



SWRAC
Specialist Independent College

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2025

WELCOME

Prom Nights, Paddles & Proud Moments

Welcome to the Summer 2025 edition of our newsletter – the one place where you can catch up on all the action from across our centres, from staff reshuffles to prom night awards like “Staff Member Most Likely to Get Stuck in the Toilet” (yes, that is an actual award, thought of by our student council!).

I have the pleasure of writing this little section after the majority of the newsletter has been prepared, so it acts as an aide-memoire for me. Looking back, even over a few months always surprises me with the things that students and staff have been up to. Yet again it's been an action-packed term here at SWRAC. Learners have been meeting mayors, winning awards, taking on work placements, creating music videos, and even designing their own ice cream parlours. Meanwhile, our staff have been equally busy, changing roles faster than you can say “supported internship” – and still managing to keep everything running smoothly.

One of the highlights this year has been our Outward Bound and residential activities. From canoeing in Devon to tackling abseiling walls and evening discos, these experiences aren't just a break from routine – they're a powerful part of what we do. They help our learners build resilience when the paddle gets heavy, confidence when they try something new, independence when they spend time away from home, and co-operation when the tent won't quite go up (and it's raining). These are the moments that shape skills for life – and usually make for the best stories afterwards!

I still remember with huge fondness the activity weeks I did when I was 16ish (heavens, that's 46 years ago!) and how it helped form my personality for adult life. Confidence and resilience are just SO IMPORTANT to help prepare people for their futures, but I am sure you know that.

A special shout-out to the Very Group (the online catalogue) – such lovely people. They support our students so much in Merseyside. They included our students in a fashion photo shoot (great photos) and even gave us their photographer for the day to take some of the lovely photos that are in this edition. So, thank you Very!

This is our longest newsletter to date so please enjoy the stories, successes, and sunshine from across the SWRAC family.

Whether you're here for the big achievements, the small victories, or just the occasional unexpected comedy moment, I do hope you enjoy it as much as I did!

Adrian Gunner

ADRIAN GUNNER
MANAGING DIRECTOR

STAFF CHANGES

There have been a number of staff changes across the organisation.



In Boscombe, Rachel Taylor has taken over from Kerry Pedder following the safe arrival of her daughter.

Rachel has been with us for 9 years in a variety of roles, most recently overseeing the Supported Internship at BCP Council.

With Tracey Perren moving on to pastures new, Lauren Morris-Bourne now heads up the Dorchester centre, having joined us last year as a SENCO in Boscombe.



Rachel Taylor



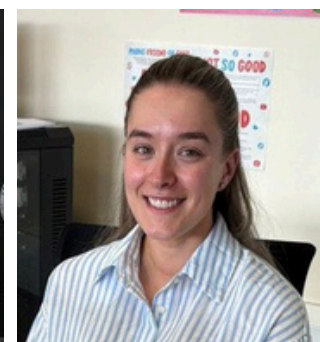
Lauren Morris-Bourne

In Liverpool, the significant expansion now means that Bev Kennedy is Regional Manager, while Claire Kennedy takes over the management of Bootle.

Jen Orr is the lead in newly opened Widnes, and Emma Lynch manages the Southport centre as well as being our new Designated Safeguarding Lead across all centres.



Claire Kennedy



Jen Orr

**GOOD LUCK IN YOUR NEW ROLES
EVERYONE - WE'RE LUCKY TO HAVE
YOU!**

SUMMER IN STYLE

This summer, we brought all our Dorset centres together for a truly unforgettable SWRAC Prom and Awards Evening, hosted at Merley House. Learners and staff arrived in style (some even in posh cars!) and enjoyed a night of music, celebration, and connection.

The event included an awards ceremony with fun categories like Best Dressed, Most Likely to Get Stuck in the Toilet, and Heart of Gold. Laughter, dancing, and selfies at the photo booth rounded out the evening.

It was fantastic to see so many learners celebrating the end of term in style and showing just how far they've come. A brilliant way to cap off a successful year!



RESIDENTIAL TRIP TO DEVON

In May, over 20 learners from across Dorset attended a 2-night residential at Calvert Exmoor, where they experienced canoeing, horse riding, abseiling, and a group disco.

