

Westminster Hall debate: Children's Mental Health Week 2024

NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS hospital, mental health, community and ambulance services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. We help those NHS foundation trusts and trusts to deliver high-quality, patient-focused care by enabling them to learn from each other, acting as their public voice and helping shape the system in which they operate. NHS Providers has all trusts in England in voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £104bn of annual expenditure and employing 1.4 million staff.

Key points

- Mental health services are reaching more individuals than ever before, but there is a growing and often more complex demand for mental health services for children and young people.
- Despite welcome additional funding in 2021, mental health trusts continue to face challenges around workforce, including retention of mental health nurses, long-term sustainable funding, and a lack of social care provision for children and young people.
- Resources need to be shifted upstream to ensure a more proactive and preventative approach to children's mental health. More joined-up, strategic thinking between multiple agencies is needed, alongside sustainable levels of funding for mental health services over the long term.

Context

There is growing demand for mental health services. Just shy of half a million children and young people in England are currently on mental health waiting lists, 85% higher than before the pandemic, and latest prevalence data shows about 1 in 5 children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023, **up from** one in six in 2021, and one in nine in 2017. Children and young people's urgent referrals to crisis teams are now **almost** three times higher than prior to the pandemic.

The theme of Children's Mental Health Week is 'My Voice Matters'. This provides an important opportunity to reflect on how trusts are working with children and young people through coproduction to deliver high quality and accessible services despite the significant challenges they face. Trusts are designing services, hiring staff, delivering services and communicating their value with children's voices at the centre. We have set out some specific examples in this briefing.

Steps trusts are taking to deliver high-quality care for children and young people

Trusts, in collaboration with local partners (including schools, GPs, local authorities and the voluntary sector) are taking a range of steps to better meet the needs of children and young people within their communities, such as:

- setting up day services as an alternative to hospital admission,
- using digital solutions to expand access to care where appropriate,
- working with social care partners to deliver pop up package support, crash pads, crisis beds/day facilities, and other short-term supported accommodation options.

Trusts are also working with children and young people to develop services and improve their accessibility and quality, for example:

- **Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust's** Youth Action Group (HYAG), which is reflective of the diverse community it serves, helped with development of Humber's **Youth Recovery and Wellbeing College** which provides virtual and face-to-face experiences, workshops and activities, and serve as an alternative for young people facing long waits for mainstream services.
- **South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust's** Pears Maudsley Centre for Children and Young People involved young people in its development. For example, they asked for the building to be open and include natural daylight, and this informed the building concept, shapes, and room arrangements. The trust has also considered the needs of children with autism and heightened sensory experiences in the centre's design.
- **Leeds and York Partnership NHS Foundation Trust** involved young people and their families in development of Red Kite View, a children and young people's mental health inpatient unit which opened in January 2022. As part of this, children coproduced a new **Patient Experience Measure** which has supported service improvements and young people, and their parents and carers felt their views and feedback were heard and valued.

Challenges in the provision of mental health care for children and young people

Growing demand outpacing capacity

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated the growth in demand and had a **profound impact** on children and young people across the country, including **worsening the health inequalities** they face. Their needs are likely to become more pressing, in the face of a **cost-of-living crisis**, given the well-known

effects of poverty on children's health and life chances. In our October 2023 survey, over 9 out of 10 trust leaders told us they are worried about capacity to meet demand from adults and children and young people over the next 12 months.

Workforce

We have seen a welcome expansion of the children and young people's mental health workforce, and trusts have been doing a lot to date to meet gaps by using new roles, changing skills mixes, and pursuing a range of recruitment and retention initiatives. However, the impact of these steps is limited without greater national progress on growing and funding the domestic pipeline and retention initiatives.

Retention, particularly of mental health nurses, remains a key challenge. In our October 2023 survey of trust leaders, 6 in 10 trust leaders were worried about their trust having the right numbers, quality and mix of staff to deliver high quality healthcare currently. Furthermore, the implementation of the NHS long term workforce plan must be fully funded.

Funding

There was welcome additional funding for children and young people's mental health services in June 2021, which has gone some way to help to address some of the challenges facing services. However, we know more is needed given historic underinvestment. The impact of additional funding is also often reduced when it is ad hoc, limited and too narrowly focused. This is particularly the case when it comes to service design and delivery for children and young people which requires strategic planning and delivery across multiple agencies and communities, such as schools and local authorities.

Mental health trusts are also in desperate need of capital investment to shore up outdated buildings and infrastructures to provide a more therapeutic environment as well as a better place for staff to work. In many instances mental health services have lacked the investment in modernisation and development available to other parts of the health and care sector. We include examples below of trusts working with children and young people to design and develop more therapeutic care settings which show the positive difference capital investment can make.

Social care

A lack of suitable social care provision was cited by trust leaders as one of the key reasons why demand for children and young people's mental health services is not being met currently. There is concern that mental health settings, and general settings when there are no mental health beds

available, are being used when places of safety provided by local authorities would be the most appropriate setting for many children and young people and the best use of resources. Cuts to tier 1 and 2 children's services in local authorities over the years have had "a massive impact" according to trust leaders, and poor outcomes and placement breakdowns are more frequent due to lack of suitable placements.

Next steps: better supporting and prioritising the needs of children and young people

Trust leaders are clear that a coherent national strategy to meet future and projected demand, funding and coordination between education, social care and health are essential. Current plans need to go much further and **prioritise** children and young people.

There must be sufficient and sustainable levels of investment over the long term for trusts and their local partners, with a particular emphasis on the enablers of expansion and transformation such as data and digital, workforce, and capital investment. Resources need to be targeted towards establishing an appropriate bed base and creating a safe therapeutic inpatient environment alongside enhancing community-based provision to prevent the necessity for admission as well as ensure timely discharge if an admission is necessary.

Resources need to be shifted upstream and deliver a more proactive and holistic model of care that is coordinated, multi-agency and community-based to help prevent children and young people becoming unwell and enable early access to support for those that do. Wider public services, and in particular social care, play a crucial role in supporting children and young people and their families and helping to prevent ill health and avoid deterioration.