

Educating Leeds



SUPPORT: Teacher Jo Freeman with Year 8 pupil Maddie Canning-Sylvester at Southway Hub in Leeds.

The alternative to mainstream that gives pupils second chance

WHEN THE headteacher says “you have to really want to work here” and the school’s designated police officer admits pupils have been involved in crime, you would be forgiven for thinking Southway Hub is just a place to send ‘naughty’ kids in Leeds.

But while it does teach some of the city’s most challenging pupils, it is also helping to transform the lives of those who have chaotic and complex family backgrounds, mental health struggles or special educational needs as well as those who do not thrive in schools with 1,700 pupils.

When asked what inspired him to take up the post of headteacher at an inner-city alternative provision, Andy Percival admits, “it gets under your skin”.

Southway was set up 10 years ago by Leeds City Council to get south Leeds to the point where it had zero exclusions from its secondary schools, but the Belle Isle base now takes pupils

from all across the city and, currently, 29 different schools.

It has capacity for 120 pupils, with 79 on the registers at the moment. Referrals are increasing though amid the fallout from lockdowns.

Mr Percival took over the post in October from Kelly Newby, now the Vulnerable Children Lead for Leeds City Council. It was the setting she had created that led him to leave his post as deputy head at The Rodillian Academy.

“Rodillian will keep going and kids will always be a success,” Mr Percival said. “Without the right people in front of these kids and the opportunities, support and intervention, they won’t get it and they deserve better.”

“We have pupils that have been involved in weapon and gang-related incidents, some who struggle with mental health needs or special needs, some who are academically bright pupils but struggle with mainstream setting and



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some who have a difficult family life and their behaviour means they need a break from mainstream.”

For pupils who have been moved from mainstream to Southway, which looks like any other school, it is not the

end of the road. The ultimate aim is reintegration to their own school, but Southway is still preparing them for maths, science and English GCSEs.

In the last five years, none of its pupils have left without being in education, employment or training.

Among the current cohort is Maddie Canning-Sylvester. She was placed at Southway from Cockburn High School and staff say her progress is “beyond belief”.

She admits she was abusive to teachers, but says this was really about wanting and needing more support with reading and managing her emotions. Having had that, she is now doing a few days a week at Cockburn and looking forward to going back full time.

The Year 8 pupil said: “I do enjoy school but felt I wasn’t getting support and got angry if I could not get what I wanted. Here I can have a breather. Now I like reading and I am looking forward to going back. I feel



LEARNING: Teacher Ben Powell with Lewis Harrison.

better able to cope and like food technology, art and history.”

The benefit of a provision like Southway is also felt back at the school that a pupil has come from as it allows the other children to carry on their studies without disruption.

PC Paul Coates is a schools safety officer, who has been

based at Southway for almost four years. He said: “Most of the kids have had bad or negative experiences of police and most here have had previous involvement, whether that is cautions, community resolutions, criminal convictions. A lot of them, I have locked up their mums and dads, they get it.”

“When you see a kid that has been given up on making something of themselves, it is really rewarding.”

However, partnerships with agencies like the police depend on funding – one of the biggest concerns for Mr Percival.

“There needs to be greater security around funding, allowing me to look long term at wider opportunities,” he said.

“I hope we get more kids back into mainstream and I would like Southway to be viewed differently. I don’t want us to be seen as the naughty school. We are about putting something different in place, allowing people to succeed.”