

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#) ar [anhydraddoldebau iechyd meddwl](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) consultation on [mental health inequalities](#)

MHI 67

Ymateb gan: | Response from: National Education Union Cymru | Undeb Addysg Cenedlaethol Cymru

Mental Health Inequalities Inquiry

About NEU Cymru

The National Education Union Cymru (NEU Cymru) stands up for the future of education. It brings together the voices of teachers, lecturers, support staff and leaders working in maintained and independent schools and colleges to form the largest education union in Wales.

The National Education Union is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC), European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) and Education International (EI). It is not affiliated to any political party and seeks to work constructively with all the main political parties.

If we value education, we should value educators.

Our Response

The National Education Union Cymru (NEU Cymru) welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Health and Social Care Committee Inquiry on Mental Health Inequalities.

NEU Cymru is increasingly concerned that austerity has had an adverse effect on school funding, early intervention services, family counselling and Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which risks leaving our most vulnerable youngsters at serious risk. NEU Cymru believes in equality including the rights of all young people to receive a fully supportive and funded education system that meets their needs.

NEU Cymru recognises that there is a mental health crisis involving teachers and other education workers. Factors in the workplace which contribute to stress and anxiety include:

1. Harassment and bullying.
2. Excessive and unnecessary workload.
3. Oversized classes.
4. Unruly and disruptive pupils.
5. Other forces outside the workers' control.

Support for education professionals with mental health issues must be a priority for all involved. Advising and supporting education professionals who are experiencing mental health problems is not a substitute for action to tackle the root causes of work-related health

problems. The NEU Mental Health Charter¹ lays out the framework whereby the workplace can be changed so that the workers' mental health is protected. Changing the workplace not the worker is the aim of this union.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed challenges for the mental health and well-being of the education profession as well as for their workload.

Many in the profession are already burnt out due to the stress caused by lockdowns and will need additional support in the coming months. Staff themselves have fallen ill, had family disruption and experienced bereavement. On top of this they are trying to support the well-being of children and young people in their school and re-engage them with learning.

NEU Cymru believes that it is important to look at the mental health of both staff and pupils alike in the context of an accountability regime, driven by pressure and high stakes. The Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act, with its focus on wellbeing, should help ensure that we move to a fairer system which supports everyone in education to fulfil their potential. Welsh Government must cut workload for the workforce in education and support the mental health of everyone, if they are to deliver the new curriculum.

The 'Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being',² which was introduced in March 2021, is aimed at supporting the needs of school-age learners and the workforce. It is intended to support schools, including pupil referral units (PRUs) and education settings in reviewing their own well-being landscape and in developing plans to address their weaknesses and build on their strengths. We are hopeful that this guidance will assist with the development of action plans, strategies, and other policies that impact on the well-being of young people and education professionals. But Welsh Government must support local authorities and education settings to undertake this work – the Framework in itself will not solve the mental health crisis.

¹ <https://neu.org.uk/advice/neu-mental-health-charter>

² <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-03/framework-on-embedding-a-whole-school-approach-to-emotional-and-mental-well-being.pdf>

Which groups of people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in Wales? What factors contribute to worse mental health within these groups?

Education workforce

This last year has had a huge impact on the education workforce in terms of workload and wellbeing. Work intensity has shown to be significantly high in for teachers and is understood to be impacting on wellbeing.³

Whilst Covid-19 has inevitably had a massive impact on everyone in Wales, the education workforce are critical workers, supporting young people with their learning. Schools and colleges have not been operating on a 'business as usual' basis.

In July 2021, NEU Cymru, supported by Unite and GMB unions, conducted a mental health and wellbeing survey of education sector workers across Wales. The survey attracted over 1600 responses from educators across all job roles in schools, colleges, and universities and highlighted the strength of feeling amongst our education sector workforce.

The main finding from the survey indicates that excessive workload continues to be the leading cause of workplace stress and mental health issues.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic around 73% of survey respondents said that they had been affected by poor mental health (35% of these had been affected significantly). This figure has risen over the course of the pandemic to 84%.

80% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that work has impacted on their mental health, and 64% of workers said that work pressures had made their mental health worse. In the 12 months leading up to the survey, 84% of those surveyed had supported colleagues in the workplace in emotional distress at least once. Even more worryingly, 10% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they had had suicidal thoughts related to their work. This is not acceptable.

Young People

More should be done for young people, especially since the pandemic, experiencing poverty, abuse, Adverse Childhood Experiences, learning disabilities, etc. Without mental health support, many of these children will continue to suffer with poor mental health into adulthood.

Some NEU Cymru members have highlighted that there remain serious problems accessing mental health support (CAMHS, etc.) and a more specific issue of managing the transition from child to adult mental health services. Without access to the right services at the right time, young people are continuing to suffer, and this can affect their ability to achieve their full academic potential and limit their life chances. School alone cannot make up for a lack of mental health support for young people.

Menopausal education professionals

Although we would agree that all the groups mentioned in the Centre for Mental Health factsheet⁴ are affected by poor mental health, one sizeable group that might suffer disproportionately amongst NEU Cymru membership are education professionals going through the menopause.

