

# Wellbeing Hub Year Two Annual Report

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# Wellbeing Hub Year Two Annual Report

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# Executive Summary

In response to the national mental health crisis amongst autistic children and young people, the Centre for Autism Wellbeing Hub began in August 2023, with the aim of co-developing impactful support services, training future professionals, and advancing autism research. Funding has been provided by the University of Reading Alumni and supported by the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences (PCLS).

## **Summary of Year 1 Activity and Aims for Year 2:**

The first year of the Centre for Autism Wellbeing Hub marked a strong and impactful launch, beginning with an event attended by around 600 people and followed by extensive community engagement through newsletters, a website, and two important scoping studies with autistic young people about autistic thriving. We used our scoping studies to develop range of wellbeing initiatives for young people, their families and professionals that were grounded in what they told us.

This year, we have successfully built on our existing programmes and initiatives and have continued to extend our reach and support more children, families and professionals to thrive in ways they tell us are meaningful to them.

## **Key Achievements in Year Two:**

### **Community Engagement and Knowledge Sharing**

We continue to strengthen the community reach of the Wellbeing Hub through a monthly newsletter (now exceeding 1,500 subscribers) and a programme of nine online webinars led by autistic adults on themes of thriving and wellbeing. These attracted 1,668 registrations across the year, with strong live attendance and continued online engagement via recorded talks.

### **Support for Autistic Children and Young People**

In Year Two, we piloted delivery of the NeuroBears programme, supporting autistic children aged 8–14 to explore and understand their autistic identity alongside a trusted adult. Fifteen families participated, with high levels of satisfaction reported by both parents and children. Feedback highlighted the value of personalised, neurodiversity-affirming approaches and skilled facilitation by trained placement students.

We also launched a new co-production project in partnership with local organisation ASSIST, working directly with autistic young people to design identity-affirming activities. Initial scoping with 11 young people identified priorities such as “being myself” and “connecting with others.” Co-design and pilot delivery are planned for 2025–26.

### **Support for Parents and Carers**

Responding to parental reports of isolation and stress, we developed and piloted a six-week parent support course co-delivered with a local charity partner, Parenting Special Children. Three pilot courses (18 participants) demonstrated high satisfaction and increased understanding of autism and acceptance-based approaches.

Monthly themed parent/carer meetups were also introduced, with 60 attendees across five sessions.

In addition, three four-session anxiety workshop series were delivered in two local special schools (35 parents and staff), strengthening collaboration between families and educational settings. A pilot mainstream workshop series was also delivered and updated for future roll-out.

### **Training Future and Current Professionals**

Twelve MSc Clinical Psychology students completed 320-hour placements, receiving structured autism acceptance training, supervised clinical experience, and opportunities to contribute to research. Students reported significant development in reflective practice, flexibility, and neurodiversity-affirming skills.

Through the Wellbeing Hub, we also revised and delivered updated autism and mental health training to 28 CAMHS practitioners, with materials now being rolled out regionally. Additional external talks and events reached more than 200 professionals.

### **Impact and Future Direction**

Year Two demonstrates an integrated model that combines direct support, co-production, research, and workforce development. Feedback across all activities has been consistently positive, with families reporting increased confidence and reduced isolation, and professionals valuing the emphasis on tailoring support to individual needs.

In Year Three, the Hub will consolidate and formally evaluate its programmes, expand delivery to larger cohorts, and strengthen its evidence base to support future funding applications. Securing sustainable funding and long-term partnerships will be essential to ensure continuation and growth beyond 2028.

# Centre for Autism Wellbeing Hub Year Two Report

## Remit

Funding for the Wellbeing Hub was generously donated by University of Reading Alumni. Recognising the national mental health crisis for children and young people, and the additional barriers faced by autistic children and young people in accessing timely and appropriate help, the funding was awarded in order to:

1. Deliver an impactful service that supports the local community and tackles the chronic shortage in the provision of mental health services for autistic children and young people, their families and support networks
2. Provide training opportunities for the practitioners of the future, by providing students with work placement opportunities
3. Support autism research activity

Recognising that almost nothing is known about autistic wellbeing or thriving, particularly from the perspectives of autistic children and adults, our overarching aim is to place autistic voices at the heart of everything we do and then to work with autistic people and their allies to build creative and meaningful solutions to support autistic young people to lead their best lives.

