

Westminster Hall debate - Children and young people's mental health

Wednesday 16 June 2021

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 trusts and foundation 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 voluntary membership, collectively accounting for £92bn of annual expenditure and employing more than one million staff.

Key messages

- In recent years, welcome progress has been made to improve the access and quality of mental health services, supported by significant investment and support alongside the dedication of those leading and working in the sector.
- The pandemic has brought into sharp focus the impact of rising demand and chronic underinvestment in beds, workforce and capital funding for the sector. There remains significant unmet need, despite services reaching more individuals than ever before.
- A recent [survey](#) of mental health trust leaders by NHS Providers focused on children and young people's mental health services, and found that demand for treatment had increased in the last six months, with 84% of respondents saying that waiting times have got worse. The top three reasons noted for the increasing pressures were:
 - Children's symptoms becoming more severe and complex
 - Additional demand due to the pandemic
 - Lack of suitable social care provision.
- As highlighted in NHS Providers [written](#) and [oral evidence](#) to the Health and Social Care Select Committee's inquiry into children and young people's mental health services, NHS trusts are doing all they can to make improvements with the staff and resources available.
- The way mental health services are resourced, commissioned, funded and paid for needs to be addressed to improve the current quality and system of care for children and young people. National policy must not only focus on increased support for children and young people's mental health, but public health and social care too.
- While we have seen some progress, the shortfalls both in the number and skill-mix of staff in the mental health sector remain the most pressing challenge to the sustainability and accessibility of

services for children and young people, and one which will take the longest to resolve. We need to see a long term, fully funded workforce plan that builds on the steps already being taken to grow the mental health workforce.

Current pressures in children and young people's mental health services

Recent [NHS statistics](#) showed the number of children and young people (CYP) in contact with mental health services has risen considerably, with the average number of individuals in contact each month 80.6% higher in 2020 than in 2017. Similarly, our recent [survey](#) of mental health trust leaders found mental health services for CYP are under growing pressure and increasingly overstretched, despite significant support and investment. Of the respondents to the survey, 100% said demand for CYP mental health services is increasing compared to six months ago.

The survey findings also showed that a high proportion of children and young people not previously known to services are coming forward, and they are more unwell, with more complex problems than in the past. Only a third of respondents said they are able to meet the current demand for children's care and most of them are concerned about their ability to meet anticipated demand within the next 12-18 months. In particular, a large majority said they couldn't meet demand for eating disorder services (85%), and for child and adolescent community (66%) and inpatient care (65%).

There are a number of factors that have resulted in increased pressure on CYP mental health services. Trust leaders noted the top three reasons why pressures are increasing:

- Children's symptoms becoming more severe and complex
- Additional demand due to the pandemic
- Lack of suitable social care provision

Trust leaders also reported worrying staff and bed shortages, and concerns over workforce stress and burnout. In the survey, 83% of trust leaders were extremely (37%) or moderately (47%) concerned about staff wellbeing and current levels of stress and burnout across their CYP services workforce.

Improving access to mental health services

There has been progress made on improving access to mental health services, including early achievement of the national children and young people's access ambition as set out in [The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health 2016](#). This reflects the welcome focus, investment and effort nationally and locally over recent years to improve access to these services.

However, despite services reaching more individuals than ever before, there remains a substantial treatment gap and barriers to accessing help. Prior to the pandemic, services were at full stretch and access thresholds in many places were too high, creating long waits and contributing to deteriorating mental health for many individuals.

There are longstanding barriers to trusts being able to deliver the right level of mental health care for all who need it. These include:

- the stigma of seeking or receiving mental health care
- historical under-provision
- a scarcity of inpatient beds in some areas close to home for those who are most unwell
- a lack of suitable social care provision
- the need for more training in evidence-based interventions, and
- a shortage of specialist staff across health and care services.

It is clear a more joined up, proactive approach between education, health and social care is needed in all areas of the country, with a greater focus on prevention and earlier intervention.

Funding

In order to address these issues, the needs of mental health services must be adequately prioritised. This means fully and promptly funding, on a sustainable basis, the rapid expansion of services needed to meet the extra demand for mental health care and support. This includes a commitment to expand services in the community to avoid inpatient admissions where possible, and a rapid increase in beds in areas where they are needed so that out of area placements can be avoided.

It is also important that when the government considers its plans for social care reform, the needs of children and young people are not overlooked. We need funding for services to be focused on filling the current gaps in support available for children and their families – for example when someone first starts to ask for help, or after they receive a diagnosis. Trusts have expressed frustration that having carried out autism assessments – the waits for which can span years – there may be no services available in the local area to provide care and support for those they diagnose. Adequate capital funding is also needed to ensure trusts can provide patients with a safe and therapeutic environment.

Workforce

Workforce shortages have been a **key, longstanding** reason why mental health trusts have struggled to meet local demand. While we have seen some progress, the shortfalls both in the number and skill-mix of staff in the mental health sector remains the most pressing challenge to the sustainability and accessibility of services for children and young people.

Mental health trust leaders are deeply concerned about existing staff wellbeing, stress and burnout, following the pandemic. One mental health trust leader told us its staff are already extremely stressed from overwork, and increased demand stemming from the outbreak will make that worse. They added they will need “well over 100% (of capacity) to keep pace” moving forwards, but staff are tired and “in chronically short supply”, especially the highly trained staff they need for the more complex cases they are now seeing.

We need to see a fully funded, long term plan to help address the impact of workforce issues on the broader health and care agenda. This needs to include adequate investment at a national level to maintain and build on the steps being taken to grow the mental health workforce, which was already identified as fundamental to meeting the ambitions set out in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#). Trust leaders also need resources and support to give staff the time they need to rest and recover from the pandemic, and trusts need the autonomy to move at their own pace, given the variable impact of the outbreak across the country.

What are NHS trusts doing?

Despite the challenges, trusts have been working hard with local partners to meet the needs of children and young people in their local areas. The steps they have taken include:

- setting up day services to provide an alternative to admission to hospital
- using digital solutions to expand access to care where appropriate
- working with schools, GPs, local authorities and the voluntary sector to deliver services that meet individuals' needs at an earlier stage.

Trusts have also been [working hard](#) over the years to meet the workforce gaps they face, by using new roles, changing skills-mixes, and pursuing a range of recruitment and retention initiatives. However, the impact of the steps trusts are currently taking are limited without greater national progress on growing and funding the domestic workforce pipeline.