

Evaluation of Think F.A.S.T. Academy, St Helens

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1. THINK FAST ACADEMY	1
1.2. PROGRAMME STRUCTURE	2
1.2.1. Strengthening Minds Programme	2
1.2.2. Boxing	3
1.2.3. Guest Speakers	3
1.2.4. Monitoring Impact	4
2. METHODOLOGY	5
2.1. RECRUITMENT & INTERVIEWS	5
2.2. ETHICS	6
2.3. DATA ANALYSES	6
3. FINDINGS	7
3.1. STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS	7
3.1.1. Background and Implementation: ‘the vision’	7
3.1.2. Facilitators to Implementation: ‘getting ourselves about’	7
3.1.3. Implementation Challenges: ‘a bit disheartening’	8
3.1.4. Outcomes and Impact: ‘they just bloomed’	9
3.1.5. Development & Sustainability: ‘support families’	10
4. SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS	11
4.1. OUTCOME STARS	11
4.2. STUDENT TESTIMONIALS	11
4.2.1. Reason for Referral to Think F.A.S.T. Academy: ‘behavioural issues’	12
4.2.2. Facilitating Engagement: ‘I have learnt a lot’	12
4.2.3. Outcomes and Impact: ‘I can cope a lot better’	14
4.2.4. Set and Setting: ‘Here I listen to the rules’	15
5. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS	16
6. APPENDICES	19
6.1. APPENDIX 1 STRENGTHENING MINDS WORKBOOK	19
6.1. APPENDIX 2 OUTCOME STAR	20

1. Introduction

1.1. Think FAST Academy

Martin Murray's Think F.A.S.T (Finding a Solution Together) Academy was established in November 2021 to provide a range of high-quality health, fitness, educational, and personal development programmes for children and young people in St Helens and beyond, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the community who may be at risk for anti-social behaviour. It offers high quality social support and development to at-risk hard-to-reach young people. The aim is to provide a structured programme of activities for young people, male and female, aged 11 – 19 years based around boxing, fitness, health, and life skills over a 10-week period, with a graduation day on the final week. These are achieved through the strengthening minds programme, weekly guest speakers, and boxing. Think Fast builds upon the England Boxing Academy Model which is an alternative provision school initially set up in 2007 as a community project in a boxing gym and has proven successful across the country in engaging and supporting young people. It is particularly suitable for young people struggling to maintain their school place, those at risk of exclusion and/or with behavioural vulnerabilities/complexities.

The Think FAST academy was the brainchild of Martin Murray and his wife Gemma. Martin is a retired professional boxer from St Helens, who wanted to use his past experiences to help improve the lives of young people coming from similar circumstances. Martin's wife Gemma is a qualified social worker and has worked in child protection and in adult healthcare. The programme is aimed to impact the future of young men and women lacking a pro-social role model and structure in their lives. The discipline of boxing provides this framework for positive changes to emerge and embed in the lives of young people. Further, the staff at the academy endeavour to look beyond the disruptive behaviour to the young person behind it which allows them to engage, settle, and refocus them towards a more positive pathway, using the structure and discipline of the programme as a framework for change. Ongoing engagement and aftercare for all participants are a key feature of the programme.

Initially Martin and Gemma invested their own funds in the CIC but then later received grant funding from the Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP) and a range of local investors to pump prime the work. Think FAST is also supported by partner agencies including the CCG, St. Helens Council Safer Communities, and Merseyside Police who have committed to supporting the establishment of Think FAST as a key element with the partnership 'offer' for young people at risk of exclusion and

involvement in the criminal justice system. Young people who exhibit signs of frustration, anger, defiance, and other behavioural issues in the classroom are referred to the academy.

1.2. Programme Structure

The day to day running of the programme is facilitated by Martin and his staff which includes the *“behaviour and wellbeing coordinator, specifically with my role it's also a safeguarding lead for the academy”*, *“an emotional welfare coordinator supporting the academy”*, and boxing coaches. Each day is structured around the strengthening minds programme, guest speakers, and boxing. It is held in a community sports centre and boxing club *“it's a really good place because it's somewhere that does not stand out as being massively posh, its gritty”*, where they spend the day working through the programme. Lunch and snacks are provided. The setting for the programme provides a safe space for young people where they *“can be themselves, usually when they are themselves, they are lovely, the environment has a lot to answer for”*.

1.2.1. Strengthening Minds Programme

The Strengthening Minds programme is at the core of the Think FAST Academy (see appendix 1). It offers a wide range of effective packages which are designed to help enrich and foster the lives of young people. There are five core programmes which provide unique approaches to crucial issues faced by young people which are: negative behaviour, low self-esteem, preparation for the future, level of school engagement, and building positive relationships at school. Strengthening minds provides programmes to students from 6 to 18 years old. All programmes are equipped with a comprehensive evaluation system so that schools can keep track and monitor the progress its students are making. They have proven results in supporting students in a variety of key areas such as behaviour management, personal development, emotional regulation, school engagement, and self-esteem. Each programme comes with a full workbook, 10 interactive sessions evaluative documents to monitor and track progress over the course of the programme.

