

# **CALM SPACES: A STRATEGIC INTERVENTION FOR ENHANCING WELLBEING, INCLUSION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

## **INITIAL EVALUATION REPORT**

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# **Calm Spaces: A Strategic Intervention for Enhancing Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Psychological Safety - Initial Evaluation Report**

## **Abstract:**

The Calm Spaces Initiative at Sheffield Hallam University was developed in response to increasing demand for accessible, preventative mental health and wellbeing interventions embedded within everyday campus environments. Grounded in a Theory of Change framework, the initiative integrates sensory-friendly, emotionally regulating resources - such as posters and digital media - into high-traffic and reflective university spaces. Co-produced by Student Wellbeing Services, Hallam Students' Union, and informed by research into student mental health, neurodiversity, and wellbeing promotion, Calm Spaces aims to reduce barriers to support, foster emotional self-regulation, and contribute to a psychologically safe campus culture.

This initial evaluation report outlines how the Calm Spaces Initiative is expected to contribute to improved mental wellbeing for students and staff across Sheffield Hallam University. The report also summarises evidence of user engagement and feedback as well as reflections of the project lead about successes and the next steps of the initiative.

Early evaluation evidence suggests the initiative has achieved high visibility and positive reception among students and staff, with qualitative feedback highlighting its accessibility, practicality, and particular benefit for neurodivergent individuals. The simplicity and unobtrusiveness of the design were cited as strengths, enabling discreet access to wellbeing prompts without the need for formal help-seeking. Calm Spaces aligns with national strategies promoting a whole-university approach to mental health, and aims to contribute to broader institutional outcomes including improved wellbeing, enhanced academic engagement, and greater retention.

While recognising that long-term impacts will depend on the cumulative effects of multiple interventions, Calm Spaces demonstrates how small, thoughtfully designed environmental modifications can play a critical role in building a compassionate, inclusive learning and working environment. Future developments include expansion across additional campus sites, digital enhancements, and a more formalised programme of longitudinal evaluation to measure sustained outcomes.

# **Calm Spaces: A Strategic Intervention for Enhancing Wellbeing, Inclusion, and Psychological Safety - Initial Evaluation Report**

## **Report:**

### **1. Who led on this project?**

Jozef Sen (Lead Wellbeing Practitioner).

### **2. When did it take place?**

April 2025.

### **3. What was the type of evidence?**

Narrative: A narrative is provided about why an intervention is being carried out and why it might be effective.

### **4. Which stage(s) of the student lifecycle did it relate to (if any)?**

Success (e.g. retention, attainment).

## **5. Introduction and Rationale**

The Calm Spaces Initiative was introduced at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) in response to increasing demand for low-threshold, preventative wellbeing interventions that are visible yet unobtrusive. The aim is to provide students and staff with accessible, evidence-informed prompts for self-regulation and emotional grounding, embedded within everyday campus spaces.

The university environment presents a complex landscape of stressors, including academic pressure, social challenges, transitions, and financial concerns. National research consistently shows elevated levels of mental distress among university students. According to Student Minds (2023):

- 1 in 4 students report a diagnosed mental health condition.
- 30% report a deterioration in their mental health since starting university.
- 25% would not know how or where to access help.

These findings align with data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2022), which highlighted that 37% of higher education students experience symptoms of depression and anxiety. Moreover, reluctance to seek formal support - often due to stigma, time

constraints, or perceived severity - suggests a need for non-clinical, non-stigmatising wellbeing supports embedded into the fabric of university life (Browne et al., 2021).

The Calm Spaces Initiative responds to these challenges by providing environmental cues and grounding techniques that promote mental wellbeing without requiring proactive help-seeking. Informed by the concept of universal design for mental health (Baik et al., 2019), the initiative enhances everyday spaces - such as breakout areas, soft seating zones, and study environments - by integrating supportive and acknowledging messages. In doing so, it aligns with a whole university approach to mental health, as endorsed by Universities UK (2020), advocating that wellbeing support be holistic, proactive, and contextually embedded.

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## 6. Theory of Change

The Calm Spaces Initiative is grounded in a clear Theory of Change model that outlines the conditions, activities, and outcomes necessary to improve mental wellbeing for students and staff across Sheffield Hallam University. This framework provides a strategic roadmap that explains how the initiative's core components contribute to meaningful, sustainable change in the campus culture of wellbeing.

