

Written evidence submitted by YoungMinds

I am writing on behalf of YoungMinds to provide a written submission to your Committee's inquiry into education recovery in schools. We welcome the attention that you are giving to this important issue.

YoungMinds is the leading children and young people's mental health charity in the UK, and we put the experiences of children, young people and families at the heart of everything we do. This submission will draw on the insights and lived experiences of the children, young people, parents, carers and professionals that we work with, alongside wider research.

Context:

This inquiry is taking place against a backdrop of an unprecedented crisis in young people's mental health, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with record numbers seeking support. NHS Digital prevalence data shows that 1 in 4 young people now have a probable mental health condition, up from 1 in 9 in 2017.¹

Schools play an extremely important role in supporting young people with their mental health by allowing them to have structure and routine, contact with trusted adults and peers, and providing support and guidance to young people in terms of both their academic progress and emotional wellbeing.

During the pandemic, every young person had to adjust to dramatic changes in their education, routine and home life. Some experienced bereavement or other traumatic experiences during the lockdown period, while inequalities experienced by young people who were already marginalised or disadvantaged were exacerbated.

Despite the devastating impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health, the Department for Education has largely directed expenditure on education recovery towards programmes aimed at supporting children and young people to "catch up" on "lost learning".

Recommendations:

- The Committee should include the Wellbeing for Education Recovery Programme in the scope of this inquiry.
- The Department of Education should accelerate the rollout of Mental Health Support Teams and Designated Senior Leads for Mental Health to all schools by 2028. These teams should be properly embedded in their schools and in a 'whole-school approach' to mental health. These teams should also feel relevant and accessible to the communities they serve.
- Mental Health Support Teams must sit alongside other forms of support to ensure that as many young people are able to access help that works for them within the school environment.
- The Department for Education should implement a 'whole-school approach' to mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional learning across all statutory and non-statutory guidance.

¹ NHS Digital. (November 2022). Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 - wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

1. The impact of Covid-19 on young people's education and mental health

Academic pressure and burnout

Many young people who were at school during the pandemic reported that they were struggling with the pressure of home-learning. In our January 2021 survey of young people, among respondents who attended school (either learning from home or attending in person), 75% highlighted academic pressure as among the top three factors having a negative effect on their mental health.² Respondents talked about not being able to keep up, a lack of understanding from their school, college or university that they were struggling to cope and being exhausted from doing several hours of online lessons every day. They also said they missed the 'fun' parts of school, including seeing their friends.

"I feel like I'm connecting with people less. I don't really talk to people often at the moment and with all the uncertainty about my GCSEs it all just feels lonely and confusing." – a young person (January 2021)

"The work is extremely stressful at home. It's hard to get motivated and create a routine."— a young person (January 2021)

Some mentioned technical difficulties with learning online or having to care for younger siblings, which disrupted their learning. Young people scheduled to take GCSEs or A-levels were also, understandably, struggling to cope with the fact that they did not know how their grades were going to be assessed, only a few months before their exams were due to take place.

Loneliness and isolation

While some young people said they had established positive routines with their friends during the pandemic, others suggested that the novelty of video calls began to wear off and they had less contact with people outside their household as time went on. Some respondents talked about difficult – and sometimes abusive – relationships with their families, and how hard it was to escape them, which added to the feelings of isolation.

"I'm struggling working from home every day since March 2020. I have little social interaction, very little motivation and every day feels the same." – a young person (January 2021)

A number of respondents stressed that they had been isolated throughout the pandemic, particularly if they were shielding – so they had had very limited contact with others since March 2020. For young people who were studying, many said that remote learning had made them feel

more isolated as they couldn't interact with friends. Teachers were also unable to support them in the same way, and it was harder to reach out to them.

Returning to school

In January 2022, the Department for Education published a report on school recovery strategies, highlighting some of the challenges facing schools as children returned in the autumn term of 2020. In

² YoungMinds survey of 2,438 young people aged 13-25 undertaken between 26th January and 12th February 2021. All respondents live in the UK and have looked for mental health support as some point in their lives: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf>

this research, two-fifths of primary and secondary schools reported that pupils' mental health and wellbeing was a main challenge.³

Our survey and qualitative research involving over 500 young people, carried out in autumn 2021, explored young people's experiences as they returned to educational settings after a series of national and local lockdowns. The research found that after the return to educational settings, 45% of young people were struggling to cope and 55% were experiencing negative feelings in everyday life.⁴

2. Academic catch up and mental health

YoungMinds has consistently called for mental health and wellbeing to be a priority in education recovery planning. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the pandemic had a devastating impact on young people's mental health and access to support, "catch up" initiatives have focused heavily on making up for "lost learning" and boosting attainment.