Box 1: Programme Benefits

1. Reduced behaviour points (a heavy focus on emotional responses to challenging situations, allows students to learn how to manage their frustrations, leading to a reduction in behaviour points).
2. Calmer classrooms (promotes calmer classrooms by helping students control their emotions, and strategies to manage negative feelings).
3. Increases wellbeing (allows students to explore the origins of their frustrations, encourages positive mental wellbeing and comfortable engagement).
4. Engages students (a strong focus on interactivity and engagement)
5. Monitors progression (comes with a tracking system that allows student progress monitoring).

The package used by Think FAST is the 'Positive Behaviour & Emotional Wellbeing Programme' (see Box 1). Weekly topics include understanding emotions, exploring aggressive behaviour, tackling teamwork, the power of positivity, less stress, strategies, mindfulness and me, resilience, my future self, and the joyful journey ahead.

The strengthening minds programme is in a classroom-style setting however is flexible depending on the group's needs. A primary focus is monitoring and discussing behaviour at school and home, setting targets, and re-evaluating each week *"they try hit personal targets or group targets each time, it's basically looking at their behaviour, their emotions, how they get angry and stressed quite quickly and how to bring that down for them. We give them strategies to help them and that goes on over the weeks so that's the intervention really"*.

1.2.2. *Boxing*

Boxing benefits the students by teaching them teamwork, discipline, anger management, how to improve their concentration, and getting fit, through positive engagement and empowerment. As a result students feel confident in their decision-making and mindset choices in real life situations. Boxing coaches are employed for this role as young people instinctively respect and look up to strong role models particularly those who present a positive image of discipline, responsibility, respect for others, good manners, and work ethic *"we trialled the school coming in one day a week for a week period with the positive behaviour and wellbeing programme and it worked really, really well and we linked that into the boxing"*. The boxing coaches and programme leaders are locally recruited and who are trained and experienced in working with challenging young people. This results in strong, positive relationships which allow the students to begin a positive cycle of achievement and rebuild their self-esteem. The Martin Murray Think Fast Academy ethos reflects the origins of a boxing gym: a small, comfortable, and familial environment with clear boundaries, a system of rewards, and an emphasis on discipline, achievement, and hard work.

1.2.3. *Guest Speakers*

Guest speakers with lived experience on a range of topics attend each week to share their stories with the young people *"our guest speakers are a range of people who are successful but came down a long winding path to get there"*. This is an integral part of the programme. It begins with Martin Murray telling his story on week one. Other topics over the 10 weeks are focused on drug and alcohol awareness, knife crime, county lines and anti-social behaviour, lessons learnt from lived experience, domestic abuse and healthy relationships, impacts and consequences, sexual health,

and county lines/gangs *“each week it gives them a good grounding of experiences and professional people”*.

1.2.4. *Monitoring Impact*

The students work through the programme over 10 weeks where there is continued engagement with the schools, by way of weekly monitoring sheets and parent/carer questionnaires which provide information on how they are at school and at home each week. Outcome Stars are also used at week one and ten which measures improvement on different aspects of the programme over the 10 weeks (see appendix 2). The students also provide testimonials on the final day of the programme which focus on why they were first referred, aspects they most liked, and something(s) new that they learned or improved.

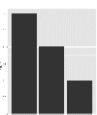
2. Methodology

To meet study objectives, a range of methods were implemented with findings triangulated to inform the evaluation outcomes and recommendations.

Evaluation activities included:



A review of literature and information about Think FAST and the Strengthening Minds Programme provide context to the research and aid the interpretation of research findings and development of recommendations.



Quantitative analysis of available anonymous secondary data from Think FAST Academy: Outcome stars $n=26$.
Qualitative analysis of: Student Testimonials $n=36$.



Interviews ($n=3$) with key staff/coaches involved in the delivery of the programme and integrated support at Think FAST Academy

Review of programme documents and data: We collated existing documentation, case studies, outcome stars, and student testimonials which provide detail on the reach and impacts of the programme. All information collected was anonymised.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with programme developers and co-ordinators who deliver different aspects of the programme. Interviews were conducted via MS Teams and explored perceptions of the programme and curriculum content; programme development and delivery, including any adaptations; factors supporting and impeding implementation of, and engagement in the programme; areas for development; and perceived and actual impacts.

2.1. Recruitment & Interviews

The gatekeeper (director of company) was responsible for providing permission for the research to be carried out at their organisation and facilitated engagement with the co-ordinators/programme leaders. The gatekeeper was contacted via email informing them of the study and consent was obtained to proceed. Co-ordinators/programme leaders were recruited to the study directly via an email. All participants were provided with a participant information sheet, which outlined the purpose of the interview and what it would entail, information about confidentiality, and how the data they provide would be used. Participants were then asked to sign a consent form and/or provide verbal consent, and with their permission, the interview could be audio recorded using a Dictaphone and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted around 30 to 45 minutes. Participants were not offered any incentive to participate.

2.2.Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and approved by Liverpool John Moores University (UREC ref no 23/PHI/003).

2.3.Data analyses

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and were imported into NVivo as were the student testimonials. Here they were coded and subsequently thematically analysed. Outcome star data was imported into SPSS and subsequently analysed. The findings of both qualitative and quantitative analyses were triangulated with collated literature to provide robust findings and recommendations.

3. Findings

3.1. Stakeholder Interviews

Stakeholders (n=3) discussed their roles in the design and implementation of the programme and their current roles within the organisation. Discussions centred on background to the interventions, programme aims and objectives, programme delivery, facilitators and barriers to implementation, outcomes and impact, areas for development, and sustainability.

