

YOUNG MINDS MATTER

*WELSH YOUTH PARLIAMENT,
MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING
COMMITTEE*

26 November 2022

**WELSH
YOUTH
PARLIAMENT**

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INTRODUCTION

The Welsh Youth Parliament (WYP) was created in 2018 to give young people in Wales a national platform to discuss and debate issues that affect our day to day lives with decision makers at the highest level.

We are a group of 22 Welsh Youth Parliament Members (WYPMs) who have come together to form the Mental Health and Wellbeing Committee. Over the last few months we've been working to hear from young people from all over Wales to help us understand their experiences and how they would like to see things change.

Mental health and wellbeing is a major issue for a lot of young people in Wales. Data shows that this is a growing trend, and despite an increase in the amount of money spent on improving the situation, we as WYPMs know from our own experiences and from talking with other young people that the support available at the moment just isn't good enough.

Mental health and wellbeing was selected by young people as the area they wanted this Welsh Youth Parliament to prioritise most by a comfortable margin in our issues survey earlier this year. In February 2022 when all 60 WYPMs met virtually to decide on our three top priority areas, we agreed with those young people who felt it should be a priority.

"Unfortunately, the majority of us, including myself, would've had to deal with mental health struggles at one point or another in our lives. Who better to discuss the mental health of young people, than young people themselves? I feel that it is important, to raise awareness and help build an environment where young people feel comfortable to come forward and don't feel like they have to hide the way they are feeling."

Tegan Skyrme, WYPM, Learning Disability Wales

We chose to prioritise three issues:

- Education and the school curriculum
- Climate and the environment
- Our mental health and wellbeing

Our Committee's work follows on from the report produced by the first WYP's Emotional and Mental Health Support Committee, **'Let's Talk About Mental Health'**. We feel that many of the themes from that report are as important now as they were over two years ago when it was published, and in part wanted to see how young people's experiences compare to what our predecessor Committee found in 2020.

"As a committee, we think that well-being is an essential topic to discuss. Mental health affects everything: how we think, act, and relate to others. Mental health is important at every stage of life and not just in young people; however, it is especially critical to get it right from the start, to set ourselves up for constructive and positive lives."

Isaac Floyd-Eve, WYPM for Anglesey

We were very grateful to the Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing for being so eager to connect with us, and for meeting with us to provide information on the Government's work in this area.

The issue of young people's mental health is one that Senedd Committees have looked at since the Senedd Election in 2021, in particular through the work of the Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into **mental health inequalities**, and the Children, Young People, and Education Committee's inquiry into **mental health support in higher education**. We'd like to thank the Members and staff supporting these Senedd committees for engaging with us in the lead up to producing this report.

We are also extremely thankful to everyone who has taken time to take part in our consultation, be it by completing our survey as 3,679 young people did, by attending one of our events, or by talking to their WYPM on this issue.

Unfortunately, the findings of our consultation do not come as a surprise to us and reiterates our belief that there is a significant amount of work to do to if we are to see real change in young people's emotional and mental wellbeing. We really

hope that this report provides a valuable insight into young people's views and experiences, that our recommendations get taken forward, and that we can support the delivery of some of these priorities where possible.





CONSULTATION FINDINGS

The findings from our consultation split naturally under four themes:

1. **YOUR EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH**
2. **AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING**
3. **ACCESSING SUPPORT AT YOUR PLACE OF LEARNING**
4. **ACCESSING SPECIALIST SUPPORT**

All Welsh Youth Parliament Members were given the opportunity to analyse and discuss the results in the last regional meetings, and made recommendations for us as a committee to consider. We as committee members compiled and voted on the final recommendations that are presented at the end of this report.

In the next sections you can see the main findings under each theme, followed by our committee's final recommendations.



YOUR EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH



YOUR EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

When comparing responses to our survey to the survey carried out by the WYP in 2020, it shows little to no difference in how often young people are struggling with their mental health:

How often do you struggle with your feelings or mental health?	% of respondents	% of respondents in 2020 survey
Every day	28%	28%
At least once a week	16%	17%
More than once a week	16%	16%
Once a fortnight	5%	6%
Once a month	5%	3%
Every now and then	20%	24%
Never	10%	8%

The young people who took part in our events spoke of how widespread the issue is, with the vast majority either experiencing it themselves, or knowing a friend or family member who has struggled with their emotions and mental health recently.

