

Children and young people's mental health: An independent review into policy successes and challenges over the last decade

Parliamentary briefing

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and the Report

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of over 260 organisations dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children, and young people. Our coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

Summary

The [latest report](#) by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, commissioned by the Local Government Association, considers the policy landscape in England over the last decade in relation to children and young people's mental health, and reviews progress relating to implementation and impact. The report was informed by a rapid review of key policy documents across national and local agencies.

The mental health of babies, children and young people has been subject to public and policy interest in recent years. This has been driven by increases in the numbers of children and young people reporting mental health concerns, with one in six children aged 7 to 16 with a mental health problem in 2022 compared to one in nine in 2017 (NHS Digital, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has likely placed additional pressures on mental health and has exacerbated existing inequalities with 1.5 million children and young people aged under the age of 18 now needing new or increased mental health support.

Interventions that occur during the childhood and teenage window are crucial for avoiding future difficulties, yet many children aren't receiving the right help at the right time. Historically, children and young people's mental health services have been underfunded and as a result, the demand for support has outweighed the capacity of services in responding to young people's needs.

To respond to these issues, there has been a range of measures introduced to help drive greater parity of esteem between mental and physical health over the past decade, and to improve access to services. Most notably, ambitions have been set out in Future in Mind (2015), The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health (2016) the NHS Long Term Plan and the Transforming Children and Young People's Provision: A Green Paper.

Whilst there has been some tangible progress in both policy and practice to expand provision for families, children and young people, there is growing concern that these attempts risk being undermined due to a lack of coordinated vision and action both locally

and nationally. This briefing therefore highlights the existing gaps in provision and sets out recommendations for change.

Gaps in children and young people's mental health provision

1. Prevention

Some steps have been taken to increase the availability of preventative support for children and young people, most notably through the Healthy Child Programme. First launched in 2009, the programme brings together key stakeholders in health and education to deliver prevention and support. However, success in integrating preventative support within the mental health system has been hampered by funding and the workforce. Real term reductions in public health budgets (of 26% since 2015/2016) and the loss of key parts of the workforce, such as health visitors and school nurses, have significantly limited the work of local authorities in this area. Over the years there has been a steady decline in the number of health visitors, with a reduction of 40% from 2015 to 2023 (Institute of Health Visiting, 2023). As a result, this likely means that children and young people now have less access to preventative measures of support.

Recommendations

- The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities should develop a framework for addressing the social determinants of health and should produce local guidance to support the implementation of this.
- The Government should restore the Public Health Grant to pre-2015 levels and above. This should be accompanied by the development of a Prevention Transformation to ensure a specific focus on preventative support.
- The Government should seek to increase the number of health visitors, school nurses and other vital public health teams to support children having the best start to life.

2. Early Intervention

Some policies have referenced the importance of early intervention support, such as the Future in Mind strategy (2015) and the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: Green Paper (2018) which was committed to expanding access to early intervention support within education settings. However, there has been a lack of clear direction at a national level to ensure services of this kind are in place within local areas. As a result, it is challenging to track the progress of ambitions to improve the availability of early intervention support. Measuring progress is also hampered by the lack of data collected on the availability of early support services, and the lack of accountability and dedicated funding provision in local areas.

Reductions in early intervention services catering to the community means there are fewer services to pick up on lower-level mental health and wellbeing issues meaning, for many children and young people, their needs will escalate before they are able to access support. In the financial year 2018/2019, it was estimated that around £226 million was spent on low-level mental health services (Children's Commissioner, 2019). However, overall spending on early support per child has fallen in real terms in around three-fifths of local areas (ibid).

This will subsequently put increased pressure on mental health services further down the line.

Recommendation

- The Government should increase the provision of early intervention support in the community through a national roll out of early support hubs in every local area so that all children and young people have early support for their mental health.

3. Mental Health Support in Education

Over recent years the Government has worked to increase the availability of mental health support in schools, most notably through the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper which set out the government's vision for a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing. The Green Paper set out three key proposals which involved incentivising schools to identify and train designated Senior Mental Health Leads, to fund Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) and to pilot four week waiting times for access to specialist services.

