

ISA Awards 2024 Case Study: Award for Excellence and Innovation in Mental Health and Wellbeing



SLINDON COLLEGE

SEPTEMBER 2025



History of the School

Nestled within the stunning South Downs National Park, Slindon College is an independent day and boarding school for boys aged 8–18. The College occupies a beautiful Georgian manor house surrounded by acres of woodland and gardens, offering a uniquely calm and restorative environment that supports learning and emotional development in equal measure.

Slindon College provides a tailored education for pupils who may not have thrived in larger or more traditional settings, particularly those with mild learning differences or social, emotional, and communication needs. Its ethos is deeply rooted in understanding the individual, removing barriers to learning, and nurturing each pupil's confidence and sense of self-worth.

Under the leadership of Headteacher Sotiria Vlahodimou, the College has evolved into a national example of best practice in inclusive education. The school's culture of care and respect permeates every aspect of its operations—from its small class sizes and specialist teaching to its innovative Mental Fitness framework, which has redefined how mental health and wellbeing are discussed, supported, and celebrated across the community.

Sotiria Vlahodimou
Headteacher



The driving force behind this approach is Mr Adam Sharpe, former Assistant Head (Pastoral and Safeguarding) and leader of the Mental Fitness Team. Drawing on pupil voice, Mr Sharpe deliberately replaced the phrase mental health with mental fitness—a term that shifts focus from deficit to strength and emphasises the ongoing, proactive nature of emotional wellbeing.

This philosophy underpins the College's pastoral vision: to ensure every pupil is emotionally equipped, confident, and mentally fit to flourish both within school and in their wider lives.



Aims

Slindon College's award-winning approach to mental health and wellbeing is guided by four core objectives that shape the daily experience of pupils and staff alike.

To Normalise Mental Health Conversations

The College aims to remove stigma and create a shared understanding of mental health as an integral part of life. Through annual and weekly events—such as Mental Health Week, Inside Out Day, The Slindon Memory Tree, Woodland Walks, Gratitude Journaling, and Time to Talk sessions—pupils learn that emotional ups and downs are natural and manageable.

These initiatives are designed to “usualise” mental health, encouraging open dialogue among peers and staff. Activities are led by the Mental Fitness Team and frequently co-designed with pupils, ensuring they remain relevant, inclusive, and engaging. By embedding this culture throughout the year rather than confining it to single events, Slindon has created a school where emotional literacy is as valued as academic achievement.

To Promote Self-Regulation and Emotional Awareness Through ‘Learning Energy’

A cornerstone of Slindon’s mental fitness philosophy is the Learning Energy framework—a simple but powerful tool used throughout the school to help pupils monitor and manage their energy levels.

Staff noticed that when pupils were fatigued or overstimulated, their ability to learn and regulate emotions was reduced. The Learning Energy model uses visual cues to help pupils identify whether their energy levels are “too low,” “too high,” or “just right.” Pupils are then supported to use self-regulation strategies—such as mindfulness breaks, movement, hydration, or quiet reflection—to return to a balanced state.

This shared language allows pupils to articulate their emotions confidently, empowers them to take ownership of their wellbeing, and equips teachers with consistent methods for responding to dysregulation. Over time, this initiative has transformed classroom culture, helping learners become more self-aware, resilient, and ready to engage.



To Strengthen Restorative and Reflective Practice

Recognising that behaviour is often a form of communication, Slindon College has introduced the Interventions Learning Support Assistant (iLSA) role—a post designed to provide targeted, restorative intervention following incidents of emotional or behavioural difficulty.

Instead of punitive measures, the iLSA facilitates Internal Reflection Sessions where pupils can process what happened, explore underlying emotions, and develop strategies for future self-management. This approach, rooted in restorative justice, promotes empathy and accountability while preserving the pupil’s dignity and reintegration into the community.

