

# The Blossom Centre



**A vision for life-changing support  
for autistic girls at Millais**

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“ *In the past, it was assumed that autistic people were overwhelmingly men and boys, and only very rarely women and girls. This is wrong. There are many women, girls and non-binary people on the autism spectrum.* ”

National Autistic Society

“ *Autistic girls can be deceptively good at faking neurotypical behaviours from a very young age, and are experts at hiding in plain sight at school. It is time for society to reimagine what autism looks like.* ”

**Sarah Wild, Head teacher,**

Limpsfield Grange School (specialist school for autistic girls)



## Context

Through its status as a single-sex girls school, Millais has been uniquely placed amidst the increased recognition of autism in girls, and the devastating consequences for girls and women who go undiagnosed. Over the past 5 years we have noted a steady increase in the number of girls with autism. Initially these young people were only identified when the toll of masking caused significant mental health needs. However, we are increasingly able to recognise the unique presentation of autism in girls, and work with parents to provide early intervention. Many of our students currently receiving support for autism were not identified as such during their primary education, whilst some have joined us for secondary school because of our ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for them as autistic young women. In West Sussex there is very limited provision for girls with autism, particularly for those who have the potential to achieve a range of GCSEs at and above national average. Muntham House – independent autism specialist school – only admits boys, and New Barn independent autism specialist school is co-ed but has only 80 places across primary, secondary and 6<sup>th</sup> form. Feedback from parents who've considered New Barn is that their cohort appeared to unevenly split, with more boys than girls.

With a unique insight into the presentation of autism in girls, and an acute awareness of the rise of mental health difficulties in young people, particularly those who are autistic, we have sought to change the narrative for our students. Patterns of declining attendance, mental health crises, movement to specialist schools or elective home education have been halted for the majority of students in our Blossom provision. The last few years have been a journey of trial and adaptation to find an effective and sustainable model, working with the 2020 intake of students.

## Journey to this point

<b>Autumn 2020:</b>	New Year 7 cohort with high levels of anxiety (possibly exacerbated by the pandemic) and high incidence of autism. None of these students had an EHCP.
<b>Spring 2021:</b>	Bespoke plans for individuals, supporting attendance to lessons and emotional regulation. Many of these students did not have identified SEN at primary school. Multiple students referred for autism diagnostic assessment. Attendance to lessons and school fell for a significant number of students, and mental health concerns increased.
<b>Summer 2021:</b>	Mental health concerns among these students continued to increase; the ability to take time out of lessons alleviated their immediate anxiety, but caused students to panic about their future attainment and ability to gain qualifications.
<b>Autumn 2021:</b>	Clear pattern of students who are unable to cope with the demands of the mainstream classroom on a regular basis. Long term plan needed for their educational provision.
<b>Autumn 2021:</b>	Research into best practice for educating children, particularly girls, with autism, including liaising with Limpsfield Grange School (Surrey) to look at the benefits of their girls-only, autism-only specialist provision.
<b>Winter 2021:</b>	Governors approved a proposal for small group of students with autism in the 2020 cohort (now Year 7) to be taught English, Maths, Science and Humanities in the SEND area.
<b>Spring 2022:</b>	Blossom group (named by the students) began. Six students, receiving wellbeing intervention and core subject teaching together and opportunities to attend

<b>Autumn 2022:</b>	mainstream lessons with their peers in other subjects. Students remain an integral part of the school community, whilst having their needs met. Group is taught by SEN teachers initially.
<b>Spring 2023:</b>	The group moves forward into Year 9, and one further student is added. Subject specialist teachers now teach the group, but still within the SEND area.
<b>Summer 2023:</b>	A further student is added, and one leaves to attend a private Montessori-aligned school.
<b>Autumn 2024:</b>	Two students successfully return to full mainstream timetables from the group. Another student moves to Millais from a local secondary school to join the group.
<b>Spring 2024:</b>	The group moves forward into Year 10. Students continue to have English, Maths and double award Science taught by subject specialist teachers. Alongside this they have two GCSE option blocks of intervention – Study Support and Wellbeing. Other students, who do not require the small group curriculum teaching, join the group for one or other of these interventions. One student successfully attends mainstream Maths, but continues in the group for English and Science.
<b>Summer 2024:</b>	Another student joins the core curriculum teaching group, and one joins the study support provision but is able to continue in her core mainstream lessons.
<b>Autumn 2024:</b>	A further student joins the group. One student leaves the group for online schooling at parental preference. Another student, a refugee with an EHCP for autism, will start at Millais purposefully to join the Blossom group.

## Current provision

The group is now nearing the end of Year 10, and will progress into Year 11 with the same package of support. Some students have been in the group since it started (mid-year 8), others have joined along the way. In September 2024 we have the first student with an EHCP specifically joining Millais to be part of the group. Various aspects of the group currently support the educational provision of 14 students with autism, 10 of whom have EHCPs. The majority of students are on track to achieve between 5 and 8 GCSEs at grade 4 or above. Without this provision, the majority of these students would need places in specialist schools (of which there is no provision that could fully meet their needs) or be out of education entirely. Whilst several students within the group have mental health diagnoses, these are well-supported between home and school and there have been no acute mental health crises requiring A&E attendance among the students in the group.