Our survey found that the three biggest reasons causing young people to struggle with their mental health remained the same as they did in the 2020 WYP survey, those being:

- Work and exams at their place of learning
- Relationships with friends and family
- Browsing on, and being targeted or trolled on social media

The survey showed that young people are also affected by the impact of global events, with 24% referencing the cost of living crisis and 42% telling us that they've struggled more with their emotions and mental health as a result of the pandemic.

In our events, which specifically engaged young people from diverse backgrounds, many spoke of the additional challenges they experience, with some 'feeling like they don't belong'. Examples were given of times where they were bullied because of their ethnicity, their sexual orientation or having a disability, which can manifest as verbal and sometimes physical abuse.

"If you are different from the crowd – ethnicity, gender, or disability, people will be mean and that affects your mental health."

"I've spoken to many young people in my constituency, and they've told me that not enough is being done to tackle homophobia, bi-phobia and transphobia."

Ellis Peares, WYPM for Cardiff Central

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of our consultation emphasize how important this issue is and strengthen our concerns as WYPMs that the actions taken aren't showing the improvement we would like to see.

Young people are experiencing struggles with their mental wellbeing as much as they were two years ago, and while we recognise that the past two years have posed very unique challenges, we feel that this is in large part due to shortcomings in the way young people are supported.

"A lack of treatment for those struggling with mental health can lead to anxiety, hopelessness, and a loss of control. But when this is turned around, we can become the people we are meant to be and find meaning in our day-to-day lives. Mental health is just as important as any other type of health."

Isaac Floyd-Eve, WYPM for Anglesey

The additional toll that young people from marginalised communities face is also a big cause for concern. They are not only dealing with the challenges common to what all young people face growing up, but also have to cope with bullying and

abusive behaviour, which puts additional strain on their mental wellbeing. This behaviour is unacceptable and needs to be addressed as a priority.

“Education, education, education! The curriculum must be changed to help young people to learn that racism, transphobia and other forms of discrimination are wrong.”

WE CALL FOR:

- An increase in the focus put on mental health, and the amount of support available around exam periods to help young people during very stressful times.
- Steps to be taken to tackle intolerance when young people receive their education, to inform young people to understand different cultures, viewpoints and beliefs so that all young people are treated with respect and dignity.





AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING



AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

Our findings show that less than 20% of young people would not be able to recognise signs of mental health issues early on, and just over a quarter said they wouldn't know what to do to improve their emotional wellbeing if they were experiencing difficulties.

Young people at our events felt that more conversations are being had around mental health with teachers, youth workers, and in a greater variety of settings.

"There are caring people out there so that is good, there's genuine people and organisations that help us."

Less than 40% said they'd be able to talk to someone about it without feeling embarrassed or ashamed, 54% would know where to get support, and only a third would actively seek help.

"I think raising awareness and reducing stigma are two big components to making young people feel comfortable discussing mental health, feelings, and emotions."

"I want to get help but I'm too scared and embarrassed to ask"

"Too much on the web so cannot be sure if resources are actually helpful - need research proven materials. One website."

"Please make a one stop shop the No1 priority."

When asked who they would feel most comfortable in talking to, the results were extremely similar to those gathered by the first WYP in 2020. By far the most popular choices were family (66% in 2022, 63% in 2020), and friends (65% in 2022, 62% in 2020), followed by teachers at their place of learning at 32% compared to 34% in 2020.

"Give parents classes/courses on mental health."

35% of respondents said that their place of learning was good at building mental health and wellbeing into the everyday experience.

CONCLUSIONS

The conversations we as WYPMs have been having with young people in our communities are reflected in the findings of our survey. Identifying early signs of potential mental health issues is essential, and we do believe that young people are becoming more aware of their mental health, with a greater emphasis and more discussion, which is positive to see.

However it's clear to us that more can be done to raise awareness further. We've heard consistently that accessing trustworthy information on where and how to get support can be overwhelming.

"While awareness is increasing, our ability to deal with this challenge is not keeping pace."

Laura Green, WYPM for Delyn

In the first WYP report on this matter in 2020, they recommended that a "recognised central 'one stop shop' for information, resources, and support" be established. Our evidence shows that this has not been achieved, as not enough young people are clear on where to go to access resources for support.

