



## Bright Futures School – Prospectus

### 1. Context

1.1 At Bright Futures School (BFS) we have a track record of working very successfully with autistic students who:

- Have been out of school for some time (sometimes for 2-3 years or more)
- Have developed a phobia around attending school
- Have very high anxiety
- Have a PDA-type autism profile (demand avoidance, opposition, behaviour that challenges as a result of their autism), with consequent difficulties engaging in learning and social activity.

1.2 This means that when students get to BFS, they are often very behind in their learning and social communication, needing intensive support to catch up. Outlined below are the steps we take to provide this intensive support.

### 2. Our philosophy

2.1 The philosophy that informs our autism education practice at Bright Futures School responds to research (Barnard J, 2001) published by the National Autistic Society that focused on over 200 young adults who had a diagnosis of 'Asperger's syndrome'. All had relatively high IQ's and good language skills. Some 50% of these bright individuals had gone on to higher education after secondary school. Yet, at the time of the study:

- Only 12% were employed, full or part-time
- Only 3% could live independently
- Over 65% had almost no social contact outside of their family
- None were married or involved in a significant emotional relationship.

2.2 These are disappointing outcomes for 'high functioning' pupils. They help to explain why at Bright Futures School (BFS), as well as a strong focus on preparing our young people for success in adulthood, we use a special 'guiding' approach to help children with autism master the developmental milestones that they have missed.

2.3 Our experience is that the biggest obstacle to a child's engagement in learning is their autism: a child who struggles with social understanding, who finds it difficult to understand another's perspective, is easily frustrated, sees themselves as a 'failure', has difficulties with

emotional regulation, struggles to cope with uncertainty and unpredictability, has high anxiety and finds it difficult to pay attention will have significant difficulty engaging in learning, making friends and living independently. We have found that working towards mastery of these milestones via our special 'guiding' approach significantly improves pupils' ability to engage in learning and to connect with others.

### 3. Our unique 'guiding' approach

3.1 Our 'guiding' approach focuses on ameliorating the core difficulties that lie at the heart of autism. It is one of a small number of approaches that meet all the criteria outlined in NICE guidelines CG170 'The Management of autism in under 19's' for approaches that address core autism difficulties.

3.2 Research (Green J, 2016) published in The Lancet has shown that if parents are supported to change their communication and interaction style with their autistic children then it is possible to decrease the severity of the child's autism. At BFS, our staff can use the 'guiding' approach to augment what parents can achieve if they use this approach themselves.

3.3 In implementing our 'guiding' approach at school with a number of different pupils over several years, we have found that pupils are unable to generalise most of the gains they make via guiding at school to other environments and settings unless their parents are using a similar approach as part of their family lifestyle in the home.

3.4 In cases where a child is very severely impacted by their autism, unless parents have the 'guiding' framework in place in the home, our experience to date is that any challenging/distressed behaviour that the child presents with in the home will not be ameliorated, even if the same behaviour is well managed at school.

3.5 Autism is a pervasive developmental condition which requires intensive, co-ordinated input across all settings with all significant adults where the adult guides can reinforce and elaborate on the work done by fellow adult guides in order to make a difference to core autism features.

3.6 Parents can pay privately to put a 'guiding' programme in place at home. Where parents would like to start a guiding home programme but are unable to afford to do this, our Head of Development can support them to try to get a home programme funded via grants or other sources.

### 4. The school and its curriculum

4.1 Bright Futures School is a very small, special independent school that provides education for children and young people with autism and/or other developmental difficulties between the ages of 5 and 16 years. All our pupils have an EHC plan which details their special educational needs and the provision we need to make to meet those needs.

The Department for Education has indicated that in some circumstances, a pupil may also be able to stay on an extra year.

4.2 The school curriculum follows a topic based/thematic approach which ensures that the 7 broad areas of learning (linguistic, mathematical, scientific, technological, human and social, physical, aesthetic and creative) are experienced throughout the academic year. Literacy and numeracy are both taught to all students as individual subjects in addition to being addressed through other curriculum areas.

