

Tucked away in a secluded corner of an industrial estate on the edge of a Suffolk town is an extraordinary enterprise where the focus is not on products, but on people.

Innov8 Workshops exists to enhance the lives of children and teenagers who, for many different reasons, are not succeeding in mainstream education.

They could have learning difficulties, mental health or anxiety issues, or be facing exclusion from school.

Innov8 aims to give them better prospects through one-to-one mentoring in activities from woodwork to mending bikes, cooking, art, music, hairdressing, horticulture, and functional maths and English.

They can learn a skill while building up a trusting relationship. The effect can be transformative.

Earlier this year, a former office building was converted into a series of workshops, where, every week, dozens of young people aged from 11 to 16 get the chance to work on their own with a mentor, who gives them their undivided attention.

"One to one is important," says Phil Shelley, chairman of the charity's trustees. "We know it makes a difference because the kids are completely different here."

"Mentoring and vocational education together is quite an unusual combination."

"The alternative education system is growing. We get a lot of children with autism, ADD, school refusers, and some with unmanageable behaviour."

Innov8 started life as Monkey Workshops during the Covid pandemic and was registered as a charity in March this year.

Soon afterwards, it changed its name to Innov8 Workshops and moved to a new site on the Rougham Industrial Estate on the outskirts of Bury St Edmunds to help it thrive and expand.

At the moment, the team works with around 50 students a week, but the demand is so great they are already having to turn people away, which is why they see growth as crucial.

"We are determined to do more," says Phil. "The problem is very big. In Suffolk alone, there are 2,500 children in that position."

"We need to try to be as effective as we can, which is why it's important to get bigger."

"We are trying to get the best outcome for kids who just don't fit in mainstream education."

The charity's operations director Daniela Symons says: "There are so many reasons students come here. Exclusion isn't at the top."

"A lot are here because there isn't any specialist provision for them. A lot of the time, we are a holding place. In some cases, it's because of mental health issues, anxiety, or emotionally-based school avoidance."

"We have the capacity to have seven in at once, plus horticulture, four times a day."

Their one-to-one approach limits the numbers but allows each child a say in how they want to work, which would not be possible in a group setting.

"It's student-led provision to a certain degree and, if you have a group, you can't be student-led," said

If school is simply not working, we're here, says Suffolk charity

Innov8 Workshops helps young people struggling in mainstream education by providing one-to-one sessions with vocational mentors, with demand continuing to grow. **Barbara Eeles reports ...**



Daniela.

"Apart from maths and English, we encourage them to make their own decisions on what they want to work on."

She says some of the children will be facing constant telling off at school. "It's nice to have this one-to-one respite, which is just for them and all about them, and not to have to share that with someone else."

Innov8's new home feels calm and spacious, with none of the hubbub of crowded spaces that some youngsters find distressing in school. Outside, its sheltered position means you scarcely glimpse any of the neighbouring buildings.

But in the week of their move, it was a frantic hive of activity as everyone involved pitched in to get the new workshops ready on time.

"We were lucky to find this. It was too good an opportunity to miss," said Phil. "It's a fantastic location. We moved here at the beginning of the May half-term and the kids came in a week later."

"It was a busy time setting up all the workshops. All the mentors helped set it up. We begged and borrowed. Our landlord did us a lease in a week."

All the mentors are employees and have relevant backgrounds, plus safeguarding training. The charity is



guided by its trustees, Phil and his three colleagues Nigel Gambier, Michael Walton and Teresa Selvey. Laura Walton provides admin support. Phil says: "We have an amazing team."

Innov8 Bike is led by Shaun Sivertson, who used to work at Model Junction in Bury. They are always looking for donations of bicycles in reasonable condition for students to work on, from simple maintenance to constructing wheels, or hydraulic brakes.

Occasionally, they take on other jobs, like repairing a rotovator which will be used by Innov8 Outdoors, and they are also looking to do up bikes for Bury Drop-in.

Wood mentor Rory McKenzie helps

students make things including boxes, benches, boxes, or anything else they want to try.

"We aren't trying to make stuff to sell," said Daniela. "It's for them and their family, and means they can take something back they have made – and we have a lot of kit now, so there is no shortage of things they can do."

"They also do things like putting up shelves, and helped to make the wooden cabinets the machines are standing on."

