

Written evidence submitted by Mind

Mind's submission to the Education Committee's inquiry on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services

About Mind

1. We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding. Our network of 125 local Minds supported 396,000 people across England and Wales last year.

Summary

2. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services, to inform the Education Committee's inquiry. Our submission will focus on support for the mental health of pupils and families during school closures, and the possible future impacts on disadvantaged groups. We also note with concern the effect of coronavirus on the mental health and wellbeing of school staff, which has implications for the resilience of the sector both now and in case of future emergencies. The Government must prioritise the health and wellbeing of the whole school community in their current response to coronavirus and the longer-term recovery plan.
3. To ensure that all children and young people get the support they need for their mental health and wellbeing during and after this coronavirus outbreak, we're calling on the UK Government to
 - i. communicate the continued availability of mental health services, including to schools, and to encourage children and young people to seek support for their mental health and wellbeing;
 - ii. outline what further action they are planning to support young people's mental health and wellbeing during this coronavirus outbreak;
 - iii. comprehensively plan for how the education sector will support all children and young people back into school, including those who have experienced trauma, loss and bereavement or had little educational engagement at home;
 - iv. equip schools with what they need to put mental health and wellbeing at the heart of their approach and plans for this academic year and the next, including funding, resources, flexibility in the curriculum and the accountability system;
 - v. seize the opportunity to rebalance the education system and prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people;
 - vi. implement a cross-Government approach to mental health, by urgently looking at how to use policy levers across government to promote good mental health and prevent mental problems from developing;

- vii. take preventative action to help ensure that all children and young people, including those with a mental health problem, do not face exclusion or off-rolling and are supporting with the transitions back into face to face education;
 - viii. ensure that the process of awarding grades is fair for young people with a mental health problem whose exams are cancelled, including those with high absence rates due to period of being unwell; and
 - ix. deliver on their commitment to improve the wellbeing of staff in our schools and colleges, including by actioning the recommendation to embed staff wellbeing into training, guidance and policy-making.
4. We also recommend that the UK Government and NHS England ensure that services offering support are accessible and that young people have a choice in how they access support. NHS England should also explore the issue of access to mental health support during the Covid-19 pandemic for young people who cannot access any form of remote or digital communication.

Note on our evidence & methodology

5. Our submission draws on evidence from our survey of children and young people (aged 13-17) and their experiences during this outbreak of coronavirus, but please note that these findings are only interim findings as our survey has not yet closed. Whilst the findings are not necessarily representative with around 800 responses to the survey, we wanted to share these emerging findings with the Committee.
6. We would be happy to share the full findings with the Committee in due course.

The mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families during school closures

Impact on children & young people's mental health

7. We are concerned that coronavirus is having a significant, detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. This is what we have heard from the children and young people who have responded to our survey so far.
8. From our survey of children and young people, we have found that nearly half of young people describe their current mental health and wellbeing as poor or very poor. Two thirds of respondents would describe their mental health as having got worse over the past two weeks.

"I relapsed with my eating disorder and also self harmed. Thankfully just a one off but really was a step backwards in my recovery" - Mind survey respondent

9. Feelings of boredom and restlessness are having an impact on children and young people – 85% said it had made their mental health worse recently. Of the young people we have surveyed so far, this was having the greatest negative impact on mental health.
10. About two thirds of young people said that not being able to go to school, college or work made their mental health worse.

"The cancellation of GCSEs has caused me to take a couple of steps backwards in me trying to get better" - Mind survey respondent

11. A minority of young people told us that not attending school, college or work made their mental health better.

"I am enjoying time away from the stress of school but I am becoming increasingly bored" - Mind survey respondent

12. We also heard from children and young people who are using positive coping strategies during lockdown, with connecting with family and friends online being the most popular strategy.

"I have been coping well with the changes across this month as I have supportive family and friends that have been checking up on my well being" - Mind survey respondent

Children & young people's access to information and support

13. Emerging findings from our survey have also highlighted that some children and young people are finding it difficult to access the support they need. We have also heard from children and young people about where they are going to find information (including from schools) and how helpful they have found that information.
14. From the children and young people who responded to our survey, most are going to friends and family for information on how to manage their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak, followed by social media and internet searches. Only a minority of respondents had tried to get information about mental health from their school or college.
15. We have heard that children and young people are most interested in knowing how to look after their wellbeing while staying at home and advice on managing specific mental health problems.
16. Of those who had tried to access information about mental health, we asked how useful they found that information. Children and young people told us that mental health information from their peers was the most useful. Looking at schools, just over half of respondents said that information from their school or teacher was helpful, whereas around a third reported information from their school or college mental health support as being helpful.
17. When it came to accessing support, one in three children and young people who responded to our survey had tried to access services in the last four weeks. A third were unable to do so. Of those who did access support, nearly half did so via the NHS and a quarter via their school or college.

