



Education Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Robert Halfon MP, Chair

Mr Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education and Skills
London, SW1P 3BT

31 March 2021

Children and young people's mental health

Dear Gavin,

As you will be aware, the Committee held an evidence session on children and young people's mental health on 16 March 2021. We are writing to follow up on several issues raised, and to highlight the Committee's observations and reflections on the issues that arose during the session.

Our session examined a number of areas including the impact of the pandemic, the harms of social media, and the pace and scale of the rollout of the Green Paper reforms. The Committee found the session extremely valuable, if concerning. We heard that we have reached the point of "a crisis upon a crisis" in young people's mental health. We share our witnesses' alarm about the immense rise in mental health issues among children and young people, and the additional strain placed upon support services by the pandemic.

In 2018, the previous Education and Health Committees published a [joint report](#) on the mental health Green Paper. We welcome all that the Government has done since then to support children and young people's mental health and invest in this area, but there are significant problems that remain, particularly around waiting times, referral rates, and support for the most socially disadvantaged groups.

The Covid-19 pandemic now also threatens to leave in its wake a devastating dual legacy, an epidemic of educational poverty, and a tsunami of mental health issues. We understand that these policy issues fall across the remits of both the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education, and we would like to understand what plans both Departments have to work together across these issues. We identified four key areas we wanted to highlight.

The lack of data

An issue raised repeatedly by our panel of expert witnesses was the insufficiency of available data. The NHS's 2020 follow-up survey on the Mental Health of Children and Young People in England shows the alarming rise of mental health conditions between 2017 and 2020. This data provides an indication of the early effects of the pandemic; now, one year on from the first lockdown, we anticipate that the longer-term effects will be far more severe.

We know from the data that is available that no child or young person will be untouched by the pandemic, but that disadvantaged and vulnerable children will be particularly affected. Dr Alex George told us that in order to properly assess the impact of the pandemic on different sections of society,

we need “more data and we need more research and evidence and facts to find out the reasons and causality”. We heard too from Dr Dubicka, Chair of the Child and Adolescent Faculty at the Royal College of Psychiatry, that the Government should commit to regular surveys in order to generate the data needed to map out prevalence of mental health issues.

We would be grateful if you could update the Committee on what data the Government is planning to collect to comprehensively assess the impact of the pandemic on children and young people’s mental health, and whether the Department for Education will have a role in supporting the collection of further data, particularly regarding mental health in schools. We heard that it would be unethical to simply assess and gather data on children and young people without a plan for implementing the help and support they need, and we would therefore also request information on what plans the Government has to make further mental health support available for children and young people.

Funding

We welcome the Government’s recent investment in mental health services, including the £8 million Wellbeing for Education Return scheme, the £9.2 million of additional funding for mental health organisations, and the £79 million boost to mental health support for children and young people. But we are also aware that further investment is urgently required across the whole system, from the early years through to specialist services for young people. In particular, given the long waiting times and referral rejection rates, as a priority, an ambitious funding settlement for CAMHS which reflects the mental health crisis is needed. The long waiting times, and low referral rates, for children and young people needing mental health support are of extreme concern, and we urge the Government to publish a plan to improve access.

We would like to understand what conversations you are having with the Department of Health and Social Care on plans for further investment in children and young people’s mental health services, and how we can work towards greater parity of funding with physical health funding. What work is being undertaken to understand the level of funding needed to combat the mental health crisis among children and young people? We heard that a multi-year funding settlement for mental health is needed – we would like to know what work the Department has been doing with the Department of Health and Social Care to cost and secure this? And we would also like to know whether the Government has plans to extend the Wellbeing for Education Return fund beyond March this year?

Catch-up plans

We warmly welcome the Department for Education’s £1 billion investment in catch-up funding and the further £700 million Covid recovery package. Given the close ties between mental wellbeing and academic attainment, this investment must be directed not only at academic catch-up, but also at support for mental and physical wellbeing, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils. To this end, it is vital that summer schools, and any proposed future initiatives such as longer school days, focus predominantly on provision for sporting and mental wellbeing activities. We would like to know what steps the Department is taking to ensure this investment is spent on mental health and wellbeing as well as academic catchup. What conversations have you had with the Department for Health and Social Care on ensuring catch-up funding will have the maximum impact on pupils’ mental health and wellbeing? Finally, should the Ofsted inspection framework be adapted to place greater emphasis on mental health support in schools and colleges?

A whole-schools approach to mental health

The 2018 joint report of the previous Education and Health Committees, *The Government's Green Paper on mental health: failing a generation*, highlighted significant concerns that the scale and pace of reforms "ignores hundreds of thousands of children over the next twelve years".

We heard that the designated mental health lead is the vital centre point of the whole-schools approach, and we urge the Government to fast-track its commitment for every school and college in the country to have a designated lead by 2025. We welcome the Department of Health and Social Care's recent announcement of £79 million to grow the number of mental health support teams in schools and colleges from 59 to 400 by April 2023. But we question whether, given the devastating impact of the pandemic, plans for mental health support teams should be expanded and accelerated. We would like to know what conversations you have had with the Department for Health and Social Care on rolling out the whole-schools approach. Could the Department set out its role in working with the Department for Health and Social Care on this flagship policy? We need an NHS-funded counsellor in every school to ensure child-friendly support is available and easily accessible to all pupils. Experts such as the former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, have highlighted the importance of a counsellor in every school. Could the Department set out whether it has a plan and timeline for counsellors to be available in every school?

Finally, what plans does the Department have for developing a multi-pronged approach to support children and young people's mental health that covers not just the whole-schools approach, but also civil society organisations such as mental health charities and children's centres? And what assessment has the Department made of whether civil society has the capacity to station support in every school and college?

I am copying this letter to the Secretary of State for Health, the Government's Youth Mental Health Ambassador, and the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Yours,



Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee