



Debate briefing: The current state of mental health support for children and young people in the UK

Thursday 23rd November

This is a joint briefing by the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition and Centre for Mental Health to support the debate on the current state of mental health support for children and young people in the UK. The briefing focuses on tackling the social determinants for poor mental health, early intervention support, mental health support in education, NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services, and inpatient care. If you require further information, please get in touch with Charlotte.Rainer@cypmhc.org.uk.

Summary

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 outweighs the capacity of services to respond. There has been a range of measures introduced over recent years to help drive greater parity of esteem between mental and physical health and to improve access to services. Whilst there has been some tangible progress in both policy and practice to expand provision, there is growing concern that policies and strategies to date have not been ambitious enough in the scale of change that is needed.

There is also widespread concern from across the mental health sector that mental health is no longer a political priority following the loss of the ten-year mental health plan earlier this year and the abandonment of plans to reform the Mental Health Act 1983. The Government has committed to developing a new Major Conditions Strategy, which will include mental health, yet we are concerned how far children's mental health will be covered by this new strategy given its broad coverage.

Key statistics on children and young people's mental health

- **1 in 5 children and young people** aged 8 to 25 have a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023). That's equivalent to **6 children in a class of 30**.
- **1.5 million children and young people** under the age of 18 could need new or increased mental health support following the Covid-19 pandemic (O'Shea, 2021).
- **Suicide is the most common cause of death** for both boys and girls aged between 5 and 19 (ONS, 2019).
- The number of referrals to NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) reached **466,250** referrals in May 2023, the highest number on record (YoungMinds, 2023).

- The number of urgent referrals of children to crisis teams has also reached a record high – in May 2023, **3,732 children and young people were referred to crisis teams**. This is more than three times higher than in May 2019 (YoungMinds, 2023).
- Evidence suggests that NHS specialist mental health services are turning away **one in three children and young people** referred to them for treatment (Local Government Association, 2023).
- It is estimated that around **75% of young people** experiencing a mental health problem are forced to wait so long that their condition gets worse, or they are unable to access any treatment at all (Local Government Association, 2023).
- The **number of A&E attendances** by young people aged 18 or under with a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition **have tripled** since 2010 (Lintern, 2020).
- On average, local areas **spend less than 1%** of their overall budget on children’s mental health and **13 times more** on adult mental health services than on services for children (Local Government Association, 2023).

1. Preventing and tackling the social determinants of poor mental health

Addressing the risk factors and stressors that can impact children and young people’s mental health, and building the protective factors, cannot begin early enough. It is widely recognised that the risk factors for poor mental health are the social, economic, and environmental circumstances which can lead to the development of mental health problems. These can include experiences of trauma, adversity, inequality, racism and discrimination, poor housing, having a parent with mental health problems, and parental conflict.

Whilst the evidence base on the risk factors for poor mental health is now well understood, little action has been taken at a national level to address these and prevention remains a neglected area by the Government. As a result, we have seen rising levels of inequality in recent years. Research shows that addressing the known social determinants for poor mental health, like poverty and discrimination, and environmental factors, including housing and pollution, can lead to more of us having better mental health. Investing in more powerful public health initiatives for children and families is also key to preventing illness and promoting better health.

Poverty in particular is toxic to children and young people’s mental health and can lead to a wide range of adverse consequences in their lives. Data suggests that children from the poorest 20% of households are four times as likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 as those from the wealthiest 20% (Morrison Gutman et al., 2015). To prevent this, we’re calling on the Government to give children the best start by delivering on the Association of Directors of Public Health’s call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.

2. Early intervention support

Early intervention services aim to identify and support children and their families at an early stage to prevent problems developing later in life. The Office of the Children's Commissioner estimates that there are around 1 million children with lower-level and emerging mental health needs who would benefit from some form of mental health support but do not require specialist care from NHS Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (Children's Commissioner, 2019).

Whilst early intervention has been the ambition of successive governments, 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, there is patchy provision of early support services across the country, meaning for many children and young people, their needs will escalate before they are able to access support. This in turn places additional pressure on mental health services later down the line.

