**ELSA Project 2018-20, Summary and Evaluation**

**Swindon Educational Psychology Service, April 2020**

1. What is ELSA?

The ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention was originally developed within Hampshire area in 2004 by Sheila Burton, Educational Psychologist (EP). It was designed to build the capacity of schools to support the emotional needs of pupils from within their own resources. This is achieved by training teaching assistants (TAs) to become ‘ELSAs’, to develop and deliver individualised support programmes to meet the emotional needs of children and young people in their care. It recognises that children learn better and are happier in school if their emotional needs are also addressed. This intervention is now widely implemented by EPs across the UK and the relevance of the implementation of ELSA in schools has been further strengthened by the publication of the 2017 Green Paper: ‘Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health’, (e.g. by proposing that all schools should have a designated person to lead on mental health needs).

ELSA is an initiative developed and supported by EPs, who apply their professional knowledge of children’s social and emotional development to areas of need experienced by pupils. They provide on-going professional supervision to help maintain high quality in the work undertaken by ELSAs, thereby helping to ensure safe practice for ELSAs and pupils alike. Further detail about the ELSA programme can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.elsanetwork.org/>

2. Why was ELSA set up in Swindon?

ELSA in Swindon started from a multiagency group focused on mental health in February 2017. ELSA was introduced by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) as an intervention which would address specific challenges facing the council and target health and educational outcomes such as: improving placement stability and educational outcomes for children looked after, reducing exclusion rates, reducing referrals to specialist mental health services, improving school attendance and reducing hospital admissions for mental health conditions including incidences of self-harm.

Locally defined outcomes for the ELSA project were also identified as follows: improved emotional wellbeing, mental health and resilience of children and young people, earlier identification of children’s emotional wellbeing and mental health needs, timely access to the right support for children with emotional wellbeing and mental health needs, and improved parental and professional confidence in being able to respond appropriately to children’s mental health needs and to access additional support when required.

3. Who funded it and what was involved?

Swindon EPS received funding from the CCG, Public Health and the Virtual School to train TAs from every school in Swindon over a 2 year period (2018/19-2019/20). During this period all schools were able to access free places for 2 TAs to train as ELSAs over a 6 day training course.

Having completed the training course ELSAs also received 4 free sessions of supervision (approximately 1 every short term). Following the initial training and 4 free supervision sessions, ELSAs are required to engage in regular, ongoing group supervision facilitated by an EP, purchased by schools as a traded service (4 sessions per year). Those continuing with supervision will be put on an ELSA register and will be eligible to receive top up training as well as ongoing support from the EPS.

All EPs within the Swindon are experienced with supervision and to ensure that their approach is consistent the whole team has received supervision training accredited by the British Psychological Society (BPS). The EPS is due to have further accredited BPS training for group supervision in September 2020.

4. How many schools were involved in the Swindon ELSA project?

As of March 2020, 57 out of 66 Primary Schools, 12 out of 14 Secondary Schools, EOTAS and 1 Special School have been trained.In total138 ELSA were trained from 71 schools. There were 9 Primary Schools and 2 Secondary Schools that chose not to sign up for this free training and supervision.

In terms of the supervision, 24 out of the 36 schools from the first 2 cohorts are continuing with traded supervision for their ELSAs following the initial free supervision sessions. ELSAs from cohorts 3, 4 and 5 are continuing to receive their free supervision.

5. What was the course feedback?

a) Post-course evaluation questionnaires were completed by 111 out of 138 attendees across the 5 courses delivered. Responses to the questions on this form showed consistently high ratings on a 10 point scale as summarized in the table below.

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| **Question** | **Average rating on a scale of 0-10 (0=not at all/poor, 10=very much/excellent)** |
| How important was this training for you? | 9.3 |
| Overall, how satisfied were you with the training? | 9.5 |
| How well did the training meet its learning objectives? | 9.6 |
| How satisfied were you with the pre-course administration? | 9.1 |
| Was the venue suitable for this training? | 8.9 |
| How useful/relevant will the learning be in your work? | 9.3 |
| How was the expertise/ credibility of the trainer(s)? | 9.7 |
| How clear was the delivery/presentation? | 9.6 |
| How useful were the handouts and training materials / resources? | 9.5 |
| How well did the trainer(s) handle any equality and diversity issues? | 9.6 |

b) Additional comments given by the delegates on the course questionnaires were overwhelmingly positive. A sample of comments regarding what attendees found **most helpful** about the ELSA training is given below:

* *I thought everything was fantastic, great trainers and a lovely support group.*
* *Excellent course. Very well run and informative.*
* *Very helpful and knowledgeable trainers.*
* *Answering questions in a full and professional manner. Allowing time for discussion and feedback. Excellent trainers – very approachable.*
* *Comprehensive, systematic, clear delivery of high quality subject content.*
* *Given me a lot more strategies to use.*
* *Just loved each session. I have learnt so much that will help support children’s needs and a clearer understanding. Loved the ice-breakers and support given throughout. Looking forward to our supervision groups.*
* *Being made aware that I am not being expected to be a miracle worker but at the same time gaining access to a wealth of knowledge.*
* *I found all of it so helpful, the information / subjects are perfect for my role. Leaders very friendly, thank you.*
* *We are hoping that our school will continue to invest in the programme.*
* *Always made to feel comfortable to contribute to discussion.*
* *Thoroughly enjoyed all 6 weeks, looking forward to implementing all of this knowledge.*

c) A sample of comments relating to **improvement suggestions** from attendees are given below as follows:

* *I felt that having the Bereavement & Loss during the last week felt like a heavy topic to end on. Perhaps having it in the middle of the 6 week course would have worked better.*
* *Tables too small to sit at and write in folders. Heating didn’t work on one day, so it was quite uncomfortable.*
* *ELSA is very important but some schools may not be able to deliver it due to their own school’s choices. It may help them if you were able to contact school / intervene to help them.*

d) The following comments illustrate how well the EPs **responded to feedback** from the delegates throughout the course and made changes and adaptations accordingly.