We think that the one-stop-shop is vital to get right. It should offer guidance to those with mental health problems, teach wellbeing and mindfulness exercises, show how to help someone you know who you think might need help, and signpost to other resources and helplines. This capital for mental health information and resources should be well advertised on a national scale.

Other concerns to us include the fact that stigma around talking about difficult emotions is still a major issue, and as a consequence the amount of young people who would then go on and seek help is low.

We welcome the Welsh Government's whole school approach, and agree that mainstreaming mental health and wellbeing into all aspects of learning is the right approach to raise awareness and tackle stigma. We feel that these discussions are important to have consistently, and from an early age.

We heard from a number of young people who felt that places of learning need to create more safe spaces for young people to talk about their feelings, and to facilitate more opportunities for peer to peer support.

“Create safe spaces in school/universities for students to talk about their feelings/experiences, especially to each other in a healthy way.”

“Co-operating with the whole-school approach, charities, pastoral teams in the school as a key point of contact in schools in order to signpost young people to the right places for help.”

The results of our survey once again show that young people feel most comfortable talking to family and friends, and to a lesser degree teachers about their emotional and mental wellbeing. We think it's important that this is recognised and steps are taken to invest in providing family and friends with the tools to better recognise signs, signpost to and provide information that will help.

WE CALL FOR:

- A recognised central ‘one stop shop’ for information, resources, and support, as was requested by the first WYP in 2020.
- Greater emphasis on ensuring that families and friends are equipped to support young people, including the provision of training, information and materials to better enable those who young people trust and confide in to help.
- Places of learning to embed mental health and wellbeing into all aspects of the education experience, and for them to learn what works best in practice from one and other so that the experience is as consistent as possible for young people in all parts of Wales.





ACCESSING SUPPORT AT YOUR PLACE OF LEARNING



ACCESSING SUPPORT AT YOUR PLACE OF LEARNING

A clear theme that came from the consultation was that people are dissatisfied with the amount of support on offer in places of learning (such as school counselling sessions), with only 27% of young people saying the amount of support available was good. Only 23% of respondents to our survey had tried to access help at their place of learning. Considering that 65% of young people told us they struggle with their feelings or mental health at least once a fortnight, this figure is worryingly low, and shows that despite awareness of mental health being up - young people aren't taking that step to receive support.

"FASTER and more reliable and available for students in need."

"I had to wait and then had to cut off my counselling due to there being too many people needing a spot so I would have more counsellors provided."

"More investment is needed urgently to help young people there are more than ever needing help and support."

"Check-ups. Sometimes I feel like I was pushed away."

The reasons for this ranged from feeling there'd be too long a wait, feeling that their concerns wouldn't get taken seriously, or worries about the privacy and confidentiality of their conversations if they did seek help. In fact only 35% of young people said they would feel comfortable getting support like counselling at their place of learning.

"I felt like nobody cared or understood."

"To be allowed to openly talk about your feelings without the looming fear of those feelings being reported back to the school or to your parents. That's the last thing that you want."

"Make the support more subtle."

"I didn't feel comfortable knowing that my parents would possibly hear about what I say."

Of those who did seek support, over half had to wait over a week before receiving support. When asked about the quality of support, overall the majority (59%) felt it was good when they were able to access it.

“Too long a list to see a counsellor.”

Another theme that emerged was a call to provide more support for education professionals to develop better relationships with, and to improve their ability to recognise signs (including withdrawn and other ‘less obvious’ behaviours) in their students. This was also supported by the parents and youth workers we engaged with at our events, whilst recognising the challenges that education professionals face, and the opportunity for 3rd party specialist services to support. Where parents and youth workers referenced positive examples at places of learning in their area, these were often connected to the attitudes and capabilities of, and therefore the environment set by education professionals.

There is a need for better awareness and understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people from different backgrounds such as neurodiverse people, those with a disability, members of the LGBTQ+ community, in poverty, and different ethnicities.

“School staff create welcoming, accepting spaces and support – excellent wellbeing team.”

“Trained people in school to spot the signs and proactively offer support.”

“I understand this is challenging for teachers or professionals who work in large groups but, they should be trained on these things to recognise the signs.”

“Train more counsellor to a good standard.”

“More funding to train staff.”

“More staffing with qualifications instead of teachers having to shoulder the burden.”