4.3 Where pupils have English as an additional language, BFS will employ teaching strategies that ensure EAL pupils meet their full potential. These may include:

- Providing as much visual support as possible in a wide variety of formats
- Using key words and key language (e.g. use short vocabulary lists of key words for each unit as well as examples of key language required)
- Offering a variety of types of dictionaries
- Planning opportunities for talk into the curriculum
- Planning for regular collaboration with peers.

Our aim is to ensure that EAL pupils:

- Develop oral fluency quickly
- Immediately feel part of the school
- Develop language in context
- Experience their full curriculum entitlement.

4.4 The school day is split into 5 sessions:

- An initial 'Ready to Learn' session lasting 30 minutes which gives pupils time to decompress from their journey and promotes readiness for learning by gently introducing pupils to a paired activity on a 1-1 basis with a member of staff. A range of fun and educational learning activities that have individual appeal for each pupil are used. This session lends itself particularly well to BFS's guiding approach and where a pupil's parents have a social communication 'guiding' programme in place in the home, staff work with a pupil in Ready to Learn sessions on their individual social communication guiding objectives.
- A 'Key Skills' session lasting 50 minutes where a member of staff works on a 1-1 basis with a pupil on their individualised literacy or numeracy objectives.
- 3 further sessions of 1 hour each based on the pupil's individualised timetable. These are usually small group sessions or 1-1 for pupils who are as yet unable to work in groups due to the disruption/distraction they cause to other pupils.

## 5. Pathways into employment and independence

5.1 All pupils at BFS follow a personalised timetable based on their own interests, abilities and needs in order to prepare them for the world outside of school post 16. As autism is a developmental disorder, this means that autistic children have missed out on key communication and thinking milestones in the early stages of their development. We know that the more successful they are in mastering these milestones, the better their life chances in the years ahead.

5.2 Some of our students are academically able but their difficulties managing their anxiety mean that the pressure of taking exams of any kind is counter-productive for them as it would be detrimental to their emotional wellbeing. Following consultation with parents and pupils and based on our experience of pupils who have graduated from BFS, we take the view that it is better for our pupils to have more time to prepare (academically and emotionally) to take GCSEs at college.

5.3 We therefore need to carefully assess our students' levels of tolerance so that we are sure that they can successfully meet appropriate challenges. We aim to balance this by also giving pupils opportunities to gain qualifications that are not exam-based. It is of the utmost importance to us that our pupils do not have experiences of failure as these are usually what have led them to withdraw from learning and have contributed significantly to poor emotional wellbeing in their previous educational settings.

5.4 Due to their developmental delay, most pupils have not acquired the academic standards expected of their chronological age when they start at Bright Futures School. In some cases, e.g. where an older pupil comes to BFS with low academic levels, then using the expectation of 2 sub levels of progress per year, it is unrealistic to expect that pupil to be able to attain the academic standard that would be expected of their peers. At BFS, our emphasis is on rate of progress that is measured against the pupil's starting point, rather than age related expectations.

Good rates of progress have been documented for all our pupils through our assessment programme, Bsquared.

5.5 We provide challenge to our pupils and take them to the edge of their competencies but this has to be done very carefully to avoid negative experiences and withdrawal. Academically we will personalise studies in line with certified programmes which support learning at the level at which the pupil is assessed. In addition, we focus on developmental areas which give pupils the opportunities to develop confidence and undertake positive experiences in relevant subjects, all increasing progress, motivation and an ability to survive in the world outside of school.

5.6 In Key Stage 3 and 4, pupils undertake several different ASDAN programmes, starting with the Bronze Personal Development Award. This leads onto the silver award and once this has been achieved, COPE Level 2 is undertaken. (This equates to a GCSE grade between D and B.) ASDAN programmes and qualifications are widely recognised by educators for providing an engaging curriculum that empowers students through personalised learning and choice.

5.7 Courses motivate and enhance learners' confidence, self-esteem and resilience. In addition, learners develop core skills in teamwork, communication, problem solving, research and self-management. Courses support learners as they transition to post-16 study, as well as helping young people develop the skills needed to progress on to higher education, training and work. Older pupils at BFS are currently embarking in Short Courses such as animal care, gardening, independent living, employability, English and Maths.

5.8 In preparation for moving on to college or apprenticeships at 16+, BFS staff will work with pupils on Functional skills in English and Maths. This gives students practical skills for the modern world and helps them get the most from life, learning and work. In English, this specification aims to ensure students have good communication skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. It assesses whether students can use these skills in everyday situations and this course can be used in preparation for GCSE.