* *The EPs were very sensitive and aware of the needs of the group and responded to feedback (group seating, level of sound etc). They were always available for help and support – Thank you.*
* *The pace speeded up halfway through the course, based on our feedback, which was very helpful. Thank you for listening.*
* *A catch-up or refresher date now and then would be useful.* (This feedback has been acted on by the EPS through the creation of new ‘top-up training’ sessions for already qualified ELSA as described in point 7 below).
* *ELSA is very important but some schools may not be able to deliver it due to their own school’s choices. It may help them if you were able to contact school / intervene to help them.* (This is now being considered by the EPS as detailed in point 8 below).

6. What is the impact of ELSA?

ELSA is an evidence-based intervention and there are many existing research papers and evaluation studies to provide evidence of impact which can be found on the ELSA Network website by following this link: <https://www.elsanetwork.org/elsa-network/evaluation-reports/>

For example, the evaluation study carried out by Cheshire & Cheshire West (2016) reports on the perceived impact of the ELSA programme, indicating improvement in support for pupil’s development in the following areas: social skills, self-esteem, challenging behavior and social communication and interaction difficulties/ ASC. Further details can be viewed at the link below: <https://www.elsanetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Cheshire-West-Chester-Evaluation-Report-Sept-2016.pdf>

In Swindon we have commissioned our own evaluation project to be carried out by Trainee Educational Psychologists currently studying on the EP doctorate course at Bristol University and this study is due to be carried out from May-July 2020.

Whilst awaiting the outcomes of this evaluation study, comments from our training course feedback questionnaires already provide us with some anecdotal evidence regarding the positive impact of the ELSA project in Swindon:

* *I expected the course to be useful, however it has been not only useful it has left me feeling much better equipped to deal with situations / interventions to come.*
* *Very helpful and has given me confidence to perform more activities in school.*
* *To realise and understand that children’s behaviours stem from an unmet need and that it’s a way of communicating.*
* *Anger Emotions – great strategies- I have been using them and they have been working. All of the course helpful and more confident to use ideas. Dealing with loss – great help with children I’m working with.*
* *Understanding the skill of pealing back layers to reveal the source of different behaviours / problems.*
* *A very useful session to ensure that school has a policy regarding bereavement / loss in place to meet associated needs.*
* *This training has been essential, I feel much more relaxed in my work due to all of the 6 days. I felt supported and all the information was detailed and useful.*

Verbal feedback from supervision sessions has also been very positive indicating that it is highly valued.

7. What is happening with ELSA now the initial project in Swindon has finished?

The initial ELSA project has now come to an end, although free supervision will continue for the 5th cohort until the end of term 2 in December 2020. All other ELSA activities will now be chargeable through the EPS traded services offer as follows:

* 4 sessions of ELSA supervision per year, lasting 2 hours. These sessions will be led by an EP with accredited supervision training from the BPS.
* ELSA training to those schools who have not yet taken up the offer of training or those schools that would like to extend the number of ELSAs in their schools/settings (6 full days over 6 weeks).
* Top up training sessions for registered ELSAs, lasting 2 hours. Topics will be linked to pertinent themes and can be tailor made for each supervision group. Top up training could include topics such as understanding trauma, school refusal, anxiety, resilience and working with parents.

8. What are our learning points for the future?

Overall the feedback related to ELSA has been overwhelmingly positive. We have taken on board comments and feedback from our groups so that the participants receive the best experience possible (see also points detailed above in 5d), whilst equipping them to deliver high quality, effective interventions for children and young people experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties in their schools.

Nevertheless we also recognise that some improvements to the programme can still be made:

a) Within supervision sessions, some ELSAs have expressed that barriers to providing ELSA support within their schools include:

* Being given time protected by the Head Teacher to fulfil the ELSA role.
* Having a designated/protected space within the school to use for ELSA sessions.
* Ensuring staff across the whole school understand and are signed up to the approach.
* Ensuring the Head Teacher is committed to and has the funding to continue with the supervision sessions on a long-term basis.

Based on this feedback, the EPS is now planning to hold an initial meeting with Head Teachers and SENCOs new to ELSA, to support them to formally launch it within their schools and to talk about the expectations of schools and TAs going forward for the training. This would include ensuring that all participants are aware of what the training entails. It would also alert them to the value of supervision and the expectations that continued supervision will be necessary if an ELSA is to keep up their registration. This information has already been in the booking information which Head Teachers were required to sign, but feedback suggests that more information would have been useful to reinforce these initial messages.

b) We are aware of the need to source an alternative training venue as many participants rated the venue negatively due to acoustics and temperature (Meadow Hall). However this is proving to be a challenge as this is the only venue large enough within the council that would not charge us for its use, which helps keeps the costs down for schools.

c) We recognise the need to change the position of the grief and bereavement topic so it is not the final training session that ELSAs receive (day 6), as feedback suggests this felt ‘too heavy’ for a closing session.

d) As well as collecting and analysing feedback from ELSAs regarding their experience of the training courses via questionnaires, we also need to start collecting and analysing feedback from ELSAs regarding their experience of their supervision sessions, to support our continued improvement in this area.