Many young people told us that they wanted to see more done to help young people at an earlier stage, to help build resilience and avoid getting to a crisis point. This was often tied to the concerns around the availability of support, that is felt to be stretched far beyond capacity in trying to support those who have

reached a stage where they are in greater need. Some young people told us that they wanted counselling to be available to all young people.

"You shouldn't have to be at your absolute worst before you feel like you should ask for help."

"Early intervention is crucial to try to overcome issues asap."

"Not enough support in school, only for people who already have problems."

"If we were automatically offered counselling so it didn't seem so shameful and awkward, we'd do it and it would help hugely. I know a lot of people whose mental health state has become dangerous or life threatening because they are too scared to get proper help."

CONCLUSIONS

We heard loudly and clearly that the amount of support available in places of learning doesn't come close to meeting the demand.

We want young people who require support to be able to access it quickly, for that support to be of a good standard, and for there to be a continuity in the provision, but the findings of our consultation and our experiences as WYPMs tells us we are a long way away from achieving that.

In fact, we think we should be pushing further, by looking to provide young people who haven't reached out with support, such as school counsellor services, as a preventative measure and to help tackle stigma. We feel this would result in a higher percentage of young people reaching out for help.

Stigma around accessing support at places of learning is a big problem. Steps need to be taken to tackle stigma, but places of learning also need to create environments where young people feel comfortable to talk. This is essential. Young people must have a positive first impression with accessing support or they may instead return to struggling on their own.

Again, these are themes which emerged in the first WYP's report back in 2020, which called for an increase in the amount of time counsellors are available to support young people and offer more support services where young people can remain anonymous. Despite there being an increase in funding from Welsh

Government to expand on the schools counselling scheme, we don't feel that enough progress has been made.

"Make counselling more accessible to everyone with shorter waiting lists, and give more sessions for a longer period of time, so that you can go anytime like in the evening and on weekends as this might be the only time you feel comfortable going. Don't just provide it in school and colleges."

Georgia Miggins, WYPM, Learning Disability Wales

Resources need to be in place to deliver the support young people need. Many teachers and other professionals are already under a great deal of stress, so we think it's important that the responsibility doesn't fall on them alone, and that places of learning are able to bring in additional third-party support where appropriate. More needs to be done to support diverse groups of young people, to better understand the challenges they face. Training programmes for professionals who work with, and support young people should seek to address this.

There needs to be more touch points where young people are able to access help not only where they learn, but in the communities they live more widely.

The previous Children's Commissioner for Wales advocated in their report 'No Wrong Door', that: *"Regions need to move rapidly towards a 'no wrong door' approach in responding to children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health needs. This means that they should not keep being told that they are knocking on the wrong door when trying to access help. This could include early help panel or hub models, drop-in centres, models that make sure children and young people get the right help so that they don't need to go away from home to receive specialist care, or plans for specialist residential care closer to home."*

Young people told us, and we agree, that more needs to be done here, and there needs to be consistency across the country.

"So many young people are suffering in silence. Things need to change. Please work hard to remove the barriers, there isn't enough support, organisations either say that they are not the right people or do not respond at all, it takes months to get the help that you need, it simply isn't enough."

WE CALL FOR:

- An increase in the amount of places in the community, such as local support hubs where young people can access information, and talk to people about their mental health.
- Training programmes for professionals who work with, and support young people to improve awareness and understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people from different backgrounds, such as neurodiverse people, those with a disability, members of the LGBTQ+ community, in poverty, and different ethnicities.
- Places of learning to be provided with the resources they need to deliver more timely, consistent support of good quality to those young people who require help with their emotions and mental health, and look to mainstream support such as school counselling services to all young people, including those young people who haven't reached out for help.
- Places of learning to create more safe spaces for young people to talk with other young people, and professionals, and do more to reassure young people that seeking support can be done privately and confidentially.





ACCESSING SPECIALIST SUPPORT



ACCESSING SPECIALIST SUPPORT

We asked young people about their experiences of accessing CAMHS (Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services) support. 44% of those who had received CAMHS support told us that they had to wait longer than the 28 day target for first appointments set by the Welsh Government, with 13% waiting between 6-12 months. 27% had to wait longer than a month for their second appointment.

A lot of the young people, parents, guardians and youth workers we engaged with told us of the difficulties young people had faced in accessing CAMHS support, which was causing further harm to their mental health.

"Mental health services in this country is bad, children and people alike are escalating to critical situations (committing suicide, becoming severely depressed, hospitalised) without even having a chance to have an appointment at the mental health services."