3.1.1. *Background and Implementation: 'the vision'*

The quotes below show that all stakeholders had knowledge of the inception and background to the programme, which was a concept developed by a professional athlete with lived experience, and his wife Gemma

. The programme was intended to inspire the young people of St Helens to choose the correct path in life and avoid criminality, drugs, and antisocial behaviour. This concept was as a result of his own lived experience, which he shares with young people at the academy, as he believes it will help them not go down a similar path. He obtained qualifications in Youth Work and a mentoring course to equip him with the skills needed to work with these vulnerable young people.

"They felt due to the experiences that he had had, they felt that there could be something that post-retirement, they could do to help local youngsters and teens, really to help them to make the right choices, which he hadn't had guidance in that way" P1.

"... came up with an idea, the concept, so, boxing, guest speakers, like experts by experience, people they could learn off. And also, that personal development in the classroom, in between as well" P2.

*"He wanted to get the children off the streets of St Helens, into boxing, really. And his **vision** really was to have some kind of club or academy whereby they would be able to come out of school and attend the academy sort of once a week" P3.*

3.1.2. *Facilitators to Implementation: 'getting ourselves about'*

Initially, the programme was self-funded and later, organisational funding was received from the VRP and other local businesses. However, the main facilitator was through hard work and determination of those involved in the development and implementation. Factors that had to be considered were around safeguarding the young people on site, health and safety at the community centre, and aligning with schools' policies and procedures.

"invested their own money into getting it going ... and then a couple of local businesses put money in" P2.

“In terms of getting it from nothing to large, that was just through nothing but hard working in writing this behaviour programme, to be honest with you and getting all the processes and procedures into place, visiting the schools you know, showing them the behaviour programme” P3.

“For me because obviously because I'm from an education background, I was concerned whether the facility would be safe for the children because it's open to the general public. It's a community based boxing gym. There's a community cafe. So I was concerned about all of that. So had to put lots of things in place around in that and that that we know there's a lot of trust that's gone into it from schools” P3.

The next step was to then reach out to local schools and provide them with information about the programme. This involved emailing schools and visiting face-to-face to discuss how the programme would be structured and intended impacts. Furthermore, the pilot phase was given to schools free of charge and then some reduced price options were provided, so as to encourage 'buy in' to the programme and subsequent recommendations by word-of-mouth.

*“We've had to go to schools. I went to one last week, I sent a letter back in June 2021, and I keep sending them letters, keep sending them programs. I literally walked in the other day and handed the programme to reception. So, it's been a lot of stuff like that, **getting ourselves about**” P2.*

“We did a programme first with them completely for free, it was funded by Operation Stonehaven which has helped us massively. And then we did a condensed programme at a reduced price. They might potentially book one because it's at a reduced price” P2.

3.1.3. Implementation Challenges: 'a bit disheartening'

Some challenges were encountered along the way. These were primarily centred on making connections and receiving buy-in from schools. All stakeholders discussed this as being a challenge at the beginning. Participant 1 noted below that it was not because of lack of interest in the programme, but that some schools do not have enough funding to buy in to the programme. Furthermore, participant 2 believed that this was a larger problem in terms of government funding for all five Burroughs of Merseyside.

“It still is difficult if I'm honest ... It was hard with the schools because we sent all these letters out and I just didn't get any reply and that was a bit disheartening really. I sent it everywhere and I got a reply from one school which was quite disheartening coz there was a big spread on it in the local newspaper about what I was gonna do” P2.

“So the biggest challenge really for it was the schools, because for schools they like to work with alternative provisions that are OFSTED inspected. Costs was a big issue for schools as well and getting support from and funding really from third parties was always gonna be an issue” P1.

“For me I didn’t realise how, I don’t wanna say unfair, but the process regarding funding is in Merseyside. I know that a lot of the money comes from the Home Office or wherever, it comes up to Liverpool which takes a massive chunk of that and then Knowsley, Sefton, wherever it may be, and then St Helen’s is this tiny town on the outskirts of Merseyside, which is kind of forgotten about in a way, so a lot of the schools, they’ve not got the money, they love the program, but they’ve not got the money” P2.

3.1.4. Outcomes and Impact: ‘they just bloomed’

All stakeholders reported positive outcomes on those young people who had engaged in and competed the programme. Improvements encompassed a number of factors which included as increased confidence, improved self-esteem, anger management and improvement in school attendance and behaviours at school. Participant 1 believed that the setting of Think FAST was a huge factor in these success stories as whilst students are engaging in discussions similar to a classroom, the delivery is less formal than their school classroom. The success of the programme was evident for example, maintained relationships with certain schools who return each semester with referrals to Think FAST.

“I think if we hired a room and use their facilities [schools] I still think it wouldn't have the same impact. I think especially using a professional gym with their sort of rules and respectfulness and all that, I think that really works well and you know I do think that that really helps them too” P1.

“We had some really big success stories. So we've if I go back to the beginning, we work with a school that we've now maintained a really strong relationship with them. They send a cohort of children, and they send two groups every term and they have done for two years now” P3.