5.9 Functional Mathematics aims to promote mathematical thinking and transferable skills that are useful in everyday situations and the world of work rather than rote learning but are comparable in size to GCSEs. The Function Junction ASDAN course supports Functional Skills in English and Maths. Function Junction has been designed to help students build and practise their functional English and Maths skills at Levels 1 and 2. The activities are relevant to everyday learning and suitable for use alongside vocational, apprenticeship, diploma, foundation learning and GCSE Maths and English programmes. Functional Skills are a mandatory element in apprenticeships as well as being stand-alone qualifications in their own right at Entry Level 1-3, Level 1 and Level 2.

5.10 Entry 1, Entry 2 and Entry 3 are broadly equivalent to National Curriculum Levels 1, 2 and 3 respectively. Level 1 Functional Skills are equivalent to a GCSE Grade E-D, and Level 2 Functional Skills are equivalent to GCSE Grade C-A\*.

5.11 Pupil destinations post-16

Pupil A left BFS in July 2015, aged 16 to engage in a one year Work skills course leading to a Level 1 IT course at Hopwood Hall College, both of which included functional skills in Maths and English at entry Level 3. Successfully completed.
---

Pupil B left BFS in July 2016 to engage in a Level 1 course in Animal Care at Hopwood Hall College. Unfortunately, difficulties with independent travel at the same time as integrating into college life (as predicted and warned against by BFS at transition review,)
--

led to drop out from college. Pupil B now attends Groundwork, a practical environment based apprenticeship scheme in Rochdale.
Pupil C left BFS in July 2016 to engage in Graphic Design at Oldham College at Level 2. Despite a high standard of skill and talent in graphics and art, pressure of workloads around the accompanying GCSE work in English and Maths (as predicted and warned against by BFS at transition review,) caused great anxieties and resulted in a year out at the end of year one, to focus on re-engaging into year 2, when emotional state is more settled.
Pupil D left BFS in July 2017. Most of her education through BFS had been home based due to severe anxieties. BFS supported this pupil's parent to secure a further literacy & numeracy skills bespoke package from an external agency to gain further skills in these areas alongside developmental work to reduce anxiety, before further education could be entered into.
Pupil E left BFS in July 2018. He identified that he would be unable to engage in a college course due to his autism, and so BFS supported a proposal for a bespoke package which focuses on high quality work experience, and on non-qualification activity which will prepare him well for employment, independent living, and successfully participating in society. Despite the majority of this pupil's EHC outcomes not being fully met, his local authority refused to fund the package and BFS has supported a legally aid funded judicial review.
Pupil F left BFS in July 2018 to engage in a Pathways vocational programme at Oldham College, focussing on Level 2 functional skills with a view to progressing to GCSE in due course. Careful transition and familiarisation supported by BFS, including independent travel training, has assisted this pupil in his successful transition to college including travelling independently by bus. This pupil came to BFS at age 11 having been home-schooled and previously unable to access a school building.

5.12 Our Ofsted report (January 2019) made the following very positive comments about our pupils' progress:

- Leaders have improved the range of qualifications that pupils can achieve by the time they reach Year 11. The curriculum is broad and meets pupils' needs and interests effectively.
- Leaders have successfully addressed the area for improvement identified at the last inspection concerning the teaching of reading, writing and mathematics.
- Staff use their range of knowledge and skills to ensure that pupils are in the right frame of mind to learn. Staff support pupils very effectively in managing the social and emotional difficulties that pupils experience, which are characteristic of autism spectrum disorder. Consequently, pupils develop greatly improved attitudes to learning during their time at the school. This enables them to access the curriculum with considerable success.
- The proprietor and the Head teacher are completely committed to providing the highest possible standard of care and education for pupils at the school. The proprietor and the Head teacher are knowledgeable and dynamic. They have sustained and, in some respects,

improved the quality of education in the school since the last inspection. Because of their work, pupils make good progress from their typically low starting points.

## 6. Social and emotional development via BFS's 'guiding' approach

6.1 BFS's Head of Development is a certified Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) Consultant and BFS's 'guiding' approach to address missing developmental milestones is based on the autism intervention Relationship Development Intervention (RDI). The Head of Development works closely with an external RDI Consultant to support BFS staff in their guiding practice.