Music students are mentored by Nick May, who helps them with everything sound-related, from writing and producing their own music, to making podcasts. They have also produced their first album.

In the art workshop – where

students' work covers the walls – mentor Piers Symons coaches them in skills including drawing and painting, photography, videography and fuse-bead work, with their imaginations given free rein.

Stencilling is one of the most popular things, says Piers. "The kids are diamonds and they absolutely love it. When they are sitting there doing something and you don't have eye contact, you can have better conversations with them."

In the new kitchen, Scott Broad shares his skills with youngsters, most of whom have never cooked before, with the smell of their creations wafting temptingly through the building.

"It's like the hub of the workshops," said Daniela. "A student will be cooking up there and, towards the end of their session, they will call everyone on the radio and we all have to go to try it."

"Last week, we all had eggs benedict together. They've also made gnocchi, macaroni cheese, lasagne and some lovely desserts."

Ross Douglas mentors in functional maths and English, which can guide students towards gaining basic skills and boost Innov8's ambition to move towards helping them achieve some qualifications.

Innov8 Outdoors is led by Jane

Suffolk third lowest for burglaries

Suffolk has one of the lowest burglary rates in England and Wales, new research has revealed.

Home Office data, issued after a freedom of information request by ADT security experts, reveals the areas considered the safest and those with the highest rates of burglaries in the UK.

It indicated that Suffolk was less likely to experience a burglary compared to most other areas nationwide.

For the year ending March

2023, there were 3.7 residential burglaries per 1,000 households in Suffolk.

Only the Devon and Cornwall area, and Norfolk, had lower burglary rates, with 2.3 and 2.2 burglaries per 1,000 households respectively, while North Yorkshire also recorded 3.7.

Burglaries in Suffolk have also decreased by 9.8 per cent since last year.

Statistics show that almost one in seven burglaries happened at around

midnight, making this the most likely time of day for such incidents to occur.

The next most common time to experience a home break-in is around 10pm, which was recorded for 5.5 per cent of all burglaries in England and Wales.

In response, ADT experts have published advice on how to deter burglars, including setting up a smart home security system, installing two locks and cameras, and locking away valuables.



Dow, who does forest school and outdoor work in the walled garden at St Edmundsbury Cathedral. "It's so calming. They can potter about, and do some horticultural work," said Daniela. They are also setting up an allotment site.

The latest addition to the staff will be Melanie Pettit, who is starting later this month as a mentor in the new salon. She is qualified in hair and beauty, has been working in a pupil referral unit, and previously taught barbering at Highpoint Prison.

There are two other team members who are very popular with students – Rory's spaniel, Olly, and Daniela's dog, Buddy. Students are allowed to walk them with their mentors if they need a break.

Students come from a wide area, including Bury, Haverhill, Stowmarket, Sudbury, Newmarket, Thetford and Diss.

"We are now a Suffolk County Council approved alternative provider, which means they can also send children direct to us," said Phil. "We have one 16-plus at the moment and are looking forward to doing more post-16."

"We are trying to give children qualifications that allow them to go to college or even work, or go back to school. If we can find something they are really interested in, it helps with their mental health."

"Each session is one and a half hours, but they might have three back to back."

"Our aspiration is to have more workshops. We are planning and thinking ahead about expansion. We are always looking for mentors and would like to talk to anyone who has an idea for a workshop."

Funding comes from a variety of sources. "All the people who send children here pay us," said Phil. The county council is responsible for children who have been excluded from school.

Income also comes through grants and donations, including from West Suffolk Community Chest fund, Suffolk's police and crime commissioner, the National Lottery, Suffolk Community Foundation, and various individuals. "People are very generous, we couldn't be here without their support," added Phil.

Education experts are due soon to carry out research at Innov8, which they hope will provide proof that their approach works.

"Cambridge University's Faculty of Education is about to do a study on us," said Phil. "They do a lot of research and it is a good opportunity for them to explore alternative education. We are trying to make it work, prove it works, and make sure everyone understands it works."

To contact Innov8, go online to innov8workshops.com.

Clockwise from above:

Cookery mentor Scott Broad in the Innov8 kitchen; Nick May, the music mentor, in the music workshop, where students work on all things sound-related; and Innov8's operations director Daniela Symons and chairman of trustees Phil Shelley.

Pictures: Mecha Morton

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