



Headstart

**Supporting children
and young people's
mental health across
Greater Manchester during
the transition from primary
to secondary school.**

Case Study

Executive summary

Headstart is a needs-led early intervention programme supporting Year 6 pupils who are at increased risk of poor wellbeing during the transition to secondary school.

This transition has been largely overlooked, however, it can have a long-term effect on emotional wellbeing, mental health and a range of social outcomes (education and employment) for young people. Furthermore, there are distinct health and social benefits to framing this transition as part of a positive discourse (Garner and Bagnall, 2024).

The programme, delivered by Football Club Charities across Greater Manchester, works early to build emotional resilience, confidence, and coping skills for children in schools serving areas of high deprivation.

This preventative approach provides group and one-to-one support throughout the transition from Year 6 to Year 7, ensuring consistent support when children are most vulnerable. Working with schools, families and community organisations, Headstart supports children most at risk of facing barriers to help.

The programme demonstrates the value of taking a community-based, prevention-led approach to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing. Football clubs and their associated community trusts play a critical role as delivery partners in this model. With deep roots in their local areas, clubs bring a unique combination of reach, trust and identity that few other institutions can replicate. For many young people, especially those who may not engage with traditional services, football environments provide a familiar, non-clinical and aspirational setting.

This makes them a powerful gateway for early intervention, enabling services to connect with young people in ways that feel accessible, relevant and stigma-free.

Football clubs and their associated community trusts play a critical role as delivery partners in this model.

What did we do?

When the transition from primary to secondary school is well supported, it can strengthen emotional wellbeing, foster resilience, and set strong foundations for positive mental health, educational success, and future employment.

To help achieve this, we developed Headstart, a proactive, preventative programme targeting Year 6 pupils identified as having the greatest need.

The programme is needs-led and pupil-centred, combining evidence-based psycho-educational workshops with one-to-one mentoring and group activities. Sessions focus on building mental health literacy, emotional resilience, confidence, and practical coping strategies to help pupils manage anxiety and feel more prepared for the move to secondary school.



Working with NHS GM, GM Moving and local partners, supported by a pooled budget including partial match funding from EFL club charities, Bolton Wanderers in the Community, Rochdale AFC Community Trust and Wigan Athletic Community Trust, we identified priority schools across Wigan, Rochdale and Bolton. By combining school-level data with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) referral wait times, we ensured support reached pupils facing the greatest barriers to early help.

Across the programme, delivery through football club community trusts has been central to engaging young people effectively. Clubs provide safe, trusted spaces within the community, while coaches and youth workers play a key role as relatable and consistent adults, often developing strong relationships with young people over time.

This combination of trusted place and trusted people creates an environment where young people feel more comfortable to participate, build confidence and, where needed, open up about more sensitive issues.

How did we do it?

Headstart was delivered as a phased, trauma-informed programme by Mental Health Transformation Officers (MHTOs) embedded within three Football Club Charities across Greater Manchester. Each MHTO worked with five primary schools, identifying up to 25 pupils across those schools for targeted one-to-one support, while also delivering group sessions to a wider cohort of Year 6 pupils.

Delivery included:

Phase 1 (Apr–Jul):

One-to-one and group support combining mentoring, classroom workshops and activity-based sessions.

Phase 2 (Aug–Sep):

Summer provision to maintain engagement and reduce anxiety during the transition period.

Phase 3 (Sep–Dec):

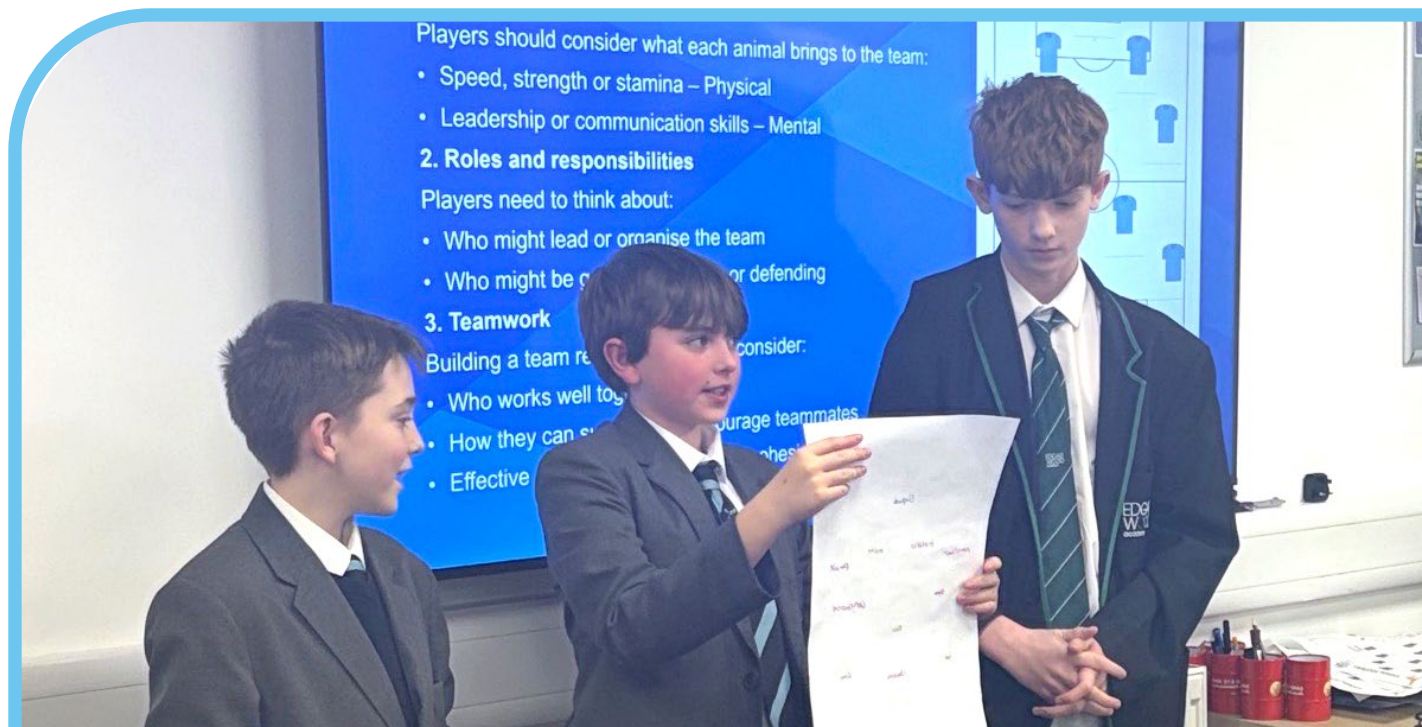
Follow-up support in Year 7, including step-down pathways and links to Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) and wider Children and Young People (CYP) services.