6.2 Where parents are following a home programme of guiding, BFS staff work on individual guiding objectives with pupils – filming their guiding sessions and sharing key footage with the RDI Consultants who evaluate staff use of the guiding framework and child progress in mastering key developmental milestones.

## 7. Our staff

7.1 Alison Hughes, Head of Learning is a qualified teacher with National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). She oversees the academic curriculum and daily running of the school together with assessment and monitoring of pupil progress.

7.2 Zoe Thompson is Proprietor of the school as well as Head of Development. She is a certified Relationship Development Intervention (RDI) Consultant and she oversees the implementation and monitoring of the school's 'guiding' approach.

7.3 As well as Alison, there is one other qualified teacher on staff and ten Learning Mentors who work with pupils as guided by teaching staff.

**Lucy Andrew (NVQ Level 2 & 3 Childcare, Learning and Development and BTEC Diploma Art & Design)** has, for many years, worked as a Learning Support Assistant in a mainstream school, working with children with autism on a 1:1 basis. Lucy has completed many courses which help her in her role as Learning Mentor at Bright Futures, such as Level 1&2 Working with Autism, Lego Therapy, Phonics, Time to Talk and Word Finding Difficulties. Lucy also uses her creative and artistic flair when working with pupils at Bright Futures School.

**Brian Banawich (Level 3 Children and Young People's health and social care, Diploma of Higher Education, ECDL Qualification information technology, currently in year five of a five year BA Honours Social Sciences degree course)** has worked with adults and children who have a learning disability, including autism, for over 30 years. Brian also holds qualifications for First Aid in the workplace, level 2 food safety and hygiene, equality and diversity (level 2) and the National Care Standards Certificate.

**Karen Croft (T.A. Level 2)** arrived at Bright Futures as a volunteer but is now an important member of our team of Learning Mentors. Karen makes a leading contribution to our PSE curriculum as well as delivering the ASDAN Cope award to our older pupils.

**Rosamund Hayes (qualifications include Effective Listening Skills, PTLLS, Health Improvement)** and has an extensive background of working with young people including youth volunteering, special constabulary and restorative justice panels for Children's Social Care. Her career has evolved over the years and latterly as a mentor and tutor for Rochdale Connections Trust. Ros has specialised in dealing with mental and social issues of young people and uses her nurturing, supporting and coaching skills in delivering a range of activities in her role as a Learning Mentor at Bright Futures School.

**Louise Howarth (PGCE, Moving and Handling People Trainer & Assessor)** has worked as a Health & Social Care teacher and freelance trainer since 2008. Louise trained care teams supporting people with learning disabilities and she also taught BTEC courses at a local FE college. Louise specialised in subjects including Moving and Handling People, Safeguarding and Service User Risk Assessment. Prior to this, Louise spent ten years working for a London charity – managing and developing residential services for people with learning disabilities, autism and complex needs.

**Karen Hutchinson (NVQ Level3 in Childcare Learning and Development)** has many years' experience working in different educational settings as a Learning support worker for children with autism. Karen has a BTEC qualification in caring for people enduring mental health problems and has also spent several years working as a Home Carer, supporting people with disabilities to enable them to live independent lives.

**Alex Ludlam (BA Hons with QTS in Primary Education)** qualified as a teacher in 2003 and has taught in primary schools in a neighbouring authority ever since. After working with many children with an autism diagnosis in a mainstream setting, Alex is now using her teaching skills and experience as a Learning Mentor within the Bright Futures team. Alex also has a middle management role, overseeing staff delivery of and monitoring pupils' progress in Key Skills.

**Lisa Rigg (N.N.E.B and Hlta)** has over 10 years' experience working with children with complex and profound difficulties, including autism. She is now bringing her knowledge and experience to the Bright Futures team.

**Lauren Tomlinson** has previous experience working with children and young adults with mild, moderate and severe learning disabilities including autism. She has qualifications in health and social care, health and safety including first aid, and a level 3 award in education and training.

**Molly Walker** completed her Apprenticeship at Bright Futures School and is now working with the team of Learning Mentors in a supporting role.