## Funding

The funding from University of Reading Alumni covers salaries for a start-up period of 5 years, August 2023 to July 2028. Additional funding for the Wellbeing Hub Clinical Director is provided by the School of Psychology and Clinical Language Sciences (PCLS).

Further income has been generated from generous donations from Wellbeing Hub supporters and through our training activities. These monies have enabled us to pay for research consumable costs, pay our webinar speakers and to fund activities such as our Special Interest Group. Hub activities are provided for free or at low cost, but donations also enable us to offer financial support to families when the cost of activities is a barrier to participation.

## Wellbeing Hub Team

The Wellbeing Hub has 4 core staff members, all of whom are part time. In year two, our team consisted of 1.4WTE clinical staff, and 0.5WTE executive support. In addition, Dr Ruth Moyes, Autism Researcher, joined for one time-limited project. After training, placement students have the opportunity to contribute to all activities in the Hub and to support us with our research.

Core team:

Dr Fiona Knott – Clinical Director and Clinical Psychologist

Dr Jo Billington – Autism Researcher

Dr Emma Harris – Clinical Psychologist

Charlie Murphy – Administrator

# Wellbeing Hub Year Two Activities

## Connecting With Our Community

We continue to produce a monthly newsletter and now have more than 1500 subscribers. We use the newsletter to share updates about our work and to recruit participants to autism research conducted by ourselves and the wider Centre for Autism Team. We have also refreshed the Wellbeing Hub pages on the Centre for Autism website.

## Webinars about Autistic Thriving and Wellbeing

This year we have facilitated 9 monthly online talks from autistic adults about thriving and wellbeing. Most talks are recorded and are available on our website for those who were unable to attend on the day. This year's speakers have covered a diverse range of topics such as 'black mothers advocating for their autistic children', 'Improving mental health therapies for autistic people and family members' and 'autistic masking'

A total of 1668 people have registered over the year, averaging 190 people per webinar. About 1/3 join the live event and on average each attracted 150 YouTube views.

## Activities for Young People

This year we piloted our new NeuroBears programme with children and parents. We also started a new project co-developing activities with autistic young people to support positive autistic identity.

### NeuroBears programme

NeuroBears is a programme created by autistic researchers Nic and Zed King and Kieron Rose to help autistic children (aged 5-14 years) increase their understanding of their autistic experience through conversations with their 'safe adult', usually a parent or teacher <https://www.pandasonline.org/> While the programme is available for families to buy independently, we are excited to be offering it free of charge and to facilitate delivery using our placement students.

Led by Dr Emma Harris, in 2024-25, we piloted delivery of the NeuroBears programme in the Wellbeing Hub. Emma facilitated the programme with four families who kindly allowed us to record their sessions to support student training. Using these materials, students were trained and then worked in pairs to facilitate the programme online, supported by reflective supervision meetings. We then offered the programme to another 11 families, of whom 9 completed the full series.

Following completion of the program, we collected informal feedback from both parent/carers and young people, asking participants to rate their satisfaction with various elements of the programme and its delivery as well as asking for suggestions for improvement. Satisfaction with most elements was 'good' or 'very good' and it was clear that parents and young people enjoyed the opportunity to work with our placement students.

*The students put so much effort into making the programme personal to (our son) with things like including his favourite characters into the graphics and course material. He loved it! Having someone else write everything up and having the course delivered in such a way that it didn't feel as though we were working through a workbook was hugely beneficial and massively helpful with engagement. I think (our son) may have experienced demand avoidance had we tried to work through it by ourselves at home.*

Parent who completed NeuroBears

*I really liked the people who led the meetings, they were very kind. I liked that (student) shared her experiences and talked about herself. It helped me open up and be more confident.*

Young Person who completed NeuroBears

Suggestions for improvement included increasing the number of sessions to reduce overload and exploring different ways of delivery, such as face to face. We will be testing these ideas in year three.

