



Children and young people's mental health in education: A joint statement

February 2021

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and the Schools' Wellbeing Partnership represent over 200 organisations who collectively advocate for better mental health support for infants, children, and young people within educational settings.

Our members have previously identified the below priorities and have been calling on the Government to address these as part of the response to the pandemic and beyond:

1. Better alignment between mental health, behaviour, and academic attainment agendas;
2. A long-term and cross-government children and young people's mental health strategy, with a focus on prevention and early intervention;
3. A children and young people's mental health workforce development plan, with a particular focus on the education sector and on staff wellbeing.

The Coalition and Partnership have since contributed to a cross-sector *Vision for Renewal* paper to call on the Government to demonstrate greater commitment in the immediate recovery phase and for bolder, clearer ambitions to create lasting change in a vision for renewal.

In October, the Coalition and the Partnership held a joint meeting with our members and representatives from the Department for Education and Public Health England. During the meeting, we reviewed our priorities in light of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and invited our members to share their experiences and current concerns. These priorities have since been updated to reflect emerging needs from the third national lockdown and closure of education settings to most children in January 2021.

Increases in mental health need among young people have been seen across the system during this time, along with a rise in other needs including food poverty and digital access. Our collective evidence suggests that this may be the tip of the iceberg in terms of the longer-term impact of the pandemic on young people's wellbeing. Members emphasised the importance of schools and colleges being well prepared and well supported so they can respond effectively to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of the whole school community, and avoid the disruption and uncertainty associated with the last period of school closures so they are in the best possible position to support children and young people.



What our members say has worked well

The pandemic has brought many challenges and disruption to us all and we are hugely grateful to the Department for Education and Public Health England for their ongoing dedication to children and young people and their openness with our organisations, including updating and consulting with our members at the recent joint event.

Members of both bodies welcomed the Department's Wellbeing for Education Return programme and the attached £8m funding to help deliver its objectives. The Department's latest State of the Nation report emphasised the importance of returning to schools to maintain children's wellbeing and providing emotional and pastoral support. The programme also acknowledges the toll the pandemic is having on school staff and provides them with some of the tools and support they need.

We would welcome an extension of the programme beyond March 2021 in light of the second closure of education settings to most children on 5 January, to help settings, staff and children respond to this continued disruption and recover from another extended period of time out of education. We would like clarification on the current reach of the Wellbeing for Education Return programme in terms of the proportion of schools and other education settings who have accessed the programme, which staff are responsible for embedding the learning within settings, and what the Department's plans were to ensure all schools and education settings can make full use of the offer. Finally, members suggested a reframing or renaming of the programme to reflect that there has not been one defined 'return period' for all schools but that school returns have varied significantly across the country due to outbreaks at individual schools, local lockdowns, the regional Tier system and new national lockdown, and this disruption is likely to continue for many schools and young people.

The development of Public Health England's Every Mind Matters campaign and platform for children, young people and parents/carers was received positively by our members and the communities they work with. Our members appreciated the opportunity to share their expertise and resources as part of the campaign development.

The additional £500m announcement as part of this years' Spending Review for mental health services was also welcomed and we look forward to further details about how this funding will be distributed over the 2021-22 period. However, we are concerned that there is insufficient clarity about how and where this funding will be allocated and, indeed, that it will be additional to other funding. We call on the government to clarify that as soon as possible.



What challenges have our members identified?

Our members shared several challenges and concerns based upon emerging evidence and insight from their practice:

- **Rising mental health needs.**

Recent prevalence data [from NHS Digital and the Office of National Statistics](#) shows an alarming rise in the proportion of 5 to 16 year-olds with a probable mental disorder – from one in nine in 2017 to one in six in July this year. The pandemic was identified as a factor in relation to sleep problems, isolation and worries about missing school. The study also found that children who were unlikely to have a mental disorder were more likely to receive regular support from their school or college during the pandemic (76.4%) compared to those with a probable mental disorder (62.6%). We urge the Department to explore this further to ensure that pupils most in need are not missing out on vital help.

Further Data published by NHS England this January also showed that the number of children and young people being referred to mental health services is at its highest ever level, and has increased by 20%.

Ofsted's [latest briefing](#) examined the impact of the pandemic and raised concerns about the rise in pupils experiencing eating disorders and self-harming since lockdown. The inspectorate also noted a rise in school exclusions and home education in some areas, and worsening staff wellbeing during this period. These findings chime with what our members have told us.

Our members also stressed that infants are at a particular risk and have been largely overlooked in policy initiatives to date, including by a lack of mental health support in early years settings. Similarly, the support available to pupils aged 16 to 25 has been missing from much of the dialogue around supporting the wellbeing of young people in education settings.