Phase 4 (Jan–Mar):

Year-round workshops and staff training to strengthen understanding of emotional wellbeing and transition needs.

Phase 5 (Jan–Mar):

Comparative analysis and economic modelling using NHS non-intervention data.



What did we find?

The delivery of Headstart reinforced that effective transition support must extend beyond academic readiness, placing equal importance on emotional wellbeing, family engagement, and strong relationships between schools, parents and EFL club charities, with the child at heart. The programme highlighted a growing level of unmet mental health need among primary-aged pupils, reinforcing the value of early, preventative and trauma-informed approaches.

The programme engaged a high proportion of children with greater levels of need, with 44% of participants from the lowest two socio-economic deciles (1 and 2). Wellbeing improved across the cohort, alongside a reduction in children with “high” or “very high” SDQ needs from 53% to 43%, with overall SDQ scores also improving. Independent analysis estimates potential lifetime system benefits of around £680,000, alongside a return on investment.

These positive outcomes highlight both the value of the programme and the complexity of delivery within a high-need, transition-focused context, with further detail on delivery challenges outlined next.

Layton's story:

When Layton joined Headstart, he was experiencing high anxiety about moving to secondary school, rating his anxiety at 9 out of 10, and had low self-confidence. Through weekly one-to-one support, group sessions and summer activities delivered by the Football Club Charity, he explored topics including mental health, anxiety, mindset and coping strategies.

Consistent support from trusted practitioners helped Layton build confidence, develop practical techniques to manage his anxiety, and form friendships with peers who were transitioning to the same secondary school.

As a result, Layton felt less anxious, more positive about the future, and better prepared for the move to secondary school.

“Since my Headstart sessions, secondary school feels easier. I know what to do if I’m not feeling my best and the sessions help me to be calm for the rest of the day after them.”

Layton, Year 7 participant

Amelie's story

Amelie was referred to Headstart due to anxiety about starting secondary school and the impact of previous traumatic experiences. Through one-to-one support and continued guidance into Year 7, she developed confidence, resilience and strategies to manage the transition.

Over time, Amelie became more settled and engaged, building the confidence to take an active role in supporting other young people through Headstart events and activities. As a result, she experienced improved wellbeing, greater confidence, and sustained engagement beyond the programme.

[Learn more about Amelie's Headstart journey.](#)

Key challenges & lessons learned

Engaging families

Parental engagement was initially challenging, particularly where confidence in services was low. This improved through a robust onboarding process, clear communication and informal engagement opportunities, including involvement in summer activities. As a result, families had a better understanding of the programme's aims and expectations, leading to more consistent support at home and improved attendance, trust and outcomes for pupils.

Working within school constraints

SATS, timetable pressures and the absence of direct feeder schools limited access to pupils. Delivery was therefore adapted through flexible scheduling and targeted half-term and summer holiday provision, helping to sustain engagement and reduce anxiety at points when school-based support was limited. This approach maintained continuity during key transition periods, aligned more closely with school priorities, and through strong collaboration with community partners, supported pathways into ongoing wellbeing support, while also building links to the expansion of MHSTs, which will be rolled out across all secondary schools over the next 2–3 years.



Sustaining support beyond the programme

Support beyond the programme was strengthened through closer links with community organisations and clearer pathways into ongoing physical activity, mentoring and wellbeing provision. This helped improve emotional resilience, reduce transition-related anxiety and increase mental health literacy, while strengthening confidence among schools, families and partner organisations.

Trauma-informed, evidence-based practice was embedded across delivery in response to challenges identified through Headstart. Staff were trained to recognise distress, build trust and create safe, supportive environments, contributing to improved engagement, attendance and emotional wellbeing.

Conclusion and next steps

This work highlights the significant potential of football-based delivery models to support early intervention and prevention for young people's mental health. There is a clear opportunity to scale this approach through the wider football network, particularly via the EFL and its extensive system of club community organisations, which collectively engage thousands of young people across the country each week. By building on existing infrastructure and trusted community relationships, this model offers a practical route to expanding impact at a national level while retaining strong local relevance.

Looking ahead, there is also scope to strengthen delivery through closer coordination with parents, secondary schools and wider system partners, particularly around key transition points such as the move from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3. Closer alignment with MHSTs and the GM Attendance Alliance would further support engagement, continuity and early identification, ensuring children receive consistent support throughout their transition.

Partnerships between health systems and football clubs offer a scalable model for engaging young people particularly those less likely to access traditional services. Embedding this approach more widely could strengthen early support, reduce inequalities, and improve long-term outcomes.

[Find out more](#) about how the Headstart programme is helping young lives make a positive school transition.