³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03054985.2020.1847719>

⁴ <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/mental-health-inequalities-factsheet>

Many of our older members tell us they struggle with the physical and mental changes happening to them as they get older but the pressures of needing a full-time salary (e.g., mortgage, family, pension needs) outweigh their needs for self-care and getting support or making significant life changes.

Contributory factors to their worsening mental health are workload, accountability and, for some, the lack of support from employers in managing their menopause symptoms.

The Mental Health Foundation⁵ has some very useful information on menopause and mental health.

⁵ <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/m/menopause>

For the groups identified, what are the barriers to accessing mental health services? How effectively can existing services meet their needs, and how could their experience of using mental health services be improved?

Education workforce

Other findings from the July 2021 survey indicate that:

- Excessive workload continues to be the leading cause of workplace stress and mental health issues.
- There is a significant lack of support measures in place for workers experiencing poor mental health.
- Negative workplace cultures surrounding mental health mean that only a small percentage of individuals access help or support for mental health problems.

A staggering 58% of respondents had experienced a mental health issue in the 12 months leading up to the survey with 38% contacting their GP, yet only 22% of respondents took time off work due to poor mental health, with stress and anxiety being the leading cause.

Young People

Barriers to accessing the support they need include stigma, fear of ridicule from peers, etc.

Some NEU Cymru members have highlighted that there remain serious problems accessing mental health support (including CAMHS, etc.) and a more specific issue of managing the transition from child to adult mental health services.

Intersectional considerations

For some people accessing mental health support will be made more difficult due to intersectional considerations, such as disability, race, gender or sexual orientation. This includes menopausal educators, who will face significant barriers in the workplace, contributing to mental health pressures, already exacerbated by the physical impact of the menopause – as set out in the Wales TUC toolkit⁶

⁶ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Menopause%20toolkit%20Eng%20FINAL.pdf>

To what extent does Welsh Government policy recognise and address the mental health needs of these groups? Where are the policy gaps?

Education workforce

Welsh Government's 'Framework on embedding a whole-school approach to emotional and mental well-being' must be implemented to ensure that there is a solid framework for supporting positive mental health and wellbeing in our schools and colleges, with responsibility on the employers to ensure this happens in the workplace. The Health & Safety Executive⁷ has good advice for employers on this.

Welsh Government need to encourage all employers – including those in education – to undertake a stress audit of the workplace. This stress audit needs to look at the whole picture and support employers to continuously strive to reduce the causes of stress and poor mental health in the workforce, including workload, bullying, and negative workplace cultures. Only 16% of our survey respondents said that their employer carried out wellbeing surveys/stress audits.

Whilst there is welcome 'mention' of the importance of mental health and wellbeing for the education workforce in the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience⁸, this doesn't go far enough.

Whilst Estyn has been tasked with looking at staff wellbeing, policy must include mental health and wellbeing teams in all workplaces – to support staff and pupils. Policy should also include the provision of training – to include a whole host of levels and topics. This policy would benefit from being a living document that changes over time and dependant on circumstances. Education needs to move away from the tick box culture which members tell us seems to have become the norm.

Young People

Welsh Government are already recognising and addressing the mental health needs of young people by including the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning and Experience in the New Curriculum for Wales.

However, more support needs to be given to Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as a failure to do so would leave our most vulnerable youngsters at serious risk.

Schools and colleges are not resourced to provide mental health and wellbeing support, and cannot make up for a lack of support in the wider community. Thus, the role of the local authorities and health boards in supporting the school / college, to ensure the young person has access to services, to support learning is paramount.

We believe Regional Partnership Boards (established by the Social Services and Well-being (Act)) are best placed to assist schools / colleges in their area to develop and embed best practice for delivering a whole-school approach to emotional well-being and mental health. We also feel that Regional Partnership Boards are best placed to promote collaboration between schools / colleges and key partners, and intervene if this breaks down and learners, and education professionals, do not receive the support they need in a timely fashion.

⁷ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mental-health.htm>

⁸ <https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/health-and-well-being/>

Menopausal education professionals

Welsh Government has specific advice for employers on the menopause⁹. However, work needs to be done to ensure this embedded within the education workforce.

Indirect impacts of Welsh Government policies must also be handled with care. For example, members tell us that women of menopausal age can suffer from increased discrimination in the workplace. With an increased workload for everyone in education, those who are struggling with factors such as the menopause may come under increased stress.

The role out of the new curriculum must be impact assessed.

⁹ <https://businesswales.gov.wales/news-and-blogs/news/menopause-work-guidance-employers>

What further action is needed, by whom/where, to improve mental health and outcomes for the groups of people identified and reduce mental health inequalities in Wales?

Education workforce

Education in Wales is a high pressure environment which is having a negative impact on wellbeing of the education workforce. We need to value educators as they are critical in delivering education to our young people and must be supported.

