

Peer Mentor Article

Below is a piece written by a peer mentor named Olivia. Olivia attends a Buckinghamshire secondary school with our Peer Support Service in place as part of the Bucks Mental Health Support Team. A big thank you to Olivia for writing this fantastic insight into the brilliant work of a peer mentor and how the service can operate within a secondary school. Enjoy reading!

To reduce the stigma about mental health, it is really important that young people know it is okay not to be okay sometimes. More importantly they need to know they can openly talk about how they are feeling, without the pressure of feeling judged.



Giving young people a safe space to do this is the main goal of the 'Peer Support' service. It is being introduced in primary and secondary schools around the county. When I heard my school, Sir Thomas Fremantle, had been chosen to do this, I couldn't wait to get involved. I wanted to apply because I understand that the school environment can be very intimidating when you are struggling with your mental health. As going to school is something you have to do every day, it is vital that any young person knows they have someone to talk to. Therefore, I wanted to be able to create an open and comfortable environment for them to do this. I felt that as a Peer Mentor I could give support to others that I feel I would have benefited from. You cannot always fix someone's problems, but just being there to listen can really mean a lot to someone.

Our service involves training sixth form volunteers to be a friendly face for younger years in the school. Every form time we have scheduled appointments that are organised by self or teacher referral. Two of us then meet with one student at a time and we talk. At first students are hesitant to talk and open up about how they're feeling. Us big 18-year olds may seem a little scary to a year 7 at first, but we want them to realise that we are all people and we all experience the same feelings. So, we play board games, chat about hobbies or what they did at the weekend and even what we have experienced regarding our mental health.

It doesn't take long for them to see that it is a positive environment where we just genuinely want to help.

Off the back of the Peer Mentoring success, we also started offering a 'Friendship Group' service. It is aimed at year 7 students who have started secondary school and who may not be feeling comfortable with the big change. A couple of Peer Mentors meet once a week in form time with a group of year 7s. We talk about social situations that may worry them in school, qualities of what makes a good friend and they all take part in fun activities. These have included football, Pictionary and table tennis. This develops their team building and communication skills that they can then transfer into the classroom. The students loved it so much they renamed the group 'Fun Club' and were actually sad when it came to the school holidays and they couldn't attend!

Seeing the benefits of the service appear has been my favourite part of volunteering. I have loved meeting new people, forming a bond with them and seeing them develop as lovely and caring people. Most importantly they become people who are confident in their emotions and therefore ultimately in themselves. When I think of this change and journey, I think of one girl in particular who thrived using the service. She enjoyed and benefited so much that she became so comfortable with talking about her emotions, that she referred friends who she knew were struggling and even attended their first meetings when they were too worried to come alone. At the end of our time together she told me how when she goes into sixth form she would love to fill the same role and help other people. To see this development in just one person says so much about how we are evolving in how we talk to young people about mental health.



I have seen personal benefits too. I am much more confident in myself and talking to other people than I ever thought I would be. I have met people I will never forget and have had conversations with people I

will never forget. They have changed, helped and developed me as a person on the whole and also how I cope with my own mental health.

I cannot put into words how much I have loved being part of the 'Peer Support' service. It is such an asset to the school. It could not be the success it is without the endless dedication and organisation of the service leader, Julie who has supported all of the students both inside and outside of the service. Also, the service could not function without the outstanding efforts of all of the Mentors that I have had the pleasure of working alongside. I am proud to be part of a school that is pioneering the recognition of children's mental health in terms of how it affects both their social and educational development.

- Olivia, 18



Peer support changes lives.

