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Making a 'Living Classroom' in the community – the Greenside Studio

Greenside is a day special school for pupils who have severe learning difficulties. The main aim is for all our pupils to gain as much independence and autonomy as possible. However, we wanted to take this one step further and base the learning for our groups of older students in the heart of their local community. To achieve this, in 2012 the school took a lease on a retail premises and after extensive remodelling the Greenside 'Studio' was opened in September 2013. As a result, a significant part of the learning for our older students is based in the wider community. The purpose of the Studio is to extend learning into the local community, beyond the school day, into the weekend, into the school holidays, beyond the age of 19 and, ultimately, beyond the classroom into the world of work.

The Studio is a standalone business, which is open 6 days a week throughout the year.

The choice of enterprises undertaken ensures a breadth of learning and experience. The two main aspects are the selling of traditional sweets and a ceramic studio, where members of the public come to paint figures and ornaments. At the studio is a kiln as well as a wide selection of moulds, students can pour slip clay into the moulds to produce figures for the public to paint. At the rear of the studio is a kitchen and teaching area. An important feature of the studio's teaching is supporting students to be involved in all aspects of organising their day. This includes:

- creating schedules of work
- preparing their lunch
- budgeting
- planning a healthy diet
- shopping
- cooking
- and of course washing up.

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Through the Studio, Greenside offers a specific bespoke provision: a specialist vocational teaching resource. It provides a 'half-way' environment between the structures, systems and order of school and life after school, offering work experience to students and leavers of our School.

Working in the shop students help to serve customers, bag and price up sweets and deliver sweet baskets. It provides work experience and work-related learning which is not otherwise easily available for young people with severe learning difficulties, including:

- vocational courses designed to develop communication
- social interaction
- independence skills.

Students are supported by a team of professionals who guide them through their work experience helping them to engage and learn.

This is an invaluable introduction for our young people to the world of work and allows them to make links with the local community and the wider world. It acts as a base for them to work in the community, interact with the public and find out about local shops and facilities.

It also offers an excellent resource for the development and practice of functional skills as the Studio provides a real life context where challenging targets can be set. Students are faced with real life situations which gives them the opportunities to adapt and apply their functional skills.

The young people say:

- 'I like using the till and talking to the customers' (Grace, 18)
- 'I like counting the sweets it will help me get a job selling sweets' (Matthew, 18)
- 'I like helping people – bagging sweets and talking to all the people' (Andrew, 18)
- 'It's good, very hard work, I love making my own dinner' (Jarrad, 18)

The level of independence that students are demonstrating has developed significantly and we believe that this is because they have the opportunity to practice their skills, whilst teachers gradually extend the level of challenge. This fosters self-esteem and a sense of being part of the wider community. The Greenside Studio is also a facility for the whole community. The studio is used to host workshops for parents and carers; meetings of community groups, as well as facilitating a range of creative evening events for young people.

For some young people the transition from school to college can be stressful. The Studio has offered opportunities for some to maintain their relationship with Greenside whilst continuing their vocational learning. This has meant that we have been able to effectively extend our

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provision to teach our young people about life after school and work. The next stage in this development is to introduce supported internships which will lead to paid employment.

Dave Victor, Head Teacher says:

‘...since the project has been established, the progress that the students have made has exceeded all expectations. In addition to developing literacy and numeracy skills, including a far greater understanding of money, there have been huge achievements in areas such as self-confidence, taking responsibility, gaining a sense of pride, decision making, feeling part of and contributing to the wider community and demonstrating independence and autonomy. The students understand that this is a real shop and that their work matters and each and every one of them have relished the challenge. Our next step is to enable our students to move into paid employment in the community.’