Mental Health support in educational settings
Debate Briefing
Thursday 13ᵗʰ March 2025

Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) welcome this debate on mental health support in educational settings. This briefing provides information on the mental health of pupils, the current state of mental health provision in schools, whole educational approaches to mental health and 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). The Darzi review also noted an increase in referrals from 40,000 in 2016 to almost 120,000 in 2024 (Darzi, 2024).
- 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) are a cost effective resource and must be extended in scope and ambition to reach all pupils and learners. The Government can achieve 100% rollout through committing £455 million per year by 2028/29.
- A whole educational approach is also vital to ensuring the educational setting protects and promotes mental wellbeing.
- We also support the Our Wellbeing, Our Voice Campaign's calls for a national wellbeing measurement and Square Peg and Not Fine in School's recommendations on attendance.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
  - A commitment to the 100% rollout of MHSTs by the end of this Parliament, to deliver on its commitment to provide a specialist mental health professional in every school.
  - 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). The Darzi review also noted an increase in referrals from 40,000 in 2016 to almost 120,000 in 2024 (Darzi, 2024).
- 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).

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),

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).

The previous Government took steps to increase the availability of mental health and wellbeing support in schools and colleges through the Mental Health Support Team (MHST) programme. The Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health: A Green Paper (2018) committed to the establishment of MHSTs 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). 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. Since then, the Labour government also committed to a mental health professional in every school.

The current state of MHSTs

MHSTs currently support children and young people with mild to moderate mental health problems with evidence-based interventions. The establishment of MHSTs began in 2018 and approximately **500 teams are currently operational**, with **4.2 million pupils or learners** covered by an MHST, equating to **44% coverage** of pupils in schools and learners in further education in England (NHS England, 2024). The Government have previously reported that they expect coverage to increase to **54% of pupils and learners** by March 2025, however, there is currently no funding guaranteed to ensure the programme will continue its rollout beyond this point.

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 children and young people falling through the gaps between MHSTs' remit and the criteria for specialist support.
- Challenges with onward referrals to specialist services due to capacity constraints and long waiting times.
- 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.

The economic case for MHSTs

Research from the Future Minds campaign shows that MHSTs have a benefit cost ratio of 22, showing that for every £1 spent, £22 of wellbeing benefits are generated (Future Minds, 2025). Further studies have also shown that initial investment in school settings is recouped within two years (Frayman et al., 2024). Furthermore, the average benefits per intervention, as per the Government's original business case for MHSTs, were estimated at a total of £5600 across healthcare savings, increased earnings, reduced crime costs and educational benefits (Department of Health and Social Care, 2018).

As part of the Future Minds campaign, we are calling for the full rollout of MHSTs by the end of this Parliament, with a commitment to adapt the model to meet a broader range of need. This includes committing to **£455 million per year by 2028/29 to enable 100% of national coverage** for Mental Health Support Teams (Future Minds, 2025). This also includes ensuring that the limitations in the ongoing programme evaluation are addressed (Ellins et al., 2024).

Recommendations

- A commitment to the 100% rollout of MHSTs by the end of this Parliament, to deliver on its commitment to provide a specialist mental health professional in every school.

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, as costed by our CYPMHC member Place2Be.

Recommendation:

- A fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college, and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing.

We also support the Our Wellbeing, Our Voice Campaign's call for a national wellbeing measurement as part of the Children's Wellbeing Bill and Square Peg and Not Fine At School's recommendations on attendance including a Mental Health Absence Code, Attendance Code of Practice and Ending Truancy Laws.

Questions to Government

1. Will the Government commit to the 100% roll out of Mental Health Support Teams and fulfil their commitment to mental health professionals in every school?
2. Will the Department for Education take action to address the limitations raised in the national evaluation of the Mental Health Support Team model?
3. Will the Department for Education commit to a fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school, college, and university to adopt a whole education approach to mental health and wellbeing?

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 400 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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