Significant behavioural improvements were reported by all stakeholders with particular improvements observed in confidence and self-esteem. Further, improvements in school were also noted, as in the quote below, whereby weekly behaviour points at school decreased as a result of the student engaging with programme.

*“A lot of them they are just on that cusp of being excluded or do you know the potential is there. A lot of these students it's where they have come from, they have never had a chance to go ‘yeah, I can do this’. There was one particular group they came in they came in they were very had no confidence lots of them had their hoods up and by the graduation **they just bloomed**. It was a mixed bunch some talented boxers still boxing now, and it was just lovely to see them shine” P1.*

“They had two boys and that came to us with over 150 behaviour points weekly. That's hell of a lot. And he was overweight, massively overweight, always fighting in school and came to us for 12 weeks and the behaviour points by week four had reduced by 60% and that continued to be a pattern for him. And also, he decided to take up the boxing in the evening, which was great, he lost weight. He was a really big success story” P3.

3.1.5. *Development & Sustainability: 'support families'*

Areas for development of the programme was noted by all stakeholders as the need or possibility for a parents programme that could be run separately from the young people. This was based on the idea that parents may require some guidance in parenting specifically identifying problems at school, helping their children get through school, and with any behavioural issues they may have.

"We have looked into the possibility of having a family meeting as well that runs, not side by side, and not together, maybe not as long, maybe six weeks or something just to support families as well so where they understand. I mean at the graduation, it's amazing you know how much more you get because the families are involved and is lovely it's just lovely to see and to be proud of them" P1.

It was stated that sustainability of the programme is dependent upon funding first and foremost, in particular, the possibility that educational organisations such as Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) may restrict schools from out-sourcing alternative provision services. Furthermore, continuing to maintain current relationships with schools and other services, as well as creating new ones was notably significant for sustainability and positive outcomes in discussions with stakeholders.

"I think schools are gonna really struggle because I think schools, once they send the children and I think they can see that it works. But I think schools are gonna be under massive pressure from Ofsted to sort their behaviour out in-house and I think there's gonna be a lot of pressure to stop sending children to alternative provisions and that you that you sort your you know you sort your issues out in-house by the money being spent there" P3.

"So a lot of the children from that school are already known to other agencies in Liverpool. So they're already known to people like Footsteps that are working with children whose parents are alcoholics, drug addicts, they already have got a social worker, so it's like when you get all of us together, that's when it works, I feel" P3.

4. Secondary data analysis

4.1. Outcome Stars

Pre and post programme Outcome Stars (see appendix 1) were analysed ($n=26$; Male=20, Female=6) to measure the impact of the programme on different aspects of the students wellbeing, behaviour at school, relationships, and knowledge and understanding of risky behaviours. Paired samples t -tests showed significant increases from day one of the programme to the final day for physical health $t(25) = -5.25$, $p < .001$; emotional and mental health $t(25) = -5.99$, $p < .001$; understanding and managing your emotions $t(25) = -6.92$, $p < .001$; understanding of the term 'county lines' $t(25) = -8.86$, $p < .001$; attendance in school $t(25) = -2.78$, $p = .005$; behaviour in school $t(25) = -7.04$, $p < .001$; relationships with family $t(25) = -4.97$, $p < .001$; taking responsibility for your actions $t(25) = -8.04$, $p < .001$; and knowledge of the impact of drug and alcohol misuse $t(25) = -6.58$, $p < .001$. There was a significant decrease in involvement with anti-social behaviour $t(25) = -2.18$, $p = .009$ (see figures 1 and 2).

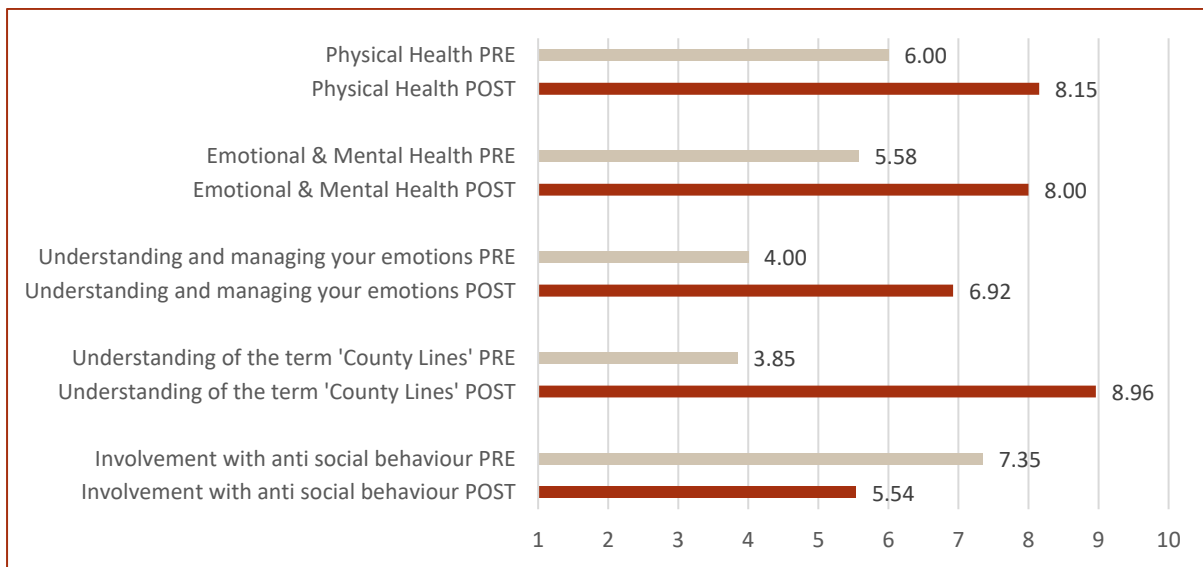


Figure 1 Outcome Star mean scores pre and post completion of Think FAST Programme

4.1. Student testimonials

Student testimonials ($n=35$) were provided by Think FAST Academy for analysis and inclusion in the evaluation. Students were asked to focus on why they were referred, what they have learned, what they enjoyed most, what their highlight was, and how their behaviour has changed or been impacted.