- **Education staff capacity and wellbeing**

Members noted that many educational settings were struggling with their capacity and this limited their ability to offer high quality and consistent mental health and wellbeing support. Issues around staffing and resourcing were cited by our members, including the impact of staff sickness, including stress-related sickness. This will only increase as the long-term and hidden effects of the current crisis become evident. Members mentioned high levels of stress and worsening mental wellbeing for school staff, and recent data from the Hays Wellbeing Report found that as many as two thirds of teachers (65%) were considering leaving the profession due to poor wellbeing and stress. Going forward, further consideration needs to be given to how wellbeing can be embedded into the school curriculum, and to ensure the full implementation of the whole school approach to ensure that students and staff are supported.



- **Navigating support offers and resources**

The pandemic has also exposed the ongoing challenges in workforce competencies around making use of the resources and services available to them, particularly as many schools have received a much greater amount of information, resources and support offers during the pandemic. Members explained that some school staff felt 'overwhelmed' by changing guidance and competing support offers, and wanted help understanding what was most useful from the available options. One member noted that *"schools don't need more information"* about the problems in terms of the pandemic's impact on mental health, instead, *"they need to know what to do with the information."* Another member talked about the challenge schools face in knowing *"what good looks like"* and identifying clear solutions among when they felt was *"lots of subjective advice."*

- **Addressing inequalities and supporting those with additional vulnerabilities.**

The pandemic has magnified existing inequalities faced by pupils, particularly for those growing up in poverty, pupils from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and those with special educational needs and disabilities who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, both directly and indirectly. Disruption to learning and school attendance is highly likely to widen the attainment gap for this group and is intractably linked to their wellbeing and mental health.

Members also raised concerns about the emotional needs of vulnerable pupils who are still missing out on the support they need. Throughout the pandemic, referrals to children's services have significantly reduced and may indicate that many children and young people are falling off the radar. [Calls to Childline](#) during lockdown skyrocketed with children and young people flagging concerns about their mental health, including loneliness and the impact of [domestic violence](#). Schools and colleges need greater support to manage these issues and require access to trauma-based interventions.

- **Tackling the digital divide**

Educational providers have been quick to adapt and embrace digital methods to support remote learning. However, our members noted that many pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds still do not have consistent access to digital devices or the internet. There were also particular concerns raised about meeting the needs of pupils with special educational needs or disabilities remotely. Feedback gathered by our members during lockdown suggests that these pupils and their parents/carers have felt isolated due to the lack of digital access.

As well as some families having limited or no access to digital technology, the digital divide was also seen in the remote learning offer provided by settings and the technology available to schools and teachers. The recent Marmot review 'Build Back Fairer' found that while 66% of private secondary school pupils could stream online lessons during the first lockdown, this was true for just 6% of state secondary schools.

Following the announcement of the third lockdown and the subsequent school closures, the Department for Education extended their offer of providing digital devices and access to the internet to disadvantaged students to support their access to remote education. Guidance for schools was also updated so that children without access to a digital device at home can access face-to-face learning in school. These are welcome



steps but many families cannot afford broadband or additional data to make remote learning possible. Future work needs to take place to ensure that both teachers and students, particularly those with additional learning needs, have the necessary skills, support and technology to access the digital world, and that the digital divide is not a barrier to future engagement with education and employment.

Members also talked about the need to ensure an '*equitable learning offer*.' Since January, the Department for Education has set clearer expectations for remote learning, specifying the number of hours of teaching that schools should provide remotely. However there has been no similar framework for the provision of wellbeing support or pastoral care, meaning that work to support pupil's wellbeing, resilience or mental health will vary hugely between schools.

- **Prioritising student wellbeing in national decisions about grades and assessments**

Members emphasised a need for further clarity around assessments and the process of awarding grades in 2021. It is vital that the wellbeing of pupils and families are prioritised, that arrangements are clearly communicated with young people, and that the anxiety and uncertainty of the 2020 exam period is not repeated.

Since the joint members meeting in October, Ofqual and the Department for Education announced their intention for teacher assessed grades for GCSEs, AS and A Levels and vocational qualifications and opened a consultation process on these suggested arrangements. Given these changes, it is important that young people's voices are informing this decision making and for the link between wellbeing, mental health and attainment to be considered this year and when considering exam arrangements into the future.

- **Rising rates of child poverty and Free School Meals**

Members expressed concern about the rising rates of child poverty, and in particular raised concerns about food poverty. The Marmot review 'Build Back Fairer' found that 40% of children who were eligible for Free School Meals before the pandemic experienced some form of food insecurity during the first lockdown, with almost 20% reporting that they went hungry. Poverty and food insecurity can not only have a major impact on attainment, but also on mental health and wellbeing and physical health. The campaign fronted by Marcus Rashford has placed a welcome focus on the issue of Free School Meals. It is crucial that throughout this third lockdown period and as we enter the recovery phase of the pandemic in the months to come, more resources are put in place to support the Free School Meals scheme.