### a) Inputs – Foundational Resources and Enablers

The success of the Calm Spaces Initiative is made possible by the convergence of institutional collaboration, physical and digital infrastructure, and evidence-based insight:

- **Cross-functional partnerships** involving Student Wellbeing, Hallam Students' Union (SU), Estates, Library Services, and Catering, ensuring a shared vision and operational coherence.
- **Utilisation of existing campus infrastructure**, such as digital displays, help points, communal seating areas, and breakout zones, which provide the physical and virtual spaces necessary for intervention.
- **Robust evidence base** drawn from internal and external research on student and staff wellbeing, mental health prevalence, neurodiversity, environmental psychology, and barriers to help-seeking.
- **Student voice and co-production**, informing the design and tone of materials to ensure relevance, accessibility, and inclusivity.

## **b) Activities - Interventions and Engagement Strategies**

These inputs are translated into targeted interventions and engagement methods that form the operational core of the initiative:

- **Co-creation of Calm Spaces resources**, including visually engaging posters, QR-linked self-help tools, and affirming digital content tailored to diverse user needs.
- **Deliberate and strategic placement** of materials across key physical and digital touchpoints - help desks, study zones, stairwells, catering outlets - chosen to meet students where they already are.
- **Awareness-raising campaigns** integrated with national initiatives (e.g., University Mental Health Day), promotional activities, Hallam Help communications, and staff briefings to amplify visibility and legitimacy.

## **c) Outputs - Immediate Tangible Results**

From these activities emerge visible and measurable deliverables that lay the groundwork for broader change:

- **Heightened visibility** of wellbeing information and coping strategies in non-clinical, everyday contexts, normalising support-seeking.
- **Environmental enhancement** through the integration of sensory-calming, emotionally regulating cue – beneficial to all, and particularly to neurodivergent individuals or those experiencing anxiety.
- **Discreet and autonomous access** to resources, removing barriers related to stigma, time, or formal service engagement.
- **Expanded reach** of wellbeing messaging to populations who may not traditionally engage with structured services.

## **d) Outcomes - Short- to Medium-Term Changes in Behaviour, Attitudes, and Experience**

The initiative aims to contribute to shifts in wellbeing behaviours and perceptions at an individual and institutional level:

- **Reduced stigma** surrounding mental health through subtle, consistent, and affirmative messaging.
- **Improved emotional self-regulation**, with students and staff reporting increased capacity to manage stress, overwhelm, and performance anxiety in situ.



- **Enhanced sense of agency and belonging**, particularly among neurodivergent and marginalised groups who often feel unseen in mainstream support models.
- **Increased satisfaction with the university environment**, reinforcing SHU's reputation as a compassionate and responsive institution.
- **Improved signposting and help-seeking**, with students more likely to access formal support when needed, having first engaged through Calm Spaces.

#### **e) Impact - Long-Term Cultural and Systemic Transformation**

At its broadest level, the Calm Spaces Initiative aims to catalyse a culture shift across the university — moving beyond reactive service delivery to a proactive, embedded approach to mental health and wellbeing. The initiative is designed to contribute to long-term outcomes as part of a broader, integrated strategy, working in combination with other wellbeing interventions and wider university initiatives. Together, these efforts seek to create a learning and working environment where psychological safety, compassion, and inclusion are visibly prioritised and consistently reinforced:

- **A healthier and more emotionally literate campus**, where wellbeing is recognised as a shared responsibility and integral to educational success.
- **Greater retention, engagement, and academic achievement**, supported by a psychologically safer learning environment that enables students to thrive.
- **A whole-university culture of inclusion, care, and compassion**, aligning with SHU's institutional commitment to equity and student experience.

### **7. Nature of the Collaboration**

The Calm Spaces Initiative was co-produced by the Student Wellbeing Service and Hallam Students' Union, in collaboration with Estates, Library Services, and the Spaces and Catering teams. Crucially, its design was shaped through a process of participatory feedback, drawing on qualitative insights from students who articulated a desire for visible wellbeing support that does not require the formal processes often associated with counselling or therapy.

This initiative utilises a combination of:

- Physical wellbeing posters with QR codes linking to [digital self-help and self-regulation tools](#).
- Digital screensavers in Hallam Help zones.
- Strategic placement of resources in both high-traffic and reflective campus spaces.

This co-productive and interdisciplinary approach ensures that wellbeing support is integrated organically into the student experience, not merely appended as an additional service (Okanagan Charter, 2015).

## **8. Reach and User Impact**

### **a) Engagement Metrics**

- A staff-facing article launching the initiative received 1,397 views, indicating broad institutional interest.
- Student communications were launched on University Mental Health Day, aligning the initiative with national visibility efforts.