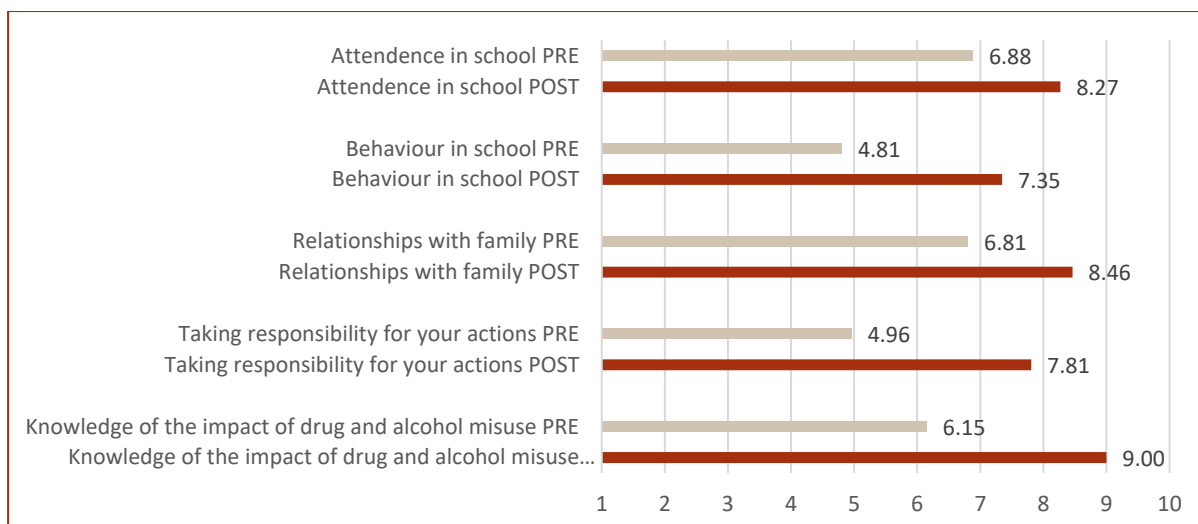


Figure 2 Outcome Star mean scores pre and post completion of Think FAST Programme

4.1.1. Reason for Referral to Think F.A.S.T. Academy: 'behavioural issues'

Students of Think FAST Academy were primarily referred by their school for behavioural problems that manifest on school grounds. This included aggression, being disruptive in class, non-attendance, not finding enjoyment at school. Some young people who had dyslexia and ADHD were referred as they struggled to concentrate in class or to complete homework.

"I was referred to Think FAST because I wasn't enjoying school and needed help with my anger".

*"I came to Think FAST because I'm on a personal support plan for overall **behavioural issues at school**".*

"I was recommended to come to Think FAST because in school I would mess about and get angry - punching the school's property".

"I was asked to come on the programme because I struggle to go to lessons, I can't keep my mouth shut and I get overwhelmed with everything that goes on and I tend to walk around".

"I was referred to Think FAST because I do not behave well in school. I often find I get into trouble when in class. I particularly struggle to sit still - often needing to move around after about twenty minutes."

4.1.2. Facilitating Engagement: 'I have learnt a lot'

The guest speaker part of the programme was favoured by almost all who completed the programme. Not only was it favoured, but most pupils reported learning something new at the talks particularly the guest speakers who discussed county lines, the police, knife crime, and drug and

alcohol awareness. It was evident that the students benefitted significantly from the stories by those with lived experience.

“I have really enjoyed being at Think FAST and having the company of the people that work here, and the guest speakers. My behaviour has improved in school, and I have learnt a lot of things from the guest speakers.”

“I enjoyed the talk from Paul, who worked for the Police. He told us how he became a policeman after a very poor upbringing which eventually led him to being homeless.”

“Connor was one of my favourite guest speakers. He spoke about things that happened in my life. He made me understand and I've tried to change my life.”

“I have also really liked the guest speaker programme particularly the drug and alcohol presentations as they were interactive. We used beer goggles and drove motor-controlled cars to understand the difference.”

Most students also thoroughly enjoyed the boxing aspect of the programme. Whilst some were a little apprehensive at first, they reported that over time they felt more comfortable and relaxed and engaged with the boxing. The team aspect of boxing was reported as being positive as well as the students reporting getting fit. Furthermore, boxing also provided pupils with discipline and control for anger which was reported by many.

“My favourite part of the programme was the boxing; this was because it helped me get my anger out.”

“The most challenging part of the programme for me was also doing the boxing as I realised it was a hard and difficult sport to do ... The most interesting thing I learned about myself was that I could actually Box and that I am good at it.”