### **New project: co-developing activities with young autistic people.**

We are partnering with local organisation ASSIST to develop activities for autistic young people that they tell us will support a positive autistic identity. We were joined by autistic researcher Ruth Moysé to carry out the initial scoping study. Ruth conducted an initial scoping meeting with 11 autistic young people in which they highlighted topics that could be included and identified a number of potential activities that could be used to explore them. Example topics included 'being myself' and 'connecting with others' and activities ranged from drawing and making posters to creating videos and talks for schools. In 2025-6, we will work with the young people to further understand what they would find helpful and will then co-design and pilot this new offer later that year.

## Activities for Parents and Carers

Led by Dr Jo Billington, in year two, we developed and piloted two new activities for parent/carers, a 6 week parent/carer course and monthly parent/carer ‘meetups’.

### Parent support courses

Drawing from our scoping review and our work with local families, we developed the programme in response to parents and carers of autistic children telling us that they often feel isolated and struggle to get the support they and their children need. This can lead to stress which can negatively affect the whole family. Meanwhile, autistic children and young people told us that having supportive parents who understand and accept their unique ways of being was crucial to their positive sense of self and mental wellbeing.

The parent support courses were created to support parents/carers’ growing understanding of autism by exploring what autistic children, young people and adults tell us about their lives. Using a bank of videos created by autistic children in our previous ‘Being Me project’, the course aims to support parent and carer wellbeing by offering a safe space to explore what their child’s diagnosis means to them, their child, and their wider family. Each course runs for 6 two-hour meetings in-person at the University of Reading. A parenting practitioner from our local charity partner Parenting Special Children co-delivers the course.

In 2024-5, we ran three pilot courses, with 18 attendees. Feedback was gathered through post-course questionnaire and interviews. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the course and said it had increased their understanding of autism.

What stood out to me was autistic children and young people being given a platform to express themselves and help others understand their world. It definitely changed my understanding

*Parent attendee*

*I have really enjoyed the atmosphere that has been created during this course. I have gained so much insight from hearing of other families’ experiences*

Parent attendee

### Parent/carer meetups

These monthly themed informal gatherings for parents and carers of autistic children started in March 2025. A short introductory talk based on recent research related to the evening’s theme is followed by an opportunity for attendees to share insights, challenges and solutions with others who have similar experiences.

In 2024-5, we ran 5 meetups attended by 60 parent/carers, covering topics such as sleep, siblings and autistic thriving.

## Anxiety Workshops: Understanding and Supporting Your Anxious Child

Led by Dr Fiona Knott, this four-session workshop series aims to give attendees up to date information about anxiety and autism and to enable them to better understand their child's anxiety. Each workshop series consists of four linked sessions and each workshop lasts two hours combining talks, discussion and practical activities. Drawing on a cognitive-behavioural model of anxiety, attendees develop a tool-box of neurodiversity affirming strategies to support their child at home and school. At the end of the fourth workshop, students collect feedback from parents during an individual interview. Originally developed some years ago for parents of children in mainstream schools, last year we successfully delivered them for parents and school staff in a special school supporting autistic children with intellectual disabilities. It was clear that facilitating workshops to parents and school staff together provides a unique opportunity for collaboration.

In 2024-25, we expanded our offer by delivering three workshop series in two local special schools, attended by 35 parents and staff members. Parents particularly valued the opportunity to talk to other parents and to have time with school staff. They also made a number of constructive suggestions about ways to improve the workshops which we will take forward next year.

*'This was an amazing opportunity.'*

Parent who attended an Anxiety Workshop

*'Really nice to meet parents of children of similar ages. Nice to hear about children in (his) class – exposure to his school life'*

Parent who attended an Anxiety Workshop

This year, we also ran a workshop series for a small group of 3 parents whose children are in mainstream primary school. This gave us the opportunity to update the materials for this group and to ask for feedback. Parents said they valued the space to share their experiences and to give them time to observe and reflect on their children's challenges. Next year we hope to deliver workshops for parents and school staff in mainstream settings.