Workload

Workload is a critical factor for the education workforce. Whilst there have been some welcome moves by the Welsh Government to look at workload in the education workforce, they could go further. We set out some ways Welsh Government could help tackle workload below:

- Every new initiative must be workload impact assessed.
- Staff must be empowered to help tackle workload in their education setting – working with trade unions at a local level.
- More time is needed to prepare for the new curriculum.
- ALNCoS must have more support and access to training.
- Estyn must work proactively to support the workforce.
- Accountability needs to be decoupled from exams.
- Tests, including online adaptive assessments, must stop as they don't tell teachers anything they don't know.

NEU Cymru welcomes the new curriculum in principle, but research from the Welsh Government clearly shows that more time is needed to prepare¹⁰:

“Two thirds of senior leaders (67 per cent) and practitioners (67 per cent) agreed with the statement ‘My school is in need of additional support or resources to be ready for the planned roll-out of the new curriculum from September 2022’.”

Tackling workforce mental health needs renewed effort to tackle workload, as it is unsustainable, and directly causing ill health.

Stress Risk Assessment / Audit

Monitoring levels of stress in the workplace and reviewing its effects on the workforce is vital. Persistently high levels of pressure can lead to distress, exhaustion, and a feeling of being overwhelmed. The Health & Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress as:

"The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work."

Stress is counter-productive and not only impacts on the mental and physical wellbeing of school / college staff, but also impacts on the school / college by affecting job performance and productivity, not to mention the financial costs of covering sick leave and recruiting replacement staff.

¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/practitioners-preparations-roll-out-curriculum-wales-final-report>

Welsh Government should ensure local authorities work with school and college leaders to build processes in the workplace which assist in the detection of both individual and organisational stress. The levels of stress in the workplace and its effects on the workforce need to be monitored and reviewed regularly.

Wellbeing Teams

Mentally healthy schools / colleges need to put children and young people at the heart of any whole school / college approach to mental health. Parents and carers should feel engaged with the school / college and its approach to wellbeing. A mentally healthy school / college looks after the wellbeing of both pupils and staff, by giving staff the right mental health support enables them to support their learners in turn. Therefore, the sentiment of the 'whole school approach' Framework must be fully funded, so that it can be implemented successfully.

By working together to find proactive, practical solutions that work, raise awareness and effect change that will improve the ethos of the school / college, a wellbeing team would make effective and sustainable changes that will improve the mental health and wellbeing of learners and staff.

Working with trade unions, the Governors in a mentally healthy school / college should also be actively involved as they have a duty of care to the staff in the school / college as well as the learners.

The development of the wellbeing team should be done democratically to suit each workplace and must be inclusive and be representative of all education staff. The team should be a body of people who are passionate and committed to improving the mental health and wellbeing of all members of the school. This should be done with the support of union representatives, who will be able to input their expertise.

The main aims of the team are to be the voice of their peers – to support, offer guidance and have consideration for all.

They will be involved with stress risk assessments, liaising with the Senior Leadership Team to look at existing policies, identifying and addressing the root causes of poor mental health and wellbeing, identifying any training needs, and engaging with parents and carers, and engaging with pupil voice.

The Senior Leadership Team should have ultimate responsibility for ensuring the existence of a wellbeing team¹¹. However, the existence of the team should be mandated and funded by Welsh Government through the local authorities.

Welsh Government should direct local authorities to fund the time that is needed for a wellbeing team to undertake its duties. Giving the team 'paid time' to undertake these duties will give credibility to the existence of the team and motivate progress.

Young people

NEU Cymru is increasingly concerned that the coronavirus pandemic and the unprecedented measures taken to contain its spread has disrupted nearly every aspect of children's lives, including their health, development, learning, behaviour, physical and

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2018/feb/01/staff-wellbeing-team-school-improved>

emotional wellbeing, the economic and social security of their families, and their protection from violence and abuse.

We want CAMHS to be as effective as possible. To be effective, Welsh Government needs to support CAMHS to work in a multi-disciplinary way with General Practitioners. We also believe that learners must have access to all the support they need, especially the education psychologist service. We would also ask for relevant training for educators to ensure they are able to support and sign-post young people appropriately.

Findings from the July 2021 survey indicate that 99% of respondents thought the Welsh Government should support mental well-being for all children and young people.

In response to what can the Welsh Government do to support the mental well-being of children and young people:

- 80% said more funding for schools and support agencies.
- 71% said less focus on tests and exams.
- 85% said better access to CAMHS and to allow them to work closer with GPs.
- 77% said increased accessibility to the education psychologist service.
- 66% said more funding for local authorities to increase provision of Specialist Teaching Facilities and special placements.
- 70% said provide all local authorities with ring fenced funding for the appointment and ongoing training of Mental Health Champions in every school.

Our members echo the concerns of the Youth Parliament report¹² which shows that young people need access to mental health support. We believe the school and college systems alone cannot support young people, they need support from a fully funded and improved CAMHS system, with proper signposting for those who do not meet the threshold.

For more information please contact:

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¹² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58e7b1b717bffc1056c5949b/t/5f7f7828b2794336984f34cc/1602189394419/WYP-mental-health-E-digi.pdf>