"I have been unable to access my main source of support which was one of my teachers at school" - Mind survey respondent

18. We also heard from children and young people who did not seek support because they felt that their issue was not serious enough to get support – over a fifth of respondents told us that they felt this way.
19. Nearly half of respondents said that difficulties accessing mental health support made their mental health worse. The main barrier to getting support was being unable or uncomfortable using phone or video-calling technology. Other barriers include services being closed; difficulty in getting in touch with a support service; and/or appointments being cancelled.

"I feel sad all the time and I miss how my life used to be. I miss my friends, my teachers and I can't have counselling anymore because my school is closed. I can't do sessions over the phone because my house is so busy" - Mind survey respondent

20. It is also often assumed that young people are all digitally literate and digitally included – but this is not always the case. The move to remote learning revealed that as many as one million children have poor technology access.¹ Even when children and young people do have access to technology, they are often sharing with siblings or parents, especially when parents are more likely to be working from home. The issues with digital exclusion affecting online learning will also be relevant to accessing services.
21. Services offering support must be accessible and young people should have a choice in how they access support. **We recommend that NHS England explores the issue of access to mental health support during the Covid-19 pandemic for young people who cannot access any form of remote or digital communication.** There must be a clear care pathway outlined for this group to ensure people do not fall through the gaps.
22. Worryingly a number of mental health services have also seen a significant drop in referrals, including children and young people's mental health services. The full drivers behind this are not yet known but it may be due to people being unaware that mental health services are available or feeling unwilling to approach the NHS at this time. The impact of reduced school opening on referrals is also unknown. **We would urge the UK Government and NHS England to continue to communicate the availability of mental health services, including to schools, and to encourage children and young people to seek support for their mental health.**
23. For some children and young people, the closure of schools to most pupils has meant a significant change to how they get support, whether from friends, teachers, informal pastoral support, or school counselling services. We welcome the focus on children and young people with mental health problems in the guidance published by the Department for Education on actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak. However, we are concerned however that the plans outlined in the guidance will not be enough and **we urge the UK Government to outline what further action they are planning to support young people's mental health and wellbeing during the coronavirus outbreak**, especially as it becomes clear that schools will not be returning to business as usual anytime soon.

"The isolation from not only family and friends but from my pastoral manager at school has taken a toll. I was on the list for counselling [sic] and now I have no one to talk to." - Mind survey respondent

Parental mental health

24. From wider research, we know that the mental health and wellbeing of parents can have an impact on their children. From our survey of adults, we have heard that parents are facing unique challenges. Our survey of adults has received over 17,000 responses, but again these are our emerging findings.
25. From our survey, we found that parents are significantly more likely to say that looking after others in their home has made their mental health worse than those without

¹ [The Centre for Education & Youth, 'Breaking the Law: Covid-19 and Online Learning', April 2020.](#)

children (54% vs 15%), and are more likely to be affected by not getting on with people they live with (33% vs 23%).

26. Parents have told us that they are more likely to be concerned about their financial situation (53% vs 43%) and work (60% vs 51%) than those without children under 18. They are also more likely to face significantly more difficulty in accessing mental health support due to balancing this with new additional responsibilities (35% vs 4%)

"Because the children take up all my time I didn't have the opportunity or the energy to access any help" - Mind survey respondent

