Mental Health of Pupils

House of Lords Debate Briefing- Thursday 22nd February 2024

Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) welcome this Lords debate on the mental health of pupils led by Baroness Bennett of Manor Castle. This briefing provides information on the current state of mental health provision in schools, evidence on the link between mental health attainment and attendance and sets out recommendations for change.

Summary

- In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 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).
- Schools and colleges play an important role in children and young people's mental health, including the provision of information, advice, and support. Educational services are the most commonly reported source of advice and help by families.
- The roll out of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) is limited in scope and ambition; MHSTS currently reach 35% of all pupils in schools and college.
- Delivering mental health interventions in school is linked to improved attainment, attendance, and reduced exclusions.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
  - **The full, national roll out of Mental Health Support Teams in all schools and colleges.**
  - **A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college, and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.**

1. The mental health of children and young people

- There was a significant rise in prevalence of mental health need amongst children and young people in the last decade, from one in ten in 2004, to one in nine in 2017 to one in six in 2020 (NHS Digital).
- This high level of need has since remained stable. In 2023, about 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023).
- The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated need, with analysis showing that 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).
- 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).

Some groups of children and young people are disproportionately impacted by mental health problems largely driven by a complex interplay of social and environmental determinants of poor mental health. This includes children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those from racialised and LGBTQ+ backgrounds, neurodivergent young people, those with physical health or long-term conditions, young carers, children in care and refugee and migrant children and young people (CYPMHC, 2023).

The mental health of pupils:

Experiencing mental health problems can impact educational outcomes, including attainment and attendance. For example:

- According to data from NHS Digital, children and young people with mental health problems are significantly less likely to report to say they enjoy learning at school (35%) compared to those without reported difficulties (71%) and had much higher absence rates (almost four times as likely to have had 15 or more days off school in one term) (NHS Digital, 2023).
- Research has suggested that mental health difficulties are negatively associated with attainment and positively associated with absenteeism (Lereyea et al., 2019).
- An independent study from the National Centre for Social Research on adolescent mental health and educational attainment observed a strong association between mental health difficulties between the ages of 11 and 14 and later educational attainment at age 16. The study found that children experiencing poor mental health are three times less likely than their peers to pass five GSCE's. (Smith et al., 2021),
- An inquiry led by CYPMHC demonstrates a link between poor behaviour and mental health problems and special educational needs and disabilities (CYPMHC, 2023).

Evidence suggests that mental health interventions, when effective are likely to improve educational attainment, particularly in high-risk groups. For example, a study of school-based interventions delivered by Place2Be found that school-based counselling positively influences educational engagement (Toth et al., 2022). When analysing their 1-1 counselling service, Place2Be found that 74% of pupils received fewer fixed term exclusions while they had counselling. Research by Public Health England also highlights that pupils with better health and wellbeing are more likely to achieve better academic outcomes (Public Health England, 2014).

What is more, providing mental health support in schools has been found to have long-term economic benefits for children and wider society, as well as the immediate increase in the quality of life for children themselves. Analysis of Place2Be's 1-1 counselling support in schools found that for every £1 spent, this generates around £8 in benefits (Gomez, 2022).

2. The role of school-based provision: Mental Health Support Teams

Schools are well placed to support children and young people with mental health difficulties and are often the first port of call for children and their families. NHS data shows that in

2023, seeking help from education services was the most commonly reported source of help and advice by parents of children with a mental health difficulty (NHS Digital, 2023).

Over recent years, the Government has taken steps to increase the availability of mental health and wellbeing support in schools and colleges. The Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health: A Green Paper (2018) committed to the establishment of new Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) in schools and colleges with the aim of reaching a fifth to a quarter of the country by the end of 2022/23 (DHSC & DfE, 2017). These teams would support children and young people with mild to moderate mental health problems with evidence-based interventions. The green paper also committed to training up a Senior Mental Health Lead in every school and college to oversee the development of a whole school and college approach to mental health and wellbeing.

The establishment of MHSTs began in 2018 and as of Spring 2023, **398 teams** were operational covering **6,800 schools and colleges**, and **35%** of pupils in schools and learners in Further Education (NHS England, n.d). NHS England expect approximately **500 MHSTs up and running by 2024.**

An evaluation of the MHST programme (led by NHS England) so far has found some positive outcomes. For example, staff feeling more confident talking to children about mental health problems, being able to access advice about mental health problems more easily and having quicker access to support (Ellins et al., 2023). However, the evaluation highlighted that some children and young people continue to fall though the gaps in support, with the evaluation highlighting the following challenges (Ibid):

- Defining what was in scope of the 'mild to moderate' remit of MHSTs, and as a result concerns were expressed about children and young people falling through the gaps between MHSTs' remit and the criteria for specialist support.
- Onward referrals to specialist services were noted as a major challenge, with capacity constraints and long waiting times for specialist mental health services being a recurring theme.
- Some groups of children and young people are underserved by MHSTs including children and young people with special educational needs or neurodiversity, those from racialised communities and some religious backgrounds, and children with challenging family or social circumstances.

Alongside this, 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 (Barnardos, 2023).

Funding for MHSTs beyond 2023/24 is also 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.

3. Embedding a whole school and college approach

Early years settings, schools, colleges, and universities all have an important role to play in promoting and protecting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. A whole

education approach encompasses a complete, setting-wide, and multi-component approach to the promotion of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and aims to place mental health as foundational to all aspects of educational life, for all students and staff. Whilst many schools are working to implement whole educational approaches this work is often underfunded, comes from core budgets, and remain optional within schools.

We believe that the Government should embed whole education approaches to mental health and wellbeing in all of its policies and across all education settings to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for both learners and staff. This would have a universal impact on the health of every child and young person. A whole school approach programme in England would cost approximately £530 million per year based upon the key elements of such an approach[1] , as costed by our CYPMHC member Place2Be.

About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. Centre for Mental Health are proud hosts of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of nearly 300 organisations and individuals 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.

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