

Inquiry into the emotional and mental health of children and young people – summary of roundtable discussions

Background

In January 2018 the Children, Young People and Education Committee held a roundtable event to inform its inquiry into the emotional and mental health of children and young people. The purpose of the roundtable discussion was to enable Members to gather the views and experiences of frontline staff who have regular contact with emotional and mental health support in schools.

The specific purpose of the event was to explore the following:

- the role of teaching staff in promoting good emotional and mental health of pupils;
- establishing a whole-school approach to emotional and mental health;
- embedding wellbeing into the new Curriculum for Wales; and
- partnership working between education and health on pupil wellbeing.

This document is a summary of the key points raised. It is not intended to provide a comprehensive list of all comments and anonymity of participants is maintained. It does not necessarily reflect collective agreement on all the issues raised.



Variation of provision

Participants highlighted differences in the provision of support for emotional and mental health between schools, and between/within local authorities and health board areas, as a key concern.

While it was acknowledged that a “one size fits all” approach would not be suitable given the varying needs and circumstances of different schools, participants noted that they would welcome more coherent guidance. To address the lack of uniformity and inequity of provision described, some participants suggested that regional plans should be developed / implemented. They argued that this would help:

- meet pupils', staff and parent/carer needs and expectations;
- enable better sharing of good practice (which most described as patchy at best); and
- the development of a national direction to provide consistent and effective wellbeing initiatives for children and young people regardless of their postcode.

Leadership

The majority of participants highlighted strong leadership as vital to ensuring that emotional mental health and wellbeing was a priority in schools. It was cited as being key to:

- embedding a whole-school approach and ethos of well-being within a school;
- enabling collaboration among all staff (teaching and non-teaching) to deliver better support;
- ensuring consistency in the provision of wellbeing support within schools;
- securing equity of access for pupils to support; and
- integrating and securing within the school setting the range of support relevant to the emotional health and well-being of pupils.

Some participants advocated the identification of emotional and mental health lead(s) within a school, to ensure delivery and coordination. Others argued that it

was important to ensure that all staff were equally responsible and accountable for the provision of support to pupils – a number referred to the need for the emotional and mental health support to be “everybody’s business”.

Training and skills

The ability of school staff to address low-level mental health problems was a key theme. The majority of participants called for all-staff training to be put in place to raise the confidence and competence of teaching and non-teaching staff in supporting the needs of pupils with emotional and mental health problems.

It was highlighted, however, that teachers could not – and should not – be expected to replace more specialist mental health staff. A number of participants called for the teacher’s role in relation to emotional and mental health to be clearly articulated so that expectations were realistic and understood.

A number of participants emphasised that emotional and mental health training needed to be included in initial teacher training (ITT) as a matter of priority. They stated that this would better equip teachers to identify issues and respond to the demands and impact of mental ill health and emotional distress on both teachers and pupils. For more experienced staff, stakeholders called for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) to support them to adapt to wellbeing (as well as attainment) as an educational priority.

Improving teaching staff’s emotional awareness and literacy was highlighted as a priority for increasing confidence in identifying and referring children to the right professional. It was also noted, however, that more needed to be done to avoid a “refer on” culture. Participants pointed to base-line wellbeing skills, and recognition of mindfulness and other wellbeing initiatives, as tools to enable school staff to address low-level problems without the need to refer on. A number of participants noted that such developments, if delivered effectively, had the potential to free-up specialist CAMHS for those who need a more specialist level of intervention.

Other professionals in the school setting

School nurses

The need for school nurses to be enabled to access further education in relation to emotional and mental health was widely supported, and it was suggested that this could create a better support network in schools. While there was broad recognition of the important role they could play, participants noted that the number of school nurses and range of other responsibilities they have (e.g. school

vaccination programmes) limited their availability and time to talk and support children with mental health problems.

School counsellors

The importance of access to school counselling was emphasised by participants. However, a number of challenges associated with school counselling were raised, including:

- demand outstripping supply, particularly due to GPs “bouncing” children and young people back to school counsellors (often due to a lack of alternative services);
- issues of stigma, not least young people being removed from class to go to counselling or having to walk to an area of the school which is only used by counsellors;
- in cases of high-level risk of mental or emotional ill health, school counselling being insufficient.

Educational psychologists (EPs) and ELSAs

Some participants referred to a lack of educational psychology capacity within schools. However, a number praised EPs’ work to mitigate this alleged shortage by developing roles such as Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs). It was noted, however, that the provision of ELSAs varies significantly from area to area.

Multi-disciplinary teams and collaboration across agencies

The importance of partnership working and access to multi-disciplinary teams and agencies, within and external to schools, was emphasised heavily by participants. Signposting to relevant support was identified as essential but lacking. A key concern raised was the need to close the gap between first identifying an issue and getting the correct support for the child or young person.

Participants highlighted the importance of better collaboration, communication and multidisciplinary working between education and health (and other statutory and third sector services where relevant) to ensure every child has the appropriate support. There was a call for children to be able to access joint appointments between education and health to promote cohesion and better communication of the emotional and mental health challenges they might be facing.

There was a clear view that the sharing of information both within and across services must be improved.

The 'missing middle'

Participants pointed to a number of challenges accessing CAMHS, not least:

- demand far outstripping supply, leading to long waiting lists; and
- difficulties meeting referral criteria.

Participants highlighted that, due to a lack of services for those with needs too severe to be supported in school but unable to access CAMHS, a child or young person often has to reach a crisis point before support can be found.

Clear and robust support pathways

There was general consensus in favour of the development of clearer and more robust support pathways. Participants highlighted this as being essential to:

- enabling school staff to know who to contact and where to direct pupils according to their specific needs;
- intervening in a timely and targeted way; and
- freeing-up time for teachers to teach and specialist CAMHS to support those with more severe needs.

Participants emphasised the importance of child-focused pathways to ensure the best provision for the pupil.

Inspection and accountability

A number of participants called for inspection measures to be modified to take better account of pupils' wellbeing. Several referred to Estyn's recognition of wellbeing in more recent inspections, but emphasised that accountability measures surrounding attainment were still far more widely emphasised. The majority highlighted the explicit link between emotional well-being and educational attainment and noted that this needed to be recognised across all inspection, accountability and performance measures if the school environment is to ensure that children and young people are in the best frame of mind to learn.

Curriculum

Participants welcomed the development of the new curriculum however a number stated that more work is needed to embed wellbeing within it. There were calls for a clearer definition of wellbeing and a more balanced focus on academic attainment.

Formal introduction of wellbeing as part of primary school teaching was supported. The importance of earlier intervention and greater focus on emotional resilience among infant and junior school pupils was emphasised. A common approach for early intervention, providing clear strategies for families and professionals, was considered a priority.

The fundamental link between physical activity, emotional wellbeing and attainment was also raised. It was emphasised that wellbeing should not be seen as an add-on but crucial to a young person's development and success.

Funding and capacity

Lack of funding and staff capacity were highlighted as key challenges to the provision of emotional and mental health support in schools. It was emphasised that full timetables and demands for academic attainment leave little room for teachers to focus on pupils' wellbeing (or their own).

Being able to engage parents was highlighted as key to pupil wellbeing however capacity constraints were highlighted here too.

On funding, participants referred to a lack of:

- continuity in funding mental health initiatives;
- uniformity in the funding allocation for schools to provide support for emotional and mental health;
- funding for provision of specialist wellbeing training for all staff as well as appointment of additional staff in wellbeing roles.

Some participants expressed optimism that the new curriculum may allow for more flexible funding.