Impact on disadvantaged groups and the education system

Prioritising mental health and wellbeing

27. We are concerned that coronavirus will lead to more young people experiencing poor mental health and exacerbate some of the disadvantages which children and young people with mental health problems already experience.
28. Before the coronavirus outbreak, on average 1 in 8 young people had a diagnosable mental health problem.² Whilst the impact of coronavirus on the prevalence of mental health problems is yet unknown, emerging findings from our survey and wider research suggest that more children and young people may experience poor mental health as a result of coronavirus.
29. Considering this, as schools open to more of their pupils, it cannot be business as usual. **Government and the education sector must comprehensively plan for how they support children and young people back into education, including those who have experienced trauma, loss and bereavement or had little educational engagement at home.** These plans must also be responsive to the fact that not all children and young people will be returning to their classrooms in the near future, especially considering that an estimated 300,00 young people with health conditions are known to be clinically vulnerable to coronavirus.
30. We note the pieces of guidance for schools published by the Department for Education, including the initial planning framework which sets out an expectation that schools should be planning to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils and staff. We are deeply concerned however that mental health and wellbeing is not included in the guidance from Department for Education for secondary school provision from 15 June 2020.
31. We welcome the announcement on Sunday 7 June by the UK Government, which set out their plans to provide extra mental health support for children and young people via schools and colleges, including online resources and grant funding to charities. This is a welcome step, and we hope that it is the start of a renewed commitment to mental health and wellbeing in our schools.
32. Responding to children and young people's lives and experiences during this time, the focus and priority must be on support and recovery. To support the transition back to school, we recommend that every school has a plan, which responds to the mental health and wellbeing of the whole school community and includes a specific focus on

² NHS Digital (2018) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017](#)

individual pupils who may find that transition particularly hard. Actions that the education sector could take to support the transition back to school include:

- i. Review of the curriculum in response to pupils' needs and context, including loss and bereavement
 - ii. Engagement with parents and families
 - iii. Delivery of high-quality pastoral support, plus additional wellbeing support for those pupils who may need it
 - iv. Provision of information and resources on mental health, trauma, bereavement and loss, self-care and seeking support for pupils, parents and staff
 - v. Joined-up working and referral routes to mental health services
 - vi. Listening to pupils and provide opportunities for students to be participate in school life and decision-making
33. To embed mental health and wellbeing into school life and culture both during this transitional period and in the longer term, we recommend that every school has a strategic whole school approach to mental health.
34. For this to happen, we need UK Government leadership and support. Mental health and wellbeing must be at the heart of UK Government's response and planning, and fully embedded into guidance. We also know that schools will need more than guidance to meet the current challenges. In planning for the return to school, **we urge the UK Government to equip schools with what they need, from funding to resources, to prioritise and deliver on mental health and wellbeing.** This must go further than the latest announcement (7 June). Action from the UK Government should include flexibility in the curriculum, to support schools in responding to their communities' needs. The UK Government should also set out their expectations and plans for the accountability system (including Ofsted) in the next academic year as soon as possible, which must be focused on enabling schools to focus on the current challenges and prioritise health and wellbeing, as well as academic achievement.
35. There has been discussion about summer schooling and a 'catch up' premium being other possible opportunities to tackle the disadvantage caused by coronavirus. We would welcome initiatives such as these, but strongly urge that mental health and wellbeing be embedded throughout such initiatives. The focus for both additional provision and funding must be on pastoral care and support for wellbeing, not only on academic performance.
36. In 2017, the UK Government set out their plans to transform children and young people's mental health provision. We welcome the clarification from the UK Government that the Link programme and Mental Health Support Teams are adapting their work in response to the coronavirus. However, whilst we wait for this plan to be piloted, tested and implemented, children and young people cannot wait – especially in the face of current challenges. **We urge the UK Government to seize this opportunity to rebalance the education system and prioritise the mental health and wellbeing alongside academic performance.** This will not only support with the transition of schools extending their provision in the short term, but bring about much needed change in the longer term too.

37. We also know that schools can't do this alone, and support cannot stop at the school gate. The work in schools must be matched by provision across early intervention, mental health, children's social services and youth services. **We need a cross-Government approach to mental health and for the UK Government to use policy levers across government to promote good mental health and prevent young people's mental health deteriorating.**

Inequalities experienced by young people with a mental health problem

38. There is also a risk that some pre-existing inequalities faced by children and young people with mental health problems in the education system will be exacerbated by Coronavirus. Before this coronavirus outbreak, we know that young people with a mental health problem were disproportionately affected by school exclusion. 1 in 10 boys with a mental health problem has been excluded from school, with half of those experiencing multiple exclusions.³ Research from the Education Policy Institute also found that nearly a quarter of pupils with a social emotional or mental health need experienced at least one unexplained exit⁴ from secondary school in 2017.⁵

39. Not only are young people with a mental health problem more likely to be excluded, but exclusion from school can also increase psychological distress and can be a risk factor for future mental health problems. We note with concern that children and young people from some Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are already disproportionately affected by school exclusions. Young people from Gypsy and Roma, and Traveller communities face the highest school exclusion rates, and Black Caribbean and mixed heritage young people are also more likely to be excluded than their White peers.⁶ In addition to this pre-existing inequality, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are among those hardest hit by coronavirus.