“During my time I have enjoyed the boxing sessions with Martin and Dom. I have learnt lots of new techniques, discipline in the gym and enjoyed sparring and learning new stuff.”

“At the first session, I felt awkward because I used to box here but stopped. I felt welcomed by the team at Think FAST. I feel like the academy has helped me even more because I have stopped getting into trouble and started back boxing.”

Discussions as part of the strengthening minds workbook were in an informal classroom-style setting. Students reported enjoying the group discussions and most reported an extremely positive view of the leaders and of having great relationships with them. This facilitated their engagement in the programme as a whole.

“All the sessions we have covered with Lesley, Gemma, and Liz were a great help in understanding this great dark world and how to avoid going down the road of crime.”

“We learned about stress, anger and emotions and it really made me understand them and think about them a lot more.”

"I learned to work hard on it as the sessions each week weren't very long and when looking back, I can see the importance of the sessions."

"I enjoyed the topic of positive communication . We explored topics such as passive, assertive, and aggressive communication which was interesting."

4.1.3. Outcomes and Impact: 'I can cope a lot better'

Positive outcomes on behaviour outside of the school environment were reported by most students. These included improved active listening skills, improved coping skills in stressful situations, and better mental health and wellbeing.

"it has helped me with my anger and my mental health and having less breakdowns."

"The staff at Think FAST have also taught me how to control my feelings a lot better, I can cope a lot better with things that have happened to me."

"The most interesting thing I learned about myself is that I can listen when I want to."

"I have learnt to control my reactions much better in certain situations and I think overall my behaviour has improved."

Significant positive impacts on behaviour in school were also widely reported, in particular, student attendance and engagement at school was getting better, behavioural points had decreased, and abiding by school rules had also developed.

"I didn't used to wear my uniform but now I try to - especially my tie. It's less of a hassle with the teachers - wearing it!"

"During the 10-week programme I think my attendance has got better. This is because I have been setting myself targets and then we discuss them."

"Last week was my best-behaved week at school reducing my behaviour points by half. I need to continue to work on this."

Other areas whereby significant positive outcomes were reported by students were centred on improved self-esteem, confidence, and maturity. Many attributed this specifically to the leaders of the strengthening minds programme who were considered *"inspiring"*. One student, see below, noted that all aspects of the academy were pertinent in his improvement and overcoming his low confidence and behavioural problems.

"I feel that over the weeks I am more respectful as a person, and I think this is because I am becoming more mature."

"I have been inspired by Lesley, Gemma, and Liz how much effort and great help they have been to me. They have given be a much better hope for my future and have inspired me to the greatest version of myself, achieving whatever I set my mind to."

“My first impression of Think FAST was that it was pointless, and I felt awkward because I wasn’t confident enough, however, during my 12 weeks, I have covered a range of topics to help me on my journey. I enjoyed the boxing and guest speakers and have found new ways to control my behaviour.”

4.1.4. *Set and Setting: ‘Here I listen to the rules’*

As previously reported by stakeholders, setting of the programme was a significant positive impact on the young people. They believed that they were more respected at the academy, the rules were easier to follow than at school, and that there was an overall good atmosphere at the gym. It is clear that the informal structured style of teaching at Think FAST is a major facilitator to success of the programme.

*“The staff here are way nicer than the teachers at school. **Here I listen to the rules** because they are easier to follow than the ones in school.”*

“The staff here at Think FAST are very respectful to us.”

“When I first arrived at the academy the atmosphere was good, and the staff were all nice and friendly.”

“When I arrived for my first day at the academy, I felt awkward however I have been made to feel really welcome over the course of the 12 weeks.”

5. Summary of Key Findings & Recommendations

Martin Murray's Think F.A.S.T (Finding a Solution Together) Academy was established in November 2021 to provide a range of high-quality health, fitness, educational, and personal development programmes for children and young people in St Helens and beyond, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in the community who may be at risk for anti-social behaviour. The academy offers a 10-week structured programme of activities for young male and female school pupils aged 11 – 19 years who are referred in by their school. The programme is based around boxing, fitness, health, and life skills which is modelled on the England Boxing Academy Model. This report presented the findings from a process and outcome evaluation of the Think FAST Academy detailing programme implementation and impacts for the young people of St Helens schools.

5.1. Implementation and delivery of the programme

The findings of this evaluation have alluded some key findings regarding the initial development, implementation, and first 18 months running of the programme. Whilst the programme experienced challenges to early implementation across schools in St Helens, most of these have been or are close to being overcome. Referrals to Think FAST Academy are increasing and significant positive outcomes and impacts for young people in schools have emerged.

Whilst the programme was initially self-funded by Martin himself, stakeholders noted the significant impact funding from the VRP and local businesses had on getting the programme off the ground. It was noted that government funding in the area was either a much smaller pot than others receive, or, simply not available and that St Helens was not considered in the same light as the other four Burroughs of Merseyside when funding grants are being allocated. Continued funding and support will be required for the sustainability of Think FAST Academy in the future.

Of consideration during the design and implementation of the programme was safeguarding of the young people/students who would enrol. The behaviour and wellbeing coordinator discussed the importance of this and ensuring that procedures were in place to protect the health and safety of the young people. Because the programme was intended to work in partnership with the schools, it was decided that safeguarding procedures would align with each of the schools own policies and procedures.