For many, it was their first time away from home, and their confidence grew massively over just a few days. We had incredible weather too!



BOSCOMBE UPDATE

Rachel Taylor

Firstly, I am delighted to have stepped up into Kerry Pedder's role, following the safe arrival of her baby girl. All of us at the centre wish her and her family the very best!

Kerry has left me with some very exciting updates to share from a very busy, vibrant and active period which has been full of opportunities.

A standout moment was our BCP Supported Internship Graduation, held at the Civic Centre and attended by local dignitaries including Graham Farrant, CEO of BCP Council.

Learners received certificates recognising their achievements, and many are now moving into job applications and interviews with confidence.



Our Prep for Life learners participated in a 6-week music project with Absolute Music, working with a local artist to compose and record a song. The finished track is still in production, but it's about being your authentic self and not comparing yourself to others.

In July, we celebrated Sports Day under sunny skies, with all learners rotating through fun activities like archery, football, and relay races. It was great to see learners from different groups working together.



Our learners also engaged with the local community through work experience at the Kings Park Reggae Festival, and attended a powerful production from Vita Nova exploring themes of gang culture, crime, and addiction. These experiences prompted meaningful discussions among students.



The local mayor invited learners to the Mayor's Parlour for tea, cake, and a behind-the-scenes tour. It was a first for many and made a lasting impression.



In other exciting news, former learner, Alfie, won the Supported Intern of the Year Award in the Dorset Apprenticeship Awards, organised by Dorset Chamber. This was for his internship with BCP Council.



Looking ahead, we're thrilled to announce our new Project Search internship with Amazon in Poole, starting in September. This will offer learners insight into warehousing and logistics.

The centre is being refreshed ahead of welcoming new learners in September, and our rooftop garden is now in full bloom - providing a peaceful space for learning and reflection.



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DORCHESTER UPDATE

Lauren Morris-Bourne

Dorchester has had a packed few months with a strong focus on transitions, inclusion, and hands-on learning.

Our THRIVE learners embraced inclusivity by celebrating Pride Month both on and off site. We created colourful fruit cups and held a session exploring the history and meaning behind Pride, followed by a visit to Bournemouth Pride Festival, where learners danced, spectated the parade, and met performers. A particular favourite was when one of the acts came out in a Mario-themed dress.

The group also went into Weymouth to look for places and people they could go to and get help if needed. We came across the police and RNLI who were happy to chat with us about safety when out in the public before taking a photo with the learners.

Outdoor learning also played a major role - we've installed a new outdoor gym, which students have begun using for fitness breaks and group sessions. Nature walks with speaker David Pengelly introduced learners to local wildlife and encouraged mindfulness and observation. We've also been making animal runs for our small furry friends.

On site, we are converting one of the barns which will become the new home for our THRIVE learners, with a cold kitchen, its own garden, and a dedicated space for front-of-house training. It will also become our main reception, which the students will work in, meeting and greeting visitors and checking them in.

We've also been working with the Friendship Club, a local group of adults with learning disabilities. They use the site regularly for picnics and social time.

In July, we hosted a successful Transition Day for new learners joining in September. Current and incoming learners mixed together through fun activities such as escape rooms, music quizzes, art, scavenger hunts, and water balloon games. It was a brilliant way to break the ice and settle nerves.

Numbers for September are strong and we're looking forward to welcoming everyone.

Coming up, we also have placements with ASDA in Weymouth lined up and are looking forward to the Dorset County Show again, complete with the donkeys, so come along and see us if you are in the area!

THRIVE UPDATE

Rachel Rainsbury

It's been a truly uplifting few months for our THRIVE learners, packed with creativity, teamwork, and personal development.

The BIG news is that Merley House will become the home of SWRAC HQ and all THRIVE services will move over to Winton from September.

Recent project weeks have been exciting. THRIVE Skills learners created their own Ice Cream Parlour, designing logos, choosing flavours, making the ice cream, and serving their peers.