40. **We urge the Government and the education system to take preventative action to help ensure that all children and young people, including those with a mental health problem, are able to cope with the transition back into school, and do not face exclusion or off-rolling.** Ofsted defines off-rolling as the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll.

41. We're also concerned that children and young people with a mental health problem tend to be more likely to achieve less well academically – research by NatCen found that young people with poor mental health were 2.7 times more likely to not achieve the GCSE benchmark, even when accounting for other factors.⁷ Whilst we do not yet know what the impact of educational impact of the coronavirus response will be on young people with mental health problems, the UK Government cannot allow this inequality to increase further as a result of Coronavirus. **We are clear that the Government and Ofqual must ensure that the process of awarding grades is fair for those young**

³ NHS Digital (2018) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017](#)

⁴ By its nature, off-rolling is difficult to measure and track. Education Policy Institute looked at unexplained school exits to better understand off-rolling.

⁵ Education Policy Institute (2019) [Unexplained pupil exits from schools: Further analysis and data by multi-academy trust and local authority](#)

⁶ Department for Education (2020) [Pupil exclusions](#)

⁷ Natcen (2019) [How does poor mental health in the early years of secondary school impact on GCSE attainment?](#)

people whose exams are cancelled, including for young people with a mental health problem who may have had to take time out of school for their health, but would have caught up in time for the exams.

"I'm worried about school I have my exams in a month I can't revise at home it's so busy I hate my family I have no support and my life is ruined. I feel so depressed and anxious I've never felt this bad before" - Mind survey respondent

The resilience of the sector

42. Looking at the resilience of the sector, we note with concern the effect of coronavirus on the mental health and wellbeing of school staff. We highlight this as it could have implications for the resilience of the sector both now and in the future. The mental health and wellbeing of school staff is an important issue that urgently needs significant attention from Government – never more so than now. As one of the largest public sector employers, the Stevenson Farmer Review called on the Department for Education to lead the way in workplace wellbeing.⁸ This review, *Thriving at Work*, estimated that poor workplace mental health cost the education sector £1817 per employee.
43. Before coronavirus, the education system was facing real issues around recruitment and retention of teachers – with over 20% of new teachers leaving the profession within their first 2 years of teaching, and 33% leaving within their first 5 years.⁹ The UK Government set out their strategy for tackling this issue, but this did not pay enough attention to mental health and wellbeing. Many more teachers are considering leaving the profession due to the impact on their health and wellbeing. Research has found that 57% of education professionals have considered leaving the sector in the past 2 years due to pressures on their health and wellbeing.¹⁰
44. During this coronavirus outbreak, research from Education Support found that over a 49% of teachers in secondary school have expressed feeling higher levels of stress and anxiety at the beginning of this summer term than usual.¹¹ Other sources of stress and anxiety related to becoming unwell with coronavirus; teaching remotely; supporting families in need of emotional or financial support; and uncertainty about the future of schooling. We have heard similar concerns from our work in schools and with Twinkl, the provider of educational resources. We have also heard additional concerns from teachers worried about their more vulnerable pupils; transition classes; uncertainty about what to teach; loss of routine; and feeling underappreciated and forgotten.
45. Before the coronavirus outbreak, we were deeply concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and school staff. School staff were already working under significant pressure, including long hours and high workloads to poor managerial support and high levels of stress.
46. We welcome the announcement that the Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb, has accepted the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Group on teacher and leader wellbeing, which we were pleased to contribute to. We want to see concrete

⁸ The Stevenson / Farmer review of mental health and employers, [Thriving at work](#) (2017)

⁹ Department for Education (2018), [School workforce in England: November 2017](#)

¹⁰ Education Support Partnership, [Teacher Wellbeing Index 2019](#)

¹¹ Education Support (2020) [Coronavirus: Teachers experiencing high levels of stress as school uncertainty continues](#), 30 April 2020

action from the UK Government to address the issues with school staff wellbeing and embed staff wellbeing into both their response to coronavirus and wider policy-making.

47. The recommendations from the Expert Advisory Group include a commitment to develop a wellbeing charter for the teaching sector, increasing access to existing resources, measurement and embedding wellbeing into training, guidance and policy-making. Whilst we welcome all recommendations, we're clear that the education sector does not need new, limited initiatives but meaningful change. **We urge the UK Government to deliver on their commitment to improve the wellbeing of staff in our schools and colleges, including by actioning the recommendation to embed wellbeing into training, guidance and policy-making.**

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