

# Mind over Matter follow-up: session with members of the Welsh Youth Parliament

Note of discussion

Held Thursday 13 February 2020 (13:15-14:15)

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To inform the follow-up work for the Mind over Matter report which would have been released two years ago this coming April 2020, the Committee met with Members of the Welsh Youth Parliament (WYP) in a private session.

Using the Committee's original recommendations (sent to the Welsh Government in 2018 to suggest how to improve the emotional and mental health support available for children and young people), six themes were established as a focus for the conversation. After discussing each theme the WYP Members were invited to rate progress in relation to each theme Red, Amber or Green (RAG). The RAG rating was defined as the following:

- **Red** – not good enough and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency
- **Amber** – some progress has been made but more needs to be done in the longer term
- **Green** – there are no major issues here at the moment

While this summary note collates the comments from the WYP Members present, each young person recognised they were sharing their own views and understood others may have had different experiences.

## Themes and feedback

The following themes were shared with the WYP Members prior to the session:



## 1. Society's attitudes towards mental health/stigma

One of the big areas of concern that is regularly raised with the Committee is the stigma people can feel when speaking about mental health. The WYP Members raised how important it was for everyone to feel comfortable initiating a conversation with others about their mental health. They also emphasised the importance of recognising poor mental health and understanding people having problems. They acknowledged that there had been some positive change, with more people now willing to speak about their mental health, but noted that "massive stigma" still existed for many.

*"It (mental health) is treated like a taboo subject still and it's not, it's a normal thing. It just needs to be recognised as normal. Everyone has mental health, some have issues some don't. We are starting to talk about it and starting the conversation will hopefully help."*

*"I think one of the problems is that I know there are some people going through mental health issues and they may go out with a smile, but they are hiding loads of stuff. What I think should be happening is that we ask the person, how they are more. Especially with close friends."*

Peer to peer support was described as often being difficult. The WYP Members explained that this was because there was a risk that peers might not know how to best deal with things or keep conversations private. They felt that this was also a similar consideration when thinking about speaking to teachers and adults. They emphasised the importance of having a relationship of trust in order to be able to speak.

*"I think there's been a slight change so people do feel comfortable talking to staff at schools, but I do think there's still a massive stigma that needs to be broken."*

*"More people are able to talk about how they feel but there's still a small amount of people that don't feel confident perhaps because they feel like they are going to be judged."*

*"I think bullying is why it's difficult to talk to younger people about your mental health. It can lead to stuff being made up about you, people not knowing the whole story, whereas with an adult, I feel like the judgement is not there."*

*"With the young people in my school if you talk to them you might be scared that there will be news about you going all around the school. I feel they might*

*tell other people in the future. I feel the same thing can happen with teachers and there's a fear of being judged as well as an issue of trust with the adults."*

RAG Rating: **Amber** / **Red**

The rating above was agreed as both WYP Members felt that **society's attitudes towards mental health/stigma** are better than they were but still need work as a matter of urgency

## 2. Preventative action in schools

The Committee's Mind over Matter report identified schools as an important place to help promote mental wellbeing and build resilience. While discussing this theme the young people shared their personal experience in school, demonstrating that different approaches were in place. Concerns were raised that across Wales schools offer different levels of support

The WYP Members were concerned that not all schools are prioritising awareness and training of mental health even though at school is where they'd expect to expand their knowledge on this. They also felt that schools needed to be more proactive and recognise that some groups of children and young people, for example asylum seekers, may have particular needs for emotional and mental health support.

*"As young adults we do spend more time in school than at home with our parents. So I feel that should be the main place we should be learning about how to have good mental health. I don't feel that schools support mental health awareness as well as they should."*

*"My school is doing things at a high level, not doing things at a low level. They don't get the training for teachers or young people. Also in my school if you need counselling you are put onto a waiting list, but it takes a long time to be seen."*

The WYP Members emphasised the importance of the new curriculum covering well-being and mental health and felt the proposed curriculum changes would be a positive step.