## Current needs

There is a clear remit for a Blossom group in other cohorts in the school, however funding to establish this and maintain the higher number of core subject teachers required is a challenge. Feedback from the local authority has been very positive, but changes of personnel at West Sussex mean an original vision to support the roll out the model more widely from September 2024 has not progressed.

6.5% of students in Year 7 to 10 at Millais are currently receiving support in school for autism-related difficulties, including those who have received a diagnosis and those who are on the diagnostic pathway. Of our new intake to Year 7 next year, 7.5% have been identified as requiring support for autism-related difficulties, and some parents have specifically selected Millais for our reputation for supporting autistic girls.

## A small snapshot of feedback on the Blossom model

### Parents:

“ I meant to say to you that I overheard her telling [another student] on Tuesday that ‘school’s really fun and she likes school now!’ I can tell she genuinely feels this way and is obviously very happy in Blossom. I can’t believe the change in her since this time last year, it’s remarkable.

*[child]’s anxiety and low mood had worsened to a debilitating extent impacting on the whole family and calling into question the viability of a mainstream setting to see her through the next three years. It was this imminent risk of dropping out of education that has led to [child]’s very supportive mainstream secondary school, Millais, offering a place for [child] in their specialist small group setting. This has given us hope that [child] may be able to remain in school and even complete GCSE’s.*

*With medication, psychological support and huge adjustments and support from Millais, [child] is now back at school and progressing really well. We are optimistic that with continued support she will be able to cope in a mainstream environment.*

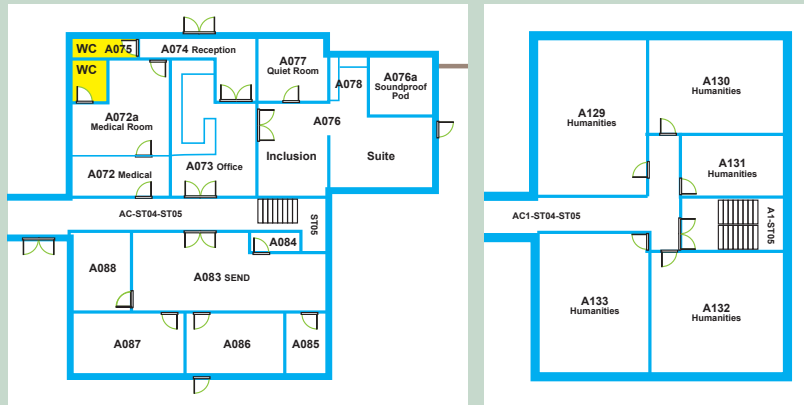
### Gemma Humphrey, SEND and Inclusion Advisor:

“ It was great speaking to your students – Blossom has clearly had a great impact for those who have transitioned back to mainstream so confidently. ”

### Katherine Lucor, Educational Psychologist:

“ I just wanted to say how impressed I was with the provision you offer in Blossom and what an impact this had had on [student]– I can see the difference this has made and is

*actively supporting both her attendance, engagement and mental health. You have achieved a remarkable outcome there and your provision is fantastic- was so great to see this today and thanks for your time.* ”



## Future vision

A Blossom class of up to 10 students in every cohort. A dynamic mainstream–specialist hybrid of provision:

- At Key Stage 3 taught English, Maths, Science and Humanities by subject specialist teachers in Blossom, and the remainder of their curriculum in mainstream classes
- At Key Stage 4, taught English, Maths, Science and PSHE (none examined) by subject specialist teachers in Blossom and their GCSE option subjects in mainstream classes

Students would have the flexibility to move in and out of this provision as required, and would continue to study their remaining subjects, including at least 3 GCSE option subject choices, alongside

their mainstream peers. Students in the group would also receive wellbeing intervention and study support, addressing the mental health and independent study difficulties that often accompany autism diagnoses in girls.

The Blossom provision would have a suite of classrooms, for small group teaching and intervention sessions, and a social space to support break and lunch times. Separate toilets and changing facilities would address common concerns around toilet usage and changing for PE. Students in Blossom would remain an integral part of the school community, taking part in lessons, enrichment opportunities clubs and trips alongside their peers, supported by trained Learning Support Assistants as required. Students would be admitted to the group via two pathways:

- The provision being named on their EHCP and the student transferring to Millais (at the start of Year 7 or as an in-year transfer)
- The student’s needs emerging during their time at Millais, and them moving into the provision at a point agreed by the student, school and parents/carers

The expert staff in the Blossom centre could also support short term interventions for autistic students in the wider Millais community who are able to remain on a full mainstream timetable with appropriate support.



Remodelled Inclusion - 2018



Remodelled SEND - 2019





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