## Training Future and Current Professionals

### Training future professionals: placement students

In year two, we supported 12 MSc students carrying out a 320 hour clinical placement as part of their MSc 'Theory and Practice in Clinical Psychology'.

**Training:** Wellbeing Hub placement students completed mandatory and core training relating to clinical governance, safeguarding and clinical skill development. Placement specific training

consisted of 5 x 3hr autism awareness and acceptance training sessions, covering topics such as: history of autism, models of disability, the neurodiversity paradigm, autism and education, autism and wellbeing, and reasonable adjustments. These reflective sessions were complemented by a programme of observation in primary school, enabling students to understand the lived experience of young autistic children. Finally, students were trained to facilitate the NeuroBears programme online with parents and children.

**Clinical and research Experience:** Students gained direct experience of working with autistic children and their family members through facilitating the NeuroBears programme, participation in parent anxiety workshops and parent/carers meetups. Some students also worked with our external charity partner, Parenting Special Children, offering hands on support during their activities for autistic children and young people. Opportunities to support the Wellbeing Hub with research were embedded across all activities.

*This placement taught me how individual and unique the experience of autism is and how important it is to be able to adapt to each persons unique needs. Through this placement I developed key skills including, communication skills, team work skills, reflective practice, flexibility, empathy, organisation and listening skills*

MSc Placement Student

#### **Other placement students:**

We also delivered our autism awareness training to 20 placement students working in the University's AnDY clinic (Anxiety and Depression for Young People).

## Training Current Practitioners

### Practitioner Special Interest Group (SIG)

We organise a termly SIG, a twilight in-person meeting for autism practitioners with a speaker and chance to network over tea. This year, each SIG was attended by approximately 25 people consisting of professionals, students and University of Reading staff. Topics this year included autistic masking and a presentation about the work of a local horticultural society.

### Psychological Perspectives in Education and Primary Care (PPEPCare) Training.

PPEPCare is a project that trains and supports experienced mental health practitioners to deliver high quality evidence- based training to practitioners working in education, healthcare and wider settings. In 2016, Fiona Knott and Tom Loucas created and later updated two sets of training materials for the project, autism awareness and autism & mental health which have

been delivered to numerous teams in Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire since then. This year, working with host organisation Brighter Futures Together (<https://brighterfuturestogether.org.uk>), the materials were completely revised in consultation with autistic and non-autistic practitioners. We then trained 28 CAMHS practitioners to deliver the updated materials in November and December 2024. Training is now being rolled out by Brighter Futures Together to schools, mental health and other services across the area.

*'It was helpful and a good space to remind us of the importance of tailoring support to each individual'*

Feedback from PPEPCare Training

## Other training courses

We have delivered several other talks and training courses this year to external organisations including legal firms, Berkshire CAMHS anxiety disorder treatment team and schools. This year, we spoke to approximately 200 attendees across 5 events.

## Plans for Year Three and beyond

Our priority for year three is to consolidate and evaluate the programme of work we developed in year two. We recognise that the biggest challenge faced by the Wellbeing Hub is funding, affecting both our ability to scale up our work and to ensure continuation of the Hub after year 5. Providing robust data about the value and impact of our work will give us a firm footing for funding applications.

In year three, we will:

- Continue to run our programme of monthly talks and our practitioner SIG.
- Support a new cohort of placement students and will evaluate the impact of the autism acceptance training we offer on their practice and understanding.
- Roll out our NeuroBears programme and parent courses to larger cohorts and will collect feedback, allowing us to adapt and improve our offers.
- Continue phase two of our project co-developing activities with young autistic people

In years four and five, we will prioritise funding and development of partnerships with University, charity and other local providers to enhance our sustainability. We will also continue to develop research projects to allow formal evaluation of our activities.