"Getting to see them is an absolute nightmare with no support whilst waiting, it is like watching my daughter in a long slow car crash as she descended to such a low that she didn't want to be here anymore."

When asked about the quality of CAMHS support received, 39% of young people who had received support said it was bad. The majority of the comments we received on this matter focused on a lack of capacity to deliver to the demand. As a result some feel that young people are being rushed through the system, and in some cases that young people are not being provided with CAMHS support because of a lack of available resource rather than not reaching the threshold.

"I was told, as I had not self-harmed in 2 years, my mental health was 'fairly good' and that they wouldn't be monitoring me. Despite my depression, anxiety and signs of BPD, ADHD and PTSD, I was told to move on."

"Reduce the waiting times for people to access the support they need quickly."

"If more specialist input required - eg. CBT or medication, you get moved on to specialist CAMHS waiting list. My daughter went on to this list in 2018 and 2022. We faced waiting times of over 30 weeks...nothing to support in the interim and no documentation to

share with school that we needed support in this period...The team here is amazing but getting to them has been terrible and school don't always understand the issues. Something needs to be done to reduce the waiting lists."

"More practitioners, easier access, increased provision, shorter waiting times, earlier intervention."

"They need more staff, more resources."

"Invest!"

The other issue raised consistently in the consultation was regarding a lack of connectivity between services, between places of learning and CAMHS, and between CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS).

"About the transition to adult MH services – there is no handover and sometimes no further support. But you may have been waiting 2/3 years to receive this help and then because you turn 18 it disappears."

CONCLUSIONS

We believe that steps to encourage earlier intervention as we have outlined previously in this report would help reduce the burden on the more specialist support provided by CAMHS.

The first WYP recommended that CAMHS be reviewed as a matter of urgency, to reduce waiting times and provide the funding and capacity to provide necessary support. Our consultation tells us that more work is desperately needed in this area as the issues our predecessor committee highlighted in 2020 are still as relevant today, and the impact its having on young people in the meantime can be devastating.

"Desperately watching some of my closest friends writhe under the unwavering grip of a mental disorder and give up on getting help because the waiting lists are who-knows-how-long, and they know it wouldn't do them any good anyway, is nothing less than a tragedy."

Isaac Floyd-Eve, WYPM for Anglesey)

We want to see CAMHS reformed and overhauled. We know that the system is failing, and because of this we worry that that further financial investment will not have the desired effect.

WE CALL FOR:

- Better support for young people at an earlier stage to lower the demand on CAMHS.
- CAMHS reform following a review of the service, in order to reduce waiting times, and improve the quality of support.
- Better connection between the different touch points that young people have with regarding their emotions and mental health, such as places of learning, CAMHS and Adolescent Mental Health Services (AMHS).





OUR RECOMMENDATIONS



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YOUR EMOTIONS AND MENTAL HEALTH

- An increase in the focus put on mental health, and the amount of support available around exam periods to help young people during very stressful times.
- Steps taken to tackle intolerance when young people receive their education, to inform young people to understand different cultures, viewpoints and beliefs so that all young people are treated with respect and dignity.

AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING

- A recognised central 'one stop shop' for information, resources, and support, as was requested by the first WYP in 2020.
- Greater emphasis on ensuring that families and friends are equipped to support young people, including the provision- of training, information and materials to better enable those who young people trust and confide in to help.
- Places of learning to adopt the approach to embedding mental health and wellbeing into all aspects of the education experience, and for them to learn what works best in practice from one and other so that the experience is as consistent as possible for young people in all parts of Wales.

ACCESSING SUPPORT AT YOUR PLACE OF LEARNING

- An increase in the amount of places in the community, local support hubs where young people can access information, and talk to people about their mental health.

- Training programmes for professionals who work with, and support young people to improve awareness and understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people from different backgrounds, such as neurodiverse people, those with a disability, members of the LGBTQ+ community, in poverty, and different ethnicities.
- Places of learning to be provided with the resources they need to deliver more timely, consistent, and on-going support of good quality to those young people who require help with their emotions and mental health, and look to mainstream support such as school counselling services to all young people, including those young people who haven't reached out for help.
- Places of learning to create more safe spaces for young people to talk with other young people and professionals and do more to reassure young people that seeking support can be done privately and confidentially.

ACCESSING SPECIALIST SUPPORT

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