be releasing a senior practitioner to help supervise Pathfinder Family Support Worker (part time);
- The SEMH Pathfinder has relied heavily on Lankelly Chase as an external grant to fund the core team. This has also been important in making the initiative higher profile.

"Having the backing of Lankelly Chase has brought a weight to the discussion. They have joined our board and can steer some of the conversations. It is about an external agency that can tell the senior officers of the Local Authority: this is really good for you!"

⁸ Ibid, p.340

⁹ <http://www.lumenchristi.org.uk/Birmingham-SEMH-Pathfinder/>

Programme activity

The Birmingham SEMH Pathfinder has undertaken the following activities for pupils and families with complex needs:¹⁰

- Trialling intensive and relational support that is adaptive, psychologically informed and strengths-based, delivered by the school workforce and wrapped around by a multi-agency team;
- Creating tools and an environment where the system can learn about the fuller picture for young people and families – their lives and interactions with services. This is being done via software, a research partnership and iterative, reflective, delivery;
- Creating an authorising environment within a set of systems via networking, lobbying, creating advisory boards as well as ‘relationship systems’ work;
- Parent manifesto – Enabling parents to influence the decision and policy-making that affect their families’ lives.

Programme impact to date

Lankelly Chase supported the evolution of the programme with an initial Theory of Change workshop for the group of school workers. This galvanised the ideas and gave the group a greater sense of identity.

“This was a catalyst for the whole work. We are reimagining children’s services, reimagining statutory approaches for some of the most in-need families. We aren’t the answer to everything but we are a significant part of a much broader systems change.”

However, evaluating the programme has proved difficult. The Birmingham SEMH Pathfinder presents a new model of working with families in need, and many of the tangible impacts are difficult to measure in a programme where strengthened relationships are a key goal. Rob reflected on the challenges of evaluation in the SEMH Pathfinder:

“Honestly, evaluation is our biggest challenge. The programme is aligned to the Local Authority and the measures of the Birmingham Early Help Framework. The troubled family agenda wants to see a reduction in anti-social behaviours and attendance improvements etc. Traditional metrics are not best configured to recognise the other real impacts – this is a relational model. Some families might say that ‘the pathfinder has literally saved my life, if they weren’t here I wouldn’t be here.’ That isn’t in any social key performance indicators. Lankelly Chase is helping us to draft a research proposal, in support of the recognition that the existing metric systems are part of the problem.”

In a publication by Young Minds, Rob and Clare Wightman of Lankelly Chase reflected in more detail on the programme’s qualitative impact to date, which indicated that:¹¹

- Family members feel more able to disclose the real problems that need resolution;
- Working together throughout the school life of the student offers families, and professionals, an opportunity for longer-term and more positive relationships;

¹⁰ <https://lankellychase.org.uk/project-summary/birmingham>

¹¹ ‘Re-thinking family interventions from an ACE perspective’ by Clare Wightman and Rob McCabe, <https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2142/ym-addressing-adversity-book-web.pdf> (p.342)

- Practical help is reaching families earlier and more quickly than it would otherwise;
- Sustainable impacts are more likely because of a focus on clients rather than on tasks of each individual agency.
- Positive and longer-term relationships create more capacity in families to enable sustained change.

What next

With the support of Lankelly Chase, Rob is developing a paper called Determined Birmingham, deliberately describing the strength and characteristics of these families ordinarily described as 'troubled'. This paper will outline the relational support model and 3 key values underpinning the Pathfinder and urges the board's organisations, which are city-wide, to consider how they can embed nurture, commitment to social justice and have a more shared authority approach in the work they do. It is hoped this will be a catalyst for city-wide thinking and help initiate a wider systems-change and public service reform.

For the initiative to grow, there has to be financial security to support 'what next'. Core strategic funding is being sought from the Local Authority in order to grow the project to more schools across the City and beyond – those with the highest numbers of exclusions, young people involved in social services or criminality. But there is a tension there.

"We don't want to grow too quickly. Our priority is to keep our integrity of what we are trying to do. It would be fantastic to spread this model even more widely, into the West Midlands Combined Authority, but at the moment we are free to spend long periods with families and keep cases open. We know that families may come back into the system unless we can keep involved and support them. Ours is a human response.

"The answer is not in government, it is not even in the Pathfinder model. It is in the power and energy of the people you're trying to help. It really is about harnessing the passion, knowledge and skills of these communities"

Learning

Rob shared two lessons learned during the evolution of the SEMH Pathfinder, to support other evolving programmes that seek to address place-level challenges and systems change:

- Use data and the views of stakeholders to understand need and strengthen a case for change

"It is about the strength of evidence you can put forward. Looking back, to try and get that mandate for systems change from the authority was naïve - The bureaucratic process is against you. You'll be up against competing agendas. You have to create the idea and gather people around you."

- Persistence and perseverance are key to getting the support you need

"I've been told it won't work a hundred times. There will be more people telling you that you can't do it, than can. Within systems there are always gaps or spaces where you can create new ways of working or test ideas. If you can get support, if you can get one person behind you then you've started something. Believe in what you do and share understanding of what is needed. I don't think there is ever a perfect set of conditions. Take little wins and create your own conditions."

Ask yourself:

- What data / evidence can you draw on to make your case for change? How will you corroborate and analyse data to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges in your local area?
- What support can you lever in?
- Who are your allies?
- What research and tools can support your development? A New Direction's [Powerful Partnerships Resource Library](#) is a curated collection of case studies, tools and research to support the 5-stage cycle of place-based partnership work: discover, define, develop, deliver and do more.

Further reading

- More on this project and Lankelly Chase: <https://lankellychase.org.uk/project-summary/birmingham/>
- Clare Wightman and Rob McCabe, 2018, 'Re-thinking family interventions from an ACE perspective' in [Addressing Adversity](#), Youth Minds (p.336-343).
- The Birmingham SEMH Pathfinder was used as a case study for good practice in a Department for Work and Pensions Green Paper '[Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families](#)', published in April 2017, as part of the Prime Minister's Welfare Reforms (case study on p. 17).
- Twitter project updates: @BhamPathfinder

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our extreme gratitude to Rob McCabe, strategic lead for the Birmingham SEMH Pathfinder, for his insights and thoughtful input into this case study.