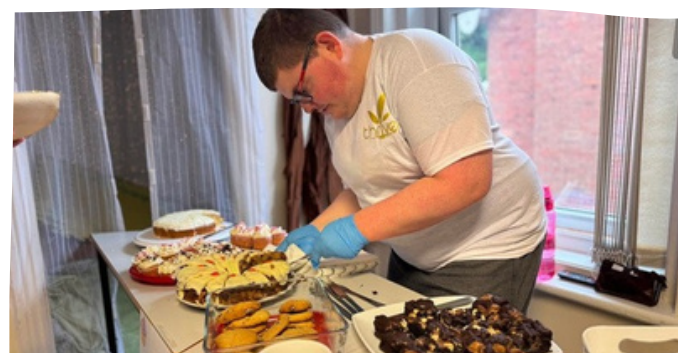
Meanwhile, THRIVE+ spent weeks creating a powerful music video to 'This is Me' from The Greatest Showman. They wrote storyboards, practiced choreography, filmed on location - including under the ASDA underpass - and edited the footage themselves. The premiere included a red carpet and a video message from The Chase's Anne Hegerty!

We also hosted a bake sale for STARS (Narcolepsy UK), raising nearly £90. Although a planned car wash was postponed due to thunderstorms, learners showed incredible leadership in organising and promoting the event.

THRIVE Social learners created their own scrapbooks during project week to commemorate their time with us as they prepare for new adventures.

In even more exciting news, we're introduced Cubbie, our brand new personalised digital sensory booth and the first in Dorset!

The 'Cubbie' is designed to support our learners with SEND by helping them manage emotions, reduce stress, and refocus and all in just 5, 10 or 15 minutes with calming lights, soothing music, and relaxing.



We've also been working with Ringwood LD, attending football sessions, which everyone has really enjoyed.

September brings many new starters and plans are already in motion for Children in Need in November, complete with an appearance from Pudsey Bear. We're also going to be transforming Winton into a seasonal celebration space with our Winter Fayre.

See Cubbie featured in the Daily Echo!

<https://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/.../25347175.sensory.../>

BOOTLE AND WIDNES UPDATE

Bev Kennedy and Jen Orr

This term has seen incredible growth and development across all three of our Merseyside centres: Bootle, Widnes and Southport

Bootle and Widnes have had a fantastic few months, with new partnerships, inspiring guest speakers, and some brilliant learner outcomes.

Our Bootle students attended the Inclusive Hub SEN gym for their Health and Wellbeing sessions.

Guest speakers have made a big impact, including RNLI talks on water safety, local police presentations on knife crime, and sessions from the NHS sexual health team.

A standout moment was Dylan Williams from Stop to Shelter sharing his powerful story of turning his life around, which really resonated with our students.

One of our proudest moments came with Thomas, who secured paid employment at Greene King as front-of-house staff while continuing his maths, English, employability studies on his Supported Internship.

Work experience continues to thrive, with learners volunteering at Friends of South Park Allotments - a community-run project where they help grow fruit and vegetables and maintain the site.

Learners are already on placement at Lumiere Soft Play Centre too, the first SEND-focused facility of its kind in the area, and we hope to have Supported Internships live later in the year.

Placements at the VERY Group have expanded, with learners running a retail pop up shop recently in Aintree and opportunities with Alder Hey Hospital and Kingsley & Co are giving learners diverse and meaningful work experience too.

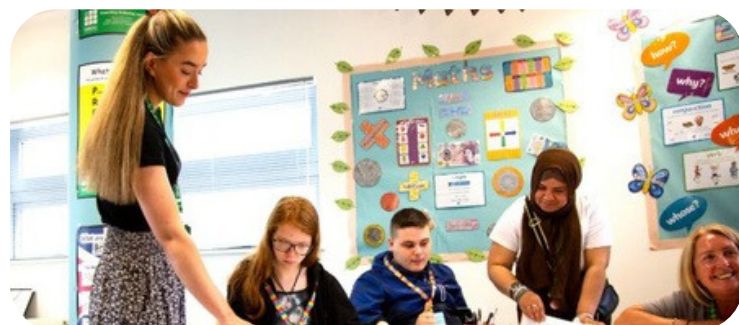
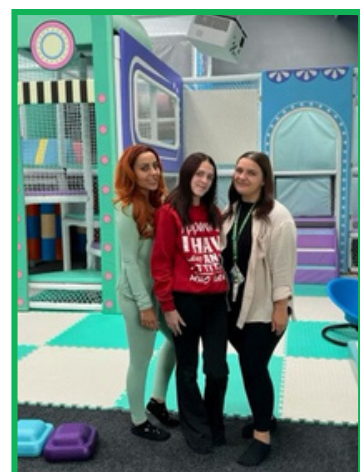
All centres came together for a joint Outward Bound day trip at Great Tower Scout Camp in the Lake District. Activities included archery, team building, and a campfire lunch and we hope to return for a residential trip later in the year!