One of the significant barriers faced during implementation was the difficulty connecting with schools. Some did not respond, some were slow to respond, and some responded and were either not interested or did not have the funding to avail of the programme. Initially, the programme was offered on a free basis with the aim of getting the programme out there and familiar among schools

in St Helen's. This was successful as a number of schools at St Helen's are now engaged with or have availed of the programme at least once. Furthermore, continued contact either through email or face-to-face at schools by stakeholders is facilitating more knowledge and interest in the programme.

5.2. Impact of Think FAST Academy

Evidence on the outcomes and impacts of the programme were evident in the interviews with stakeholders and from the analyses of Think FAST monitoring data in the form of Outcome Stars and student testimonials.

Programme leaders reported observing positive outcomes for most of the students who completed the programme. The trajectory of improvements from week 1 to week 10 were most significant for behaviour at school, and self-esteem, confidence, and anger management - not only at school - but at home and when at the academy. Particular improvements were noted for female students who were more apprehensive than male students to engage with the boxing, however, through guidance and support over the course of the programme many were confident enough to engage and enjoy the boxing aspect. The boxing aspect is important particularly for those who may have been referred because of their aggressive behaviour at school. Boxing is a vehicle for the students to let go or release their anger or aggression as well as the secondary benefits of learning discipline, an integral part of a boxing gym. In terms of behaviour at school, the stakeholders reported 'behaviour points' being significantly reduced by the end of the 10 weeks. This indicates that the programme has impacted the students positively and that they are utilising the skills they have learned whilst at school. Stakeholders reported evidence of success of the programme through schools who return each semester with a new cohort of students. It is important going forward that this is monitored and reported as it will facilitate engagement and relationships with other schools and therefore, buy-in to the programme.

All those interviewed discussed the need for a programme to run alongside the students 10 weeks for parents. It was felt that it is important to also include the parents who may not have the skills required to support their children overcome behavioural issues. Furthermore, parents may not have a broad knowledge and understanding of some of the topics covered and would benefit from similar discussions. This should be considered going forward particularly when applying for funding.

Of interest, the programme leaders believed that the setting of the programme was a significant factor in the students engaging with the programme as it is very different to a school setting or typical school day. The programme was described as informal, flexible which allowed programme

leaders to tailor programme delivery for the needs of each cohort of students. It is important for the future that the Think FAST programme continues to operate outside of the school environment to ensure successful outcomes for the students. Student testimonials also highlighted the significance of the informal, non-school like setting and delivery of the programme. There were also testimonials that alluded to the students' respect for the programme leaders who most pupils felt very at ease with and able to build positive relationships with. Again, this is a significant factor which should continue, to provide positive outcomes for the students of St Helens' schools.

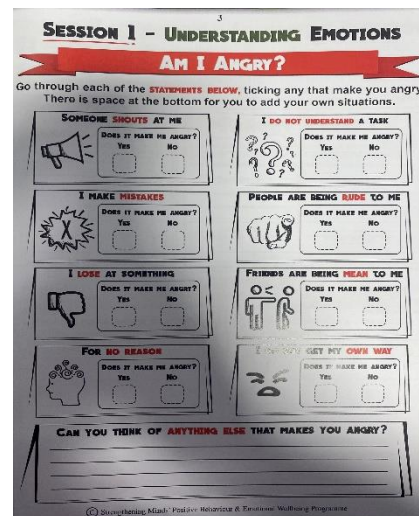
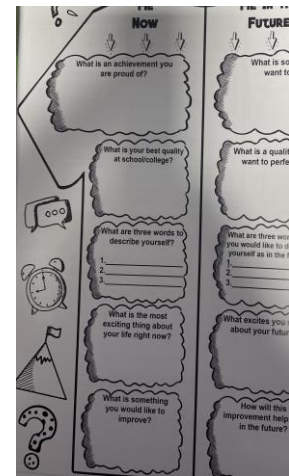
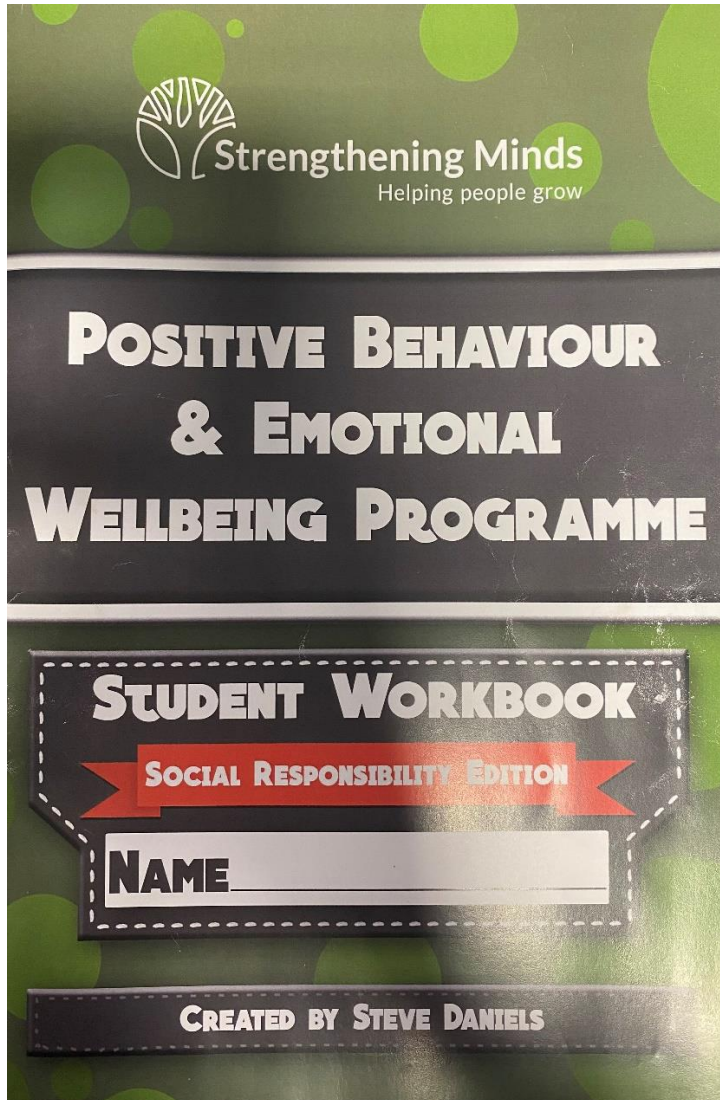
Outcome Stars completed by students on day 1 and the final day, showed that there were positive improvements in all ten items on the star. The most significant increase in the average scores (out of 10) was for knowledge and understanding of County Lines (+5.10). This was followed by increased understanding and managing your emotions (+3), behaviour in school (+2.5), and knowledge of drugs and alcohol misuse (+2.8). There was also a significant decrease in average scores for involvement with anti-social behaviour (-1.8). This is also reflected in the self-reported testimonials by students who really enjoyed the guest speaker aspect of the programme which included topics such as drug and alcohol awareness, county lines/gangs, and lessons learnt from lived experience. The lived experience aspect seemed to be poignant for the students which facilitated the learning and subsequent positive impacts of the programme.