Whilst implemented policies have made progress in enhancing mental health support in schools and colleges, concerns and challenges regarding the long-term sustainability, widespread accessibility and effectiveness of these policies remain. Initial targets set for the roll out of the MHSTs were limited meaning that not all children and young people across the country will have access to this support. Findings from Barnardo's suggest that the current timetable for the roll out of MHSTs leaves around 6.5 million children without access in the medium term, further exacerbating inequality in access to support (Barnardo's, 2023). Funding for MHSTs beyond 2023/24 is still yet to be decided, meaning there is no guarantee on how much further, or how quickly, MHSTs will be expanded.

Recommendations

- The Department for Education should develop a fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.
- The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care should commit to and fund the full national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England.

4. NHS Children and Young People Mental Health Services

There has been longstanding concern regarding the lack of timely and accessible help for children and young people in need of specialist mental health support. Whilst some progress has been made in expanding access to NHS children and young people's specialist mental health services through policies such as the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health and the NHS Long Term Plan, many children and young people still face high access threshold for support and rejected referrals. In 2021/22, 32 per cent (equivalent to 238,000 children in England) of those referred to mental health services did not receive treatment (Children's Commissioner, 2023).

The Covid-19 pandemic has likely added further pressure to services, which could not have been accounted for when policies were being developed. There are concerns that the existing NHS services capacity and infrastructure is unable to cope with the growing mental health needs. A report by the Health and Social Care Committee on children and young people's mental health concluded that the combination of unmet need prior to the pandemic and additional needs created by the pandemic means that the scale and speed of improvements planned are not enough and that services are at risk of going backwards (Health and Social Care Select Committee, 2021).

There are also concerns about the lack of accountability arrangements put in place to ensure plans are acted on. Furthermore, current children and young people's mental health policy sits between various government departments and executive agencies however there is no cross-governmental group to oversee the joined-up delivery of these programmes. Further work is therefore required to address the continued shortfalls in support.

Recommendation

- The Government should develop a comprehensive, cross-government strategy on mental health and wellbeing. This should be supported by a clear, implementation framework and a cross-government oversight group should be established to oversee implementation.

5. Inpatient Care

Previous strategies have emphasised the need for children and young people in crisis to be treated in the right place at the right time and as close to home as possible). More recently, The Rapid Review into data on Mental Health Inpatient Settings (2023) was published in order to improve the way data and information is used in relation to patient safety in mental health inpatient care settings and pathways (Department of Health and Social Care, 2023b).

Data on children in mental health hospitals is patchy, making it challenging to get an accurate view on progress made on commitments. Where data is available, it is clear that targets set to both improve the quality of care provided within inpatient settings and to reduce their use in the long-term have not been met. Available data suggests that too many children are admitted to inpatient care far away from home or in adult wards, and many report poor experiences of care. Children and young people from racialised communities also continue to experience inequalities in access and experience.

Commitments have also been made to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 to ensure that the rights of patients are strengthened to have a greater say in their care and treatment. A draft Mental Health Bill has been published, which has undergone prelegislative scrutiny, but it is currently unclear when a Mental Health Bill will enter Parliament

Recommendations

- The Government should bring forward the Mental Health Bill to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 at the earliest opportunity.

- The Government should ensure that national data is regularly collected and published on children and young people as mental health inpatients, including information on experiences of care.

What can you do to support?

- Raise the report and key findings in oral questions and parliamentary debates
- Share the report on social media using #ChildrenMentalHealth #PolicyProgress
- Meet with us to discuss the key findings from the report and how we can support you in your work.

Questions to Government

- Will the Government commit to and fund the full national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England?
- Will the Government commit to developing a comprehensive, cross-government strategy on mental health and wellbeing supported by a clear, implementation framework and a cross-government oversight group to oversee implementation?
- What steps have the Government made to improve care and patient experiences within inpatient settings?
- What plans do the Government have for the next steps of the reformation of the Mental Health Act?

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