According to then SENCo Mark Robson, the appointment of a dedicated Interventions Learning Support Assistant to support pupils with emotional and behavioural issues was a massive success. It helped enable pupils to reflect on different situations and improve their resilience and problem-solving skills.

This reflective process has contributed significantly to reduced behavioural incidents and increased emotional intelligence across the student body.

To Measure and Continuously Improve Wellbeing

Slindon College takes a data-informed approach to pastoral care. The Mental Fitness and Wellbeing Survey, completed twice a year by both staff and pupils, draws on the Boing Boing Resilience Framework. It includes multiple-choice questions assessing feelings of safety, self-management, relationships, and problem-solving.

Results are carefully analysed, and any area scoring below an 80% positivity threshold triggers targeted action and review. For example, when surveys revealed that pupils wanted more help solving problems, the College created the iLSA role as a direct response. This process ensures that every wellbeing initiative is evidence-based and evolving, driven by pupil voice and real outcomes rather than assumptions

OUTCOMES

Slindon College's holistic and proactive wellbeing strategy has achieved outstanding results across emotional, academic, and community dimensions.

- Pupil surveys demonstrate exceptional confidence and engagement with mental health topics. Over 90% of pupils say the College helps them make healthy choices, and nearly nine in ten feel safe all or most of the time. The majority report that they can calm down and manage emotions independently—evidence of the success of Learning Energy and Time to Talk. These results reflect not only improved emotional regulation but also a deeper sense of belonging and trust between pupils and staff.
- The introduction of restorative reflection has transformed the school's behavioural culture. Pupils are now more likely to self-refer for support or articulate how they are feeling, and staff report stronger relationships and a calmer, more empathetic atmosphere across the College. The iLSA's work has been instrumental in empowering pupils to learn from setbacks, rather than be defined by them.
- Slindon College's achievements in wellbeing have been nationally recognised through the Carnegie Centre of Excellence in Mental Health in Schools Award, affirming its commitment to systemic, measurable wellbeing practice.
- The most recent Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) report praised the College for its "excellent development of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-knowledge," noting that pupils "rapidly develop in their self-confidence, self-awareness and self-worth as they move through the school."
- By collecting longitudinal wellbeing data, Slindon College can track emotional growth alongside academic progress. The findings continually inform staff training, curriculum design, and pupil support strategies—ensuring that wellbeing remains a shared, evolving responsibility across the school.



NEXT STEPS

Slindon College remains committed to innovation and continual growth in its wellbeing provision. Future plans include:

Expanding the 'Learning Energy' Framework

Embedding Learning Energy more deeply across the curriculum, using it in subject lessons and boarding life to support self-regulation throughout the day.

Deepening Pupil Leadership in Wellbeing

Forming a Mental Fitness Pupil Council to co-design activities, review survey results, and develop new initiatives, ensuring the pupil voice continues to drive change.

Strengthening Parental Partnerships

Hosting wellbeing workshops for parents and carers to share strategies for supporting emotional regulation and resilience at home, aligning family and school language around mental fitness.

Broadening External Collaboration

Partnering with local schools, charities, and mental health organisations to share best practice and contribute to the wider wellbeing conversation in education.

Enhancing Data-Driven Evaluation

Building on the Mental Fitness Survey to include staff wellbeing and parental perspectives, creating a full 360° picture of the College community's emotional health.

Conclusion

Slindon College's pioneering approach to mental health and wellbeing demonstrates how a small, inclusive school can lead systemic change through compassion, innovation, and data-informed practice. By reimagining mental health as mental fitness, and by embedding reflective, restorative, and empowering frameworks across every aspect of school life, Slindon has cultivated a community where pupils truly thrive—mentally, emotionally, and academically.

As Headteacher Sotiria Vlahodimou summarises:

“At Slindon College we have embedded robust mental health initiatives which provide a supportive environment. Our programmes enhance self-esteem, strengthen the school community, and promote healthy choices. Every pupil leaves here with the confidence and emotional toolkit to succeed beyond school.”

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