**Alex Wood (PGCE)** spent 14 years teaching painting and decorating at Oldham College at pre-entry level. Prior to that, he worked for Oldham Council. Most recently, Alex has been working as a Personal Assistant for a local gentleman with autism and he's now using all his experience as a Learning Mentor within the Bright Futures team.

**Christina Stocks (BA Hons Journalism)** provides Administrative, PR and Marketing Support to the team at Bright Futures. With over 15 years' Public Relations, Marketing, Events and Communications experience, Christina uses her knowledge and contacts to help promote and publicise the school.

**Sam McManus (currently in year five of a six-year BSc Open degree with the Open University)** has worked as a volunteer in a local mainstream primary school and is studying a range of science and primary education modules as part of her degree. She is bringing her classroom experience and subject knowledge to her role as Learning Mentor at Bright Futures School.

**Kathryn Plant (7307 Certificate in Teaching, Certificate in Counselling Skills, HND Interior Architecture and Spatial Design)** has over 10 years' experience working in an Independent Special School in a neighbouring local authority as both a teacher and deputy head of education. Her teaching career has been focused around 1:1 or small groups, often working with children who have a variety of additional needs including autism. Kathryn's experience includes teaching young people who have huge gaps in their education and also young people who may be working at a level much lower than typically expected for their chronological age. She has also had much success with young people who have become completely disengaged with education and over time has supported them to re-engage by forging a trusting positive relationship. Kathryn is now bringing her knowledge, experience and nurturing approach to the Bright Futures team.

**Jenny Wright (Supporting Teaching and Learning Level 3)** has joined Bright Futures from a local primary school, where she has gained a wealth of experience working with children with Autism and other complex needs. In addition, she has gained experience working in Local Authority schools and spent eight years working as an Ofsted registered Childminder.

Our School Improvement Plan identifies the need to recruit qualified teaching staff who have experience at secondary level. We are in the process of negotiating funding to enable us to employ staff to take a lead in numeracy and literacy at secondary level.

## 8. Peer groups

8.1 Our age range is 5 – 16 and we currently (January 2019) have twelve pupils: our maximum number. Nine of our twelve pupils are boys. All the boys have good IQs and are articulate (at the so-called 'high functioning' end of the autism spectrum). We have one teen girl and two younger female pupils.

## 9. Behaviour and welfare

9.1 Our Ofsted report highlighted that:

- Pupils behaviour is excellent. Pupils who displayed poor behaviour before arriving at the school improve substantially in their time at BFS.
  
- There are no examples of bullying in school. Pupils show good relationships with each other, allowing for their needs. There are also warm and supportive relationships between adults and pupils.
  
- Pupils typically come to the school with a history of behaviour issues in their previous schools. Pupils' behaviour improves dramatically once they are at Bright Futures School. The large majority of pupils behave impeccably. A few pupils with more severe behavioural needs show sustained improvement after their arrival.
  
- Staff have highly effective behaviour management strategies. They address, with great success, the infrequent examples of poor behaviour, which are usually caused by pupils' needs.
  
- Staff know their pupils well and provide for their social and emotional needs very effectively.
  
- Parents are happy about their children's development and welfare. Pupils trust staff to look after them and know that they can talk to them if they have any worries.

9.2 In understanding and managing behaviours, we have not found the traditional 'behaviour management' strategies to be at all useful as they fail to promote social understanding, emotional regulation, the ability to take another person's perspective, the ability to manage uncertainty and unpredictability - all of which is at the root of 'challenging behaviour.' Neither have we found such strategies to be effective in facilitating independent thinking, self-actualisation, self-confidence, resilience or self-esteem.

9.3 We know from our experience with the other children at our school that using 'behaviourist' strategies is in fact counter-productive and causes a child to withdraw from the adult, to feel they cannot trust the adult and to contribute to further disengagement from interaction and learning.

9.4 We recognise that due to the nature of the autistic condition, misunderstandings and communication breakdowns are inevitable. Our whole school approach is geared towards helping our pupils develop the thinking skills they need in order to communicate and understand the world better.

9.5 We also know that our pupils' autism means that they have difficulty managing uncertainty – which often manifests itself in a need to control situations and/or sometimes acute difficulties with emotional regulation.