There have been wide-ranging calls to equitably fund the system which includes investing in early intervention provision in local communities, alongside late intervention, crisis and urgent care. The early support hub model has been recognised as an effective mechanism to providing early help to children and young people aged 11-25 in the community, providing a youth-led and accessible approach. Early support hubs offer easy-to-access, drop-in support on a self-referral basis for young people with emerging mental health needs, up to age 25. In order to increase the availability of early support in the community, the Government should commit to a full 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

Education settings have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. Mental health problems can influence how children and young people feel about school, and can impact areas such as attainment, behaviour, and attendance. For example, data from NHS Digital shows that children with a mental health problem are 7 times more likely than those without a mental health problem to have missed more than 15 days of school (NHS Digital, 2023). These settings are also vital sources of support for children, young people, and their parents. Evidence highlights that children access mental health support at school, and that education services remain a crucial source of support for families (Ibid). It is therefore essential that all schools have access to effective mental health support.

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 (2018). The green paper set out three key proposals; to incentivise schools to identify and train a new senior lead for mental health, to establish Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to work across schools and colleges, and to pilot a four week waiting time for specialist services.

Provisions such as MHSTs and the new senior lead role have been seen to be welcome additional resources to schools and colleges. Positively, the current roll out of MHSTs in schools and colleges surpassed the coverage target set out in the Green Paper a year earlier

than planned. As of May 2023, MHSTs covered 35% of pupils in schools and learners in Further Education (Department for Education, 2023). The Government has since committed to expand MHSTs so that 50% of all pupils are covered by 2025.

However, there have been significant concerns about the implementation and ambition of the Green Paper proposals and the speed at which all areas of the country will have access to this additional 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, 2022).

What is more, funding for full national roll out of MHSTs is still yet to be decided, meaning there is no guarantee on how much further, or how quickly, MHSTs will be expanded. This risks leaving huge numbers of children and young people without this additional support, further fuelling the postcode lottery that already exists for children and young people's mental health services. It is therefore vital that the Government 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's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS)

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, rejected referrals and long waiting times.

The Covid-19 pandemic has likely added further pressure to services, and there are concerns that existing NHS services capacity and infrastructure is unable to cope with the growing mental health need following the pandemic. 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).

Urgent work is required to address the continued shortfalls in children and young people's mental health support. A successful mental health system relies enormously on sufficient and effective service provision, a strong workforce and sustainable investment. In the immediate term, the Government should set out how it plans to improve mental health care and treatment for children and young people, and the investment that will be made to support this.

5. Inpatient care

It is estimated that around 3,500 children aged under 18 are admitted to mental health inpatient settings a year (Article 39, 2021). Far too many children are admitted to inpatient units far from home, without adequate understanding of their rights, and subject to restrictive interventions and inappropriate care. Insights gathered from children and young people also highlight that their experiences of inpatient care are often poor. Research by the Children's Commissioner for England shows how children and young people within inpatient

settings can find them frightening places to be, separated from their friends and families, and often seeing and experiencing high levels of restraint (Children’s Commissioner, 2023).

This is an area where policy progress has been particularly lacking. Reforming the Mental Health Act 1983 provided a vital opportunity to enhance patient rights, to strengthen safeguards for those admitted to mental health hospitals, and to re-balance the system to one that prioritises and promotes patient voice and choice in their treatment. Yet, a new Mental Health Bill to reform the Mental Health Act 1983 was not introduced as part of the 2023 Kings Speech. Urgent clarification is needed from the Government on how they plan to address urgent issues with the use of the Mental Health Act and the care of those placed in mental health hospitals.

Questions

- What steps is the Government taking to improve mental health care for children and young people and to increase investment in this?
- What plans do the Government have to expand access to Mental Health Support Teams to children and young people across all schools and colleges in the country?
- To what extent will children’s mental health form part of the new Major Conditions Strategy?
- Does the Minister agree that the reform of the Mental Health Act is long overdue and that too many people are failed by the legislation in its current form?
- When will the Government issue its response to the Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Health Bill’s report?

About the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of over 270 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.

If you would like more information, please contact Charlotte Rainer, Coalition Manager, on charlotte.rainer@cypmhc.org.uk

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