5.3. Conclusion

The findings suggest a number of key learnings about the process and outcomes of Think FAST Academy. Overall, the programme offers a unique learning environment for students of St Helens schools to learn about negative behaviours, low self-esteem, preparation for the future, level of school engagement, and building positive relationships, based around boxing, fitness, health, and life skills. The evaluation has provided robust evidence of a successful programme in engaging and supporting young people who are struggling to maintain their school place and those at risk of exclusion and/or with behavioural vulnerabilities/complexities.

6. Appendices

6.1 Appendix 1 Strengthening Minds Workbook



6.1.Appendix 2 Outcome Star

Martin Murray's Think F.A.S.T Academy

email: info@thinkfast.academy



Outcome Star

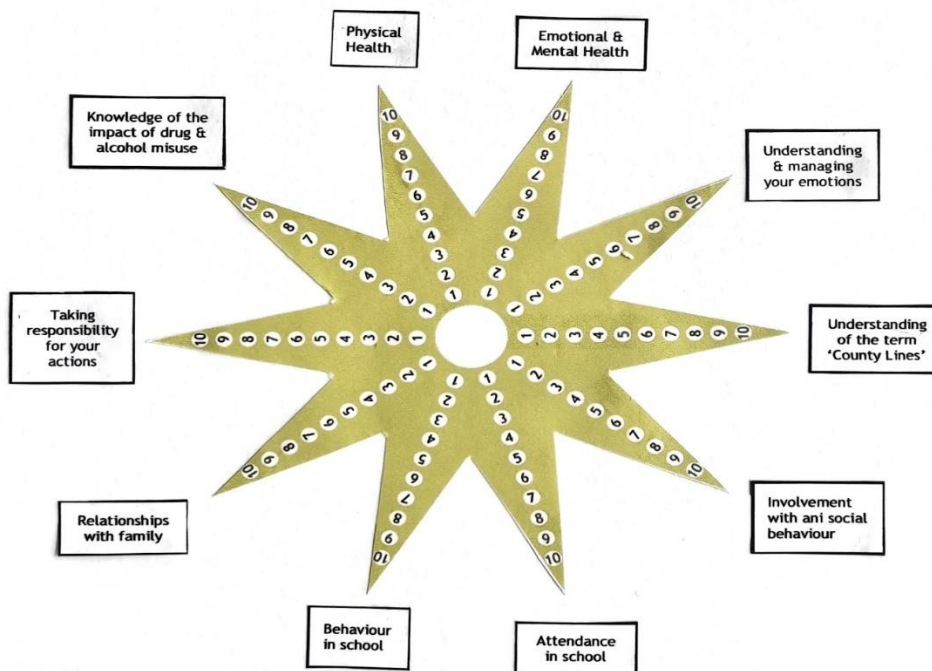
Name:

Date of Final Session:

Referred by:

Completed with:

Start Date of Programme:



1 - 2 - extremely poor
3 - poor
4 - 5 - satisfactory/average

6 - good
7 - 8 - very good
9 - 10 - excellent



THINK Finding
A
Solution
Together



THINK Finding
A
Solution
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Teaching the youth of today to:
'Think F.A.S.T'
 in life for a brighter tomorrow

- Developing minds
- Improving lives
- Changing Futures