Possible solutions:

Below we have summarised solutions from our members to improve mental health and wellbeing support in education settings, from early years through to higher education. These are suggestions our members have made when reflecting on their experiences of school and college closures and returning to education settings, and are in addition to the recommendations outlined in the *Vision for Renewal* document. These solutions do not only rely on the work of the Department for Education and Public Health England; many will require cross-government and cross-system action.



Short term:

- Extend the Wellbeing for Education Return package beyond March 2021 and ensure it acknowledges the experience of a cycle of school and college returns and periods of home learning that most children are experiencing. Ensure the Wellbeing for Education Return package specifically addresses the distinct needs of Further Education Colleges, who educate a relatively more deprived population.
- Address the digital divide, both through widening access to digital devices, sufficiently fast broadband and unlimited data plans, and upskilling teachers on how to consistently support those who need more support with digital literacy.
- As part of this, consider how best to provide support and guidance to families and young people to increase the digital literacy skills of all families, and develop stronger mechanisms to support people with additional remote-access needs, including those with SEND.
- Establish a supported school network for leaders where they can support each other and share evidence-informed best practice.
- Give schools and colleges support and guidance on where to find mental health help and how to understand, manage and best use the help that is available.
- The Government should ensure that there is consistent and aligned messaging on wellbeing, attainment, and behaviour expectations.
- The Government should engage meaningfully with early years and acknowledge the distinct needs and challenges of this age group. There is a need for immediate investment in the restoration of early years services, particularly face-to-face services and in services that have been cut so that there can be good support for young children and families.
- Focus on the experiences of 16-25-year olds to better understand and respond to their needs in a holistic way. The Government must revive its 16 to 25 working group, announced as part of the *Transforming children and young people's mental health provision green paper*, to support this work.
- Provide clarity around how grades will be awarded 2021. Arrangements should consider pupil wellbeing and be clearly communicated to young people so they feel better prepared. Young people's voices should be centred in the consultation process.
- Provide clarity and guidance for schools on supporting pupils' wellbeing and mental health remotely. Since January, the Department for Education has set out the minimum hours that schools should provide remote learning, but this could include recommendations around the importance of supporting wellbeing, whether through pastoral sessions, tutor time etc.

Medium term:

- Senior leaders should prioritise mental health and wellbeing in colleges and universities. They need to be presented with evidence on why this is important and how to deliver or commission support as part of a whole setting approach to mental health and wellbeing.
- The Government should fund a review of existing research and, as necessary, fund further research into which factors and interventions are most effective in addressing wellbeing and promoting human flourishing.
- Work on staff wellbeing, recognising the impact of stress and high workloads on mental health and wellbeing.



Long term:

- We call for a cross-government strategy on children's mental health and wellbeing, with a commitment to prevention, early intervention and to long term sustainable funding.
- Develop a strategy to diversify the children and young people's mental health workforce to tackle inequalities for those accessing help.
- Teacher training and development needs to take account of building resilience and wellbeing in a systematic way, for example by recognising trauma and taking workload into account
- Review how wellbeing can be fully embedded into the school curriculum and ensure full implementation of a whole school and college approach.
- Embed mental health and wellbeing in the FE and HE curriculum and ensure young people build their skills and confidence they need for life, including how to identify problems and keep safe from harm.

Questions to the Government:

- How will the £500m, announced as part of the 2020 Spending Review, be used to boost mental health support in educational settings? How will the funding be allocated and is this additional to other funding?
- What has the reach been of the Wellbeing for Education Return programme in terms of the proportion of schools and other education settings who have accessed the programme?
- Will the Wellbeing for Education Return programme be extended beyond March 2021 and reflect the changing circumstances and second period of national school closures?
- Will the Department engage children, young people, families, and school staff directly in forming the next phase of their Wellbeing for Education Return programme?
- What steps is the Department for Education taking in working with schools to address the concerns raised by Ofsted in their latest briefings?
- Can the Department for Education provide an update on the delivery and implementation of Mental Health Support Teams, including progress based upon the targets set and funding allocated?
- Can the Department for Education provide an update on the roll out of the Designated Senior Lead training?
- How are the Department and Ofqual ensuring that the voices of children and young people are informing the exam consultation process? What learning about alternative assessments is being captured from this process which can inform approaches to assessment in the future?
- How can we ensure schools support vulnerable groups of pupils, such as young carers, who continue to attend school or college during restrictions?



Annex

Children and young people's mental health: A Vision for Renewal

The Coalition and the Partnership joined forces with 14 of the leading mental health organisations to develop a vision for renewal paper. As leading children and young people's mental health organisations, many of which are meeting significant increased demand for support, we call on the Government to demonstrate greater commitment in the immediate recovery phase and for bolder, clearer ambitions to create lasting change in a vision for renewal. Our vision presents recommendations, based on work with children and young people, which will support the Government to take much needed further steps in three essential areas: education, our communities, and our health system.

Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing resources, reports and campaigns

Our members shared several resources to support children, young people, their families and educational professionals. Links to these resources can be found in the below document: <https://cypmhc.org.uk/covid-19/>