

Written evidence submitted by The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

Summary

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition brings together over 250 organisations to campaign and influence policy in relation to babies, children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. This response is based on the views of our members.

We welcome this inquiry from the Public Accounts Committee on education recovery in schools. As we recover from the pandemic, the government has placed emphasis on educational recovery to support pupils to 'catch-up' on lost learning. Overall funding for education recovery has totalled £4.9 billion to address learning loss and support education recovery (National Audit Office, 2023). A total of £15 million was also dedicated to the Wellbeing for Education Recovery and Return programmes to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing (Department for Education, 2022).

However, our members are concerned that not enough emphasis has been placed on responding to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing needs within educational recovery. We believe a greater focus is required on supporting mental health, including expanding current initiatives to meet rising levels of need.

The impact of the pandemic on children and young people's mental health

There has been an increase in the number of children and young people with mental health problems in recent years, with one in six 7 to 16 year olds now having a mental health problem compared to one in nine in 2017 (NHS Digital, 2022). The social and emotional disruption caused by the pandemic and subsequent school closures is highly likely to have increased or exacerbated student anxiety and other mental health issues (Daniels et al., 2020). Centre for Mental Health estimates that 1.5million under 18 year olds could need new or increased mental health support as a result of the pandemic (O'Shea, 2021).

Ofsted's annual report 2022 found that Covid-19 continues to have an impact, with pupils' learning, attendance, mental health and physical health and personal development continuing to be areas of concern (Ofsted, 2022). Our members have also reported that they are still grappling with the fallout from the pandemic as third sector providers, and schools in particular have been described as becoming the 'fifth emergency service.'

Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic did cause mass disruption to children, it is important to recognise that for some, the move to remote education was better suited to their needs. A study conducted by researchers at the universities of Cambridge and Oxford found that one in three young people reported that their mental wellbeing had improved during the first lockdown (Soneson, 2022). Students who felt they had better wellbeing during lockdown were more likely than their peers to report positive lockdown experiences of school, home, relationships and lifestyle. In relation to school-related factors, the study noted that the increased opportunities for flexible and tailored teaching, smaller class sizes and more

teacher attention, and more freedom during the school may have contributed to increased feelings of wellbeing (Soneson, 2022).

A focus on academic catch-up

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition has been undertaking an inquiry into behaviour and mental health in schools. Through the inquiry, we were keen to explore the links between behaviour and mental health in schools, the impact of school behavioural policies on children and young people's mental health, and to understand what schools can do to better support both mental health and behaviour. We also explored if and how the pandemic changed expectations of behaviour following the return to school. The following findings are from a forthcoming report, which is due to be published in early summer.

We heard consistently from young people, parents and carers and professionals throughout the course of our inquiry about the over-emphasis placed on academic catch-up during the return to school, with little consideration of children and young people's mental health needs. Young people also felt that no adjustments were made in schools' expectations of them, particularly in relation to their behaviour.

"The school's expectations haven't changed and I think this is bad. Lockdown has had a huge impact on everyone's mental health whether that be a big or small one. My school hasn't taken into account that people may behave differently to how they used to before and they haven't made any changes to their expectations." Young person survey respondent

"I think the additional pressure on schools made them less sympathetic to children's difficulties, and more rigid in their approach." Parent-carer survey respondent

"The focus seems to be on 'catch up' educationally without an understanding or respect of the collective trauma, disruption, interruption and loss that many experienced through this time." Professional survey respondent

"Schools feel under pressure from the government on catch up and have therefore cracked down on student behaviour. What students needed was time to re-engage with their friends and school again. So many young people have suffered trauma during the pandemic and for many their mental health is not ready for pressured learning."
Professional survey respondent

Wellbeing recovery

Overall, our members are concerned that the response to children and young people's mental health and wellbeing has not taken a priority within educational recovery, and that current initiatives do not go far enough in meeting the scale of need.

To respond to children and young people's wellbeing needs as a result of the pandemic, the government launched the Wellbeing for Education Recovery Programme. This built on the Wellbeing for Education Return Scheme in 2020, which provided free expert training, support and resources for school and college staff dealing with children and young people who were experiencing additional pressures from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there has been limited understanding about the impact this programme has had on children and young people, and it is not clear if this programme is still a priority for the Department for Education since children have returned to school full time. We would welcome the inclusion

of this programme within the scope of this inquiry.

The Government also continued to implement to the proposals set out in the 2018 green paper on transforming children and young people's mental health provision during the Covid-19 pandemic and made additional investment to accelerate these commitments. Most notably, the Government invested an additional £79 million to expand access to Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) from 59 in March 2020 to around 400 by April 2023, which will achieve the green paper's coverage target of 25% a year earlier than planned (Department for Health and Social Care, 2021).

Whilst this is welcome progress, our members are concerned about the scale and speed in which MHSTs will be rolled out to all schools and colleges across the country. 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. To support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing as we continue to recover from the pandemic, we believe that the Department for Education should commit to, and fund, full national roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England.

Finally, the Coalition has long been calling for whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing to be fully implemented across all education settings in England. Whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing have been recognised as an integral factor by the government in protecting and promoting the mental health and wellbeing of pupils in education. However, we consistently hear about the challenges that education settings face in relation to implementing such approaches, including challenges with resources and capacity to roll out these approaches in the face of shrinking budgets and increasing academic pressures.

The Government missed a crucial opportunity to fully embed these approaches following the pandemic. We believe the Department for Education should develop a national implementation programme to support every school, college and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.

Recommendations:

- The Committee should ensure that the Wellbeing for Education Recovery Programme is included within the scope of the inquiry.
- The Department for Education should commit to, and fund, full national roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams across all schools and colleges in England.
- The Department for Education should develop a national implementation programme to support every school, college and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.

References

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