*"Personally I think that the lack of teaching around mental health is horrid. We don't get taught anything. We don't get taught how to talk about mental*

*health. I understand it is difficult, but so is everything else until you learn how to do it. Recognising it is on the same level as physical health would help the situation.”*

*“I feel the new curriculum will help as we will be talking about feelings and emotions from a younger age. Hopefully that will teach people that sometimes their mental health is good and sometimes it’s bad.”*

RAG Rating: **Amber** / **Red**

The WYP members came to this decision about **preventative action in schools** as they felt schools were lacking training in preventative action and waiting lists for services were long.

### **3. Mental health support in schools**

WYP Members have gained an understanding of the school support offer in their locality as well as nationally during their work on the Welsh Youth Parliament’s Emotional and Mental Health Support Committee, however they were most confident sharing experiences from their own schools.

They recognised support differed within schools across Wales and both outlined approaches from their settings. One described a light touch approach with daily opportunities to discuss mental health in a group setting. The other described the counselling services which they felt were structured to suit the service rather than the user’s needs.

*“My school in particular has a nurture provision, which is helpful but you have to fit a certain criteria to get into it.. A staff member has to put you forward for it [...] We have a little office for our school counsellor’s but they visit other schools so they are only in for one day a week when we can have a 50 minute session.”*

*“In registration they ask us how we feel from 1-5, 1 is not good and 5 is good. If it’s lower than 3 then they ask you why you feel that way. And there is support there. My form do it every day but other forms don’t always. It means we can have a further conversation if we need it.”*

Both WYP Members sit on their school council as representatives for mental health but both felt that they were not being used to their full potential. One said they raise awareness as a priority but both felt they weren’t in a decision-making

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role. The WYP Members highlighted that schools were not necessarily equipped nor staff trained to help with mental health issues, and felt that mental health support could be seen as a burden on already stretched teaching resource.

*"I'm part of the school council. We haven't done anything since November last year. We haven't even seen each other. I received a book from State of Mind [a training provider] and I wanted to do something with this, to share it. I've asked many times but they don't do anything, I ask and ask but no action is taken."*

*"We haven't met each other and we don't really talk about anything, through the stigma I guess. We just raise awareness, we've done bake sales but we don't really talk about things so it's not working."*

*"They [teachers] don't think it's [mental health] as important as it is, but it's effecting everyone, if they don't know they could try to learn or train but they don't."*

WG states counselling is available at every school and both the WYP Members' schools offer it. However they felt it wasn't a very accessible service, with little proactive information provided about it.

*They never advertise it [counselling services] or show it. You have to actually go through it and then it's offered.*

*I only got told about it [counselling] when I reached my school crisis point. I was told by the pastoral staff and I had to fill out a form. I then had to wait 9 months. I had 6 sessions.*

RAG Rating: **Red**

Both WYP Members agreed **mental health support in schools** was red because although there is some support, it's difficult to access.

#### 4. 'Primary care'/community services

Both WYP Members felt that GP's would be their first point of contact but both felt their services and knowledge could be limited or unsuitable for anyone with poor mental health.

Signposting to GP's or other services was described as lacking and it was suggested that GP's should advertise in schools directly.

*"I have social workers but if I didn't, my first thought would be to go to a GP because they will be able to help with quick crisis knowledge and support. We need to make sure GP's have this knowledge."*

*"I don't think people know where to go unless they google it. It's hard to know where to go unless you've been told. I wouldn't know where to go if that'd happened to me."*

*"I think there needs to be an access door for young people, because I know that making appointments on the phone can be nerve racking for anyone. Some sort of other way to access support that was maybe less formal and intimidating. Maybe having a drop in where you can have a 1:1 chat for 10 minutes but GP's need to be flexible and this isn't really possible."*

The WYP Members felt that, in some cases, the psychological challenges that young people may have to overcome to walk through the GP's door, can be far too high. They felt that the way services are currently configured/accessed can present a barrier to accessing help.

*"The main problem is the barriers like going through the door of the GP or fitting the criteria. If you don't fit the criteria, you move closer to crisis point, and people can get into a dark place."*

The WYP Members felt that the internet is sometimes used as a primary source of information for self-diagnosing, but explained that it was difficult to judge what information is useful. WYP Members described it as 'scary' seeing how researching or spending too much time online can affect your mental state.