In Bootle, a partnership with the Bootle FC Inclusion Team will see learners volunteering with the club, taking part in match-day activities, and even using our classroom facilities for football-themed learning sessions.

Widnes, our newest centre, has been quick to establish itself. The refurbished classrooms look fantastic, and new tutors and LSAs have joined the team.

We've just had our leavers' party too, which was a great chance to celebrate learners progressing into employment, further education, or volunteering.

In other great news, Tasha Melia and Sophie Acikgoz have both been promoted to Prepare for Life Tutors in Bootle and Widnes after completing their teaching qualifications with us!



SOUTHPORT UPDATE

Emma Lynch

Southport has enjoyed a packed few months of learning, achievement, and community engagement.

We recently completed our Vocational Skills Programme, with 12 learners achieving functional skills qualifications and NOCN Level 1 awards.

Many have now secured progression routes - some to local colleges, others into apprenticeships, and several into Supported Internships starting in September.

Art has taken centre stage too, with learners contributing pieces to an Adventure Land exhibition celebrating the best of Southport. Each artwork reflected something the learner loves about the area, from the beach to the funfair. Seeing their work displayed was a proud moment for everyone involved.

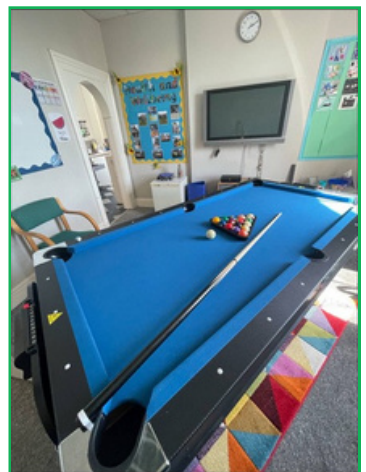
We're gearing up to launch Supported Internships from September, expanding opportunities for learners to gain hands-on experience with local employers.

Other work placements are already lined up for the new academic year include The British Heart Foundation stores, and The Atkinson arts - an exciting cultural venue where learners can explore event management, customer service, and archiving.

We took full advantage of the glorious weather too during the last few weeks, hosting an entrepreneurship event, for which the learners set up a car wash. Then we had a trip to the ice cream van for a well deserved cool-down!

As we head into autumn, Southport's numbers are looking strong and the team is ready to welcome them into a centre that's buzzing with opportunity, creativity, and the drive to help every learner find their pathway forward.

Classrooms have been reorganised and upgraded, with building work creating larger, more versatile spaces for group learning.





SAFEGUARDING UPDATE

Emma Lynch

I am delighted to now be your new Designated Safeguarding Lead.

Below is a quick update on your DDSL's before moving on to a general update:

- Adrian Gunner, Maria Fincham - all centres
- Bev Kennedy, Steph Logan - Bootle, Southport, Widnes
- Claire Kennedy - Bootle
- Jen Orr - Widnes
- Natalie Newman - Dorchester
- Rachel Rainsbury - Winton

Operation Encompass

We're proud to now be part of Operation Encompass, a national partnership with police and education that supports young people experiencing domestic abuse.

Through Operation Encompass the police will share information with our college about ALL police attended

domestic abuse incidents which involve any of our learners who are related to or living with those involved in the incident.

Staff have undergone training as part of this programme, and we are having daily conversations about how we can best support our learners in these circumstances.

Online Safety - Deflect and Protect

This autumn, we're also launching new Online Safety and Prevent sessions for learners, parents, and carers.

Delivered by Deflect and Protect, the sessions will cover how radicalisation can happen online, warning signs, and best practices for engaging online - including on social media and gaming platforms.

Deflect and Protect is a training organisation focusing on the connection between autism and extremism, how our community is radicalised online and effective measures to understand our vulnerabilities regarding this.

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