### **b) User Feedback**

In its first week, the Calm Spaces Initiative received 68 user ratings, averaging 4.84/5 stars.

Qualitative feedback, collected via an anonymous form, indicates that the Calm Spaces Initiative has achieved strong emotional resonance, pedagogical relevance, and perceived accessibility. Respondents highlighted the initiative's practical design and thoughtful implementation, emphasising its effectiveness in supporting emotional regulation during periods of heightened stress, such as academic presentations. The simplicity of the intervention was particularly praised, with users valuing the ease of engagement and the unobtrusive nature of the support offered. Additionally, feedback underscored the importance of Calm Spaces for neurodivergent students and staff, for whom sensory overstimulation can pose considerable barriers to wellbeing and performance. Collectively, the responses suggest that the Calm Spaces Initiative succeeds in delivering low-threshold, universally accessible wellbeing support that enhances users' experiences of the campus environment, contributing to greater psychological safety and inclusivity.

The initiative's appeal to neurodivergent individuals is particularly significant, as environmental overstimulation can exacerbate distress in this population (Brown & Leigh, 2020). Calm Spaces provide sensory-friendly, focussing cues and predictable resources that support regulation. The interventions hold a consistent and recognisable look and feel building on identity and recognition.

### **c) Institutional Interest**

The initiative has prompted engagement from staff across various departments seeking guidance on how to implement Calm Spaces in their own areas, suggesting scalability and alignment with the broader institutional wellbeing strategy.

## 9. Key Strengths and Successes

### a) Visible Yet Unobtrusive

The initiative leverages nudge theory (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) by positioning supportive interventions in natural pathways without requiring users to opt in, thus reducing help-seeking inertia.

### b) Low-Cost, High-Impact

The reuse of existing infrastructure and digital platforms makes Calm Spaces a cost-effective wellbeing strategy - one that is sustainable and scalable with minimal resource demands (Patalay & Fitzsimons, 2018).

### c) Timely and Adaptable

The modular nature of the intervention allows for real-time responsiveness to the student lifecycle. For instance, resources can be tailored around common stress points such as assessments, transitions, or post-exam periods, supporting the model of emotional journey mapping (Henry Stewart Publications, 2021).

### d) Inclusive and Neuroaffirming

By addressing sensory needs and emotional regulation without requiring self-disclosure or diagnosis, Calm Spaces are especially beneficial for students with autism, ADHD, and anxiety-related conditions (McCabe et al, 2024).

### e) Cross-Functional Collaboration

The initiative exemplifies effective cross-departmental working, demonstrating how strategic collaboration can generate wellbeing interventions that are contextually relevant, responsive, and embraced by both students and staff.

### f) Pedagogical Alignment

Academics have begun integrating Calm Spaces into discussions around emotionally safe learning environments, reinforcing psychological safety within the academic context (Schreiner, 2014).

## 10. Next Steps and Future Development

To enhance sustainability, reach, and impact, the following developments are proposed:

- **Wider Campus Integration:** Expanding presence in faculty buildings, large IT suites, and underutilised study areas.
- **Digital Enhancement:** Linking QR codes to an evolving suite of online self-help tools, mindfulness resources, and wellbeing media.



- **Formal Evaluation:** Conducting longitudinal evaluation through surveys and focus groups to measure sustained engagement and behavioural outcomes.
- **Staff Engagement:** Increasing involvement from academic and professional staff to model and promote use of Calm Spaces within curriculum and workplace settings.
- **Co-Production Expansion:** Inviting student co-creators to help design the next iteration of Calm Spaces materials, enhancing relevance and ownership.

## 11. Conclusion

The Calm Spaces Initiative represents a simple yet innovative, evidence-informed approach to embedding wellbeing into the lived experience of university life. By offering low-barrier, research-backed strategies for emotional regulation in everyday settings, it addresses sector-wide concerns around accessibility, stigma, and engagement with mental health support.

The initiative is strongly aligned with the Universities UK Stepchange Framework (2020), promoting a whole-university culture of wellbeing that is inclusive, responsive, and preventative. Its early successes demonstrate that small, thoughtful environmental interventions can yield substantial benefits in fostering a compassionate, mentally healthy campus community.

As the initiative continues to expand and evolve, it offers a scalable blueprint for universities seeking to normalise mental health support as part of the everyday experience of learning, working, and belonging.

## 12. References

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**Knowledge Applied**