*"I know it's happened to a few people I know, they've searched 'what's wrong with me' and tried to self-diagnose and they read into it more and more and they freak themselves out and that's not what you need. You need someone to comfort you and say that you're okay. You're normal, there's nothing wrong, you've just got an additional need that needs to be dealt with. The internet is a very scary place for when you're looking at your mental health."*

*"I think that being connected and using devices can affect your mental health and we should try to disconnect from our phones more often."*

RAG Rating: **Amber** / **Red**

The WYP members came to this decision about **primary care/community services** on the basis that they felt there is still a long way to go.

## 5. Specialist mental health services/CAMHS

The WYP members recognised the importance of specialist support for a number of young people but explained that they perceived it to be very difficult to access specialist CAMHS support.

They understood the need for staff to establish a professional relationship with young people but explained that this could feel like a lack of emotion or empathy from staff within these services.

*"We need people who care, we don't need robots. Most therapists I've been with are so under trained or nervous that they go by the book, they cross the box, follow the form and the book, there's no book for people, this doesn't work for everyone. We need face to face, heart to heart not book to person."*

*"We should have people who want to make a change. It makes me questions if they care. They may care but they perhaps don't know how to show that person that they care."*

Questions were asked about how training for the public on understanding and prevention are limited, and left the WYP Members themselves feeling unable to help people they knew moving closer to a crisis point. They also felt that having lived-experience could assist when seeking to support young people with mental health issues.

*"When my friend went through mental health problems, I wondered how do I help her? What do I say to her to help her thought this situation?"*

*"I think it's very difficult to access specialist services, I was fortunate, I guess you would say, although I hate that term in this phrase, I had to reach crisis point before I knew about CAMHS."*

One of the WYP Members shared their personal experience, shedding a light on current practices.

*"I met with a psychiatrist three times...this psychiatrist was very calm, very ready for me to talk to him, it felt like a GP. He was writing down word for word everything I was saying. And at the end he said 'yes' or 'no.' It was 'yes, I need to see you again in 6 months' or 'no, you're fine.' And that was it. I saw him in 6 months' time and it was a good day, I was 'better' I was 'fixed' so they say, so I didn't have to see him again."*

RAG Rating: **Red**

The WYP Members felt it was so important to see a change in **specialist mental health services/CAMHS** that they both chose Red.

## 6. Crisis services

One of the WYP Members shared their personal experience. They explained how it felt to be at crisis point and gave suggestions on how things could be better for people in a similar a situation. For example: hosting counselling sessions or appointments in buildings other than a hospital; talking to people before they reach crisis point to mitigate the risk of them reaching it as once they are there it's a much longer journey to get back on track; and ensuring services were readily available as many people have to go on long waiting lists which can be detrimental to their recovery.

*"Crisis point for me was actually a suicide attempt and that was the darkest part of my life and no one should ever get to that point, so anything we can do before that, is going to help, making some form of awareness, making things known that it's okay not to be okay."*

*"I wasn't aware of CAMHS or eye to eye counselling until I reached crisis point. If you talk to people when they are okay or happy, in a good mental health place then that'll help because they will listen to you. When you're in a dark place it's difficult to listen to people."*

*"A lot of people said that the waiting list is the biggest problem. I didn't have to use a waiting list but for some, even after a crisis event it's a problem."*

*"Possibly all of my appointments with CAMHS were in hospital buildings, and going there makes you feel like you're ill, and you're not, you're just not perfect and no one is. It's not a setting I liked, I didn't think there was anything 'ill'*



*about me, I just wasn't in a good place, the whole hospital environment does put people off, people worry about being sectioned."*

The WYP Members stressed the importance of society and the school environment accepting physical and mental health as equally important. They also emphasised the importance of considering the impact of the wider context of a young person's life on their mental health, and being discreet and understanding about this.

*"In my school there isn't always understanding. If you take the day off because you aren't feeling good. And then your parents get a £60 fine for you not being there then that punishment adds to the stress."*

*"If you've got a broken leg and you have a cast, you get an authorised absence for that day. But if you're in a really bad place and you've taken the day off to calm down and clear your head, it's unauthorised. There should be equality between physical and mental health."*

RAG Rating: **Red**

In order to highlight the urgent need for improvement to **crisis services** this area, the WYP Members rated this theme red.