9.6 In support of the above, Bright Futures School has developed:

- Profiles of each pupil including a section that identifies most likely problematic behaviours; appropriate strategies to support pupils when such behaviours occur; and limit setting strategies and sanctions appropriate to each individual pupil.
- Ground rules for behaviour in school.
- A pupil/school agreement that sets out the culture we are trying to promote at Bright Futures School, kinds of behaviour are unacceptable, and what sanctions will be applied for transgression of anything in the agreement. This will be personalised for each pupil.
- A personalised reward system for thoughtful and kind behaviour.
- A system for recording minor incidents in the pupil's home-school communication book together with discussion at staff meeting so that staff can ensure continuity of approach in management.
- Where a social communication breakdown or social misunderstanding has occurred, staff will work with pupils to enable them to understand the other's perspective, facilitating mutual understanding and ensuring that an apology is made where any party has been aggrieved.

## 10. Feedback from pupils and relationships with parents and families

10.1 Our students are happy and thriving. Our current students regularly express their feelings about school and what it has enabled for them:

*H age 14, ahead of meeting up out of school with 2 other pupils 'I'm really looking forward to going out with the boys tonight, Mum. Remember when I didn't have any friends?'*

*M age 13, 'I was excluded a lot at my other school. They didn't understand my autism. I felt like I was being punished for being autistic.....but I can't help it. I've never been excluded at Bright Futures and for the first time, I am happy at school, doing all my lessons and have friends.'*

*M age 14, 'Bright Futures helps me sort things out when I'm feeling low. It's a really happy place and I love learning here It's joyful.'*

*B, age 17, on leaving Bright Futures School in July 2018, "I started visiting school when I was nearly 10 years old, and officially became a pupil in May 2012. To me, it doesn't feel all that long ago, however I'm sure some of you veterans feel differently! It's honestly hard for me to think back to what I was like before coming here, regarding my mannerisms, knowledge about the world and self-confidence. However, that shouldn't particularly matter now. One things for certain, I've changed a lot. And you've all played a part in making me who I am*

*today, and for that let me offer my deepest thanks to the staff and pupils. Once I am settled at College, I'll be sure to come and visit you all. You won't get rid of me that easily!"*

10.2 Our students' parents are very satisfied with our provision and this is reflected in our Ofsted report, where it is highlighted that *'Parents hold the school in high regard and cite the skill, dedication and care of staff as a strength.'*

*Mum of a 14 year old pupil:* *'His previous school plain and simply didn't understand autism and thought he could be communicated with and taught in a 'mainstream' way. He was picked on by his peers, his mental health deteriorated to the point that our family life was in turmoil, his self-esteem was at ground zero, he was in tears every morning begging not to go to school, he'd bottle his feelings up at school then explode at home, he didn't have a single friend in the world, and this temper would also trigger seizures too.'*

*The change in him has been astounding - he loves going to school, he's made meaningful friendships, he's no longer insular, his confidence has blossomed, and I'm so happy to say he's been seizure free in the two years since being at BF and is on his final months withdrawal of epilepsy medication, which his neurologist never dreamed there would be hope of.'*

*The Dad of one of our younger pupils:* *'I've seen your videos and your comments in the home/school communication book about S making a breakthrough and I can't believe the difference in her, she is so different towards me it is amazing. She never screams and is really happy all the time.'*

*Mum of a 6 year old pupil,* *describing the changes she has observed in another pupil of a similar age: 'The two pieces of video footage are like night and day. In the first clip, L takes very little notice of anyone else in the room. She doesn't join in and she is unmotivated/unable to take turns. She is very object-focused. She finds it more fun to play with the animals in her own way (like putting the horse on her head). In the second clip, she is so attuned to Jo (staff member) and she is doing so many neuro-typical things, like referencing, imitating, and co-regulating. These clips are what I show my family when they ask about how Bright Futures works with pupils. These clips are full of hope for other autism parents like me.'*

Our Ofsted report notes that:

- The lead inspector spoke with parents of half of the pupils in the school. All had positive things to say about the work of the school, with some being fulsome in their praise of the care that staff provide. Typically, parents said that the school is 'amazing' and that their children had been inspired to engage with learning more enthusiastically as their confidence increased.