While it's important to address academic inequalities and help young people catch up on learning that they may have missed, placing extra pressure on young people who are struggling with their mental health right can be counter-productive.

"My friend in 6th form is finding college really difficult & has had to drop an A-level already" – a young person (November 2021).

Young people tell us that they have been under immense academic pressure since returning to educational settings. For some young people, this stress, along with other pressures on their mental health, is affecting their ability to learn effectively. Making wellbeing a priority does not preclude aiming for academic excellence – it is an essential pre-requisite.

Overall funding for education recovery has totalled £4.9 billion to address learning loss and support education recovery, but only £15 million was dedicated to the Wellbeing for Education Recovery and Return programmes to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. **We would like to know more about the impact of the Wellbeing for Education Recovery programme on young people and would like to see it included within the scope of this inquiry.**

3. Mental health support in schools

In our research, young people explained that they were often unable to access support during the pandemic that they would usually have access to, and felt that previously available coping mechanisms were no longer viable.⁵ Now that young people have returned to educational settings, schools have the opportunity to intercept and support students who may be struggling with their mental health, which may ultimately improve school attendance, academic attainment and recovery. As the mental health crisis has escalated in recent years, the Department for Education must do more to provide support for those who need it.

³ Department for Education, School recovery strategies: Year 1 findings, January 2022, pp12–13:
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1045471/School_Recovery_Strategies_year_1_findings.pdf

⁴ YoungMinds and Beano Brain. (December 2021). Wave 3 2021 – Autumn. For a copy of the report, please email ellie.whitlock@youngminds.org.uk.

⁵ YoungMinds (2020). Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs:
<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/xq2dnc0d/youngminds-coronavirus-report-march2020.pdf>

The rollout of Mental Health Support Teams and Designated Senior Leads for Mental Health should be accelerated to all schools by 2028. These teams should also feel relevant and accessible to the communities they serve. This means being sensitive to the different needs and experiences of pupils who have additional needs or who come from marginalised backgrounds. If a child has an emerging mental health need, it is crucial that schools provide early support themselves or signpost to local services that can do so, to prevent problems from escalating to the point where NHS services are required.

Mental Health Support Teams must sit alongside other forms of support to ensure that as many young people are able to access help that works for them within the school environment. It is imperative that all trusted adults who work with young people have access to continual training on mental health.

4. A whole-school approach to mental health

A whole-school approach to mental health “refers to a universal, school-wide, and multi-component approach to the promotion of children’s and young people’s wellbeing and mental health.”⁶ Research shows that a positive school climate that enhances belonging and connectedness is a key protective factor for young people’s mental health.⁷ **The Department for Education should meaningfully implement a whole-school approach to mental health, wellbeing and social and emotional learning across all statutory and non-statutory guidance.**

A recent study by YoungMinds and UK Youth shows that access to trusted adults – adults with whom young people have “an ongoing, positive and trusting relationship”—is a clear protective factor for young people’s mental health.⁸ School is one environment where access to trusted adults is available to the majority of young people, and promoting a whole-school approach to mental health assists in fostering positive relationships between young people and trusted adults.

There is a strong and growing evidence base that universal, whole-school approaches to wellbeing, and social and emotional learning, can have a range of benefits for individual students, staff and whole-school populations, including higher engagement, attendance and academic attainment, improved behaviour, reduced anxiety, bullying and stigma.⁹

Particularly in the wake of COVID-19, this approach should be complemented and underpinned by a trauma-informed understanding of behaviour and mental health, which is crucial given the upheaval, trauma and grief experienced by young people during the pandemic.

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⁶ Centre for Mental Health (2019): <https://cypmhc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MakingTheGrade.pdf>

⁷ Anna Freud Centre: <https://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk/risks-and-protective-factors/learnmore/>

⁸ YoungMinds and UK Youth (2022). Someone to turn to: Being a trusted adult for young people: <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/professional/community-support/someone-to-turn-to/>

⁹ Weare, K and Nind, M (2011). Mental health promotion and problem prevention in schools: what does the evidence say?, Health Promotion International, Vol. 26 No. S1 Oxford: OUP; Banerjee R et al (2016). Promoting Emotional Health, Wellbeing and Resilience in Primary Schools.

