

## Children's Mental Health Commission: Call for Evidence

### Response of the Association of School and College Leaders

- 1 The Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) represents more than 18,500 education system leaders, heads, principals, deputies, vice-principals, assistant heads, business managers and other senior staff of state-funded and independent schools and colleges throughout the UK. ASCL members are responsible for the education of more than four million young people in more than 90 per cent of the secondary and tertiary phases, and in an increasing proportion of the primary phase. This places the association in a strong position to consider this issue from the viewpoint of the leaders of schools and colleges of all types.
- 2 ASCL welcomes the launch of the Children's Mental Health Commission and this call for evidence. We support the key objectives of the Commission's work.
- 3 In July 2015 ASCL Council Inclusion Committee agreed the following position statement on emotional health and wellbeing (EHWB):
  - Schools accept the need to promote EHWB, but not to treat students (this is the remit of health professionals)
  - Those treating young people for EHWB need adequate training, qualifications and clinical supervision
  - This area of work needs to be adequately resourced before the needs of students become acute
- 4 School and college leaders tell us that young people today face an extraordinary range of pressures that include enormously high expectations and new technologies which present totally new challenges such as cyberbullying. They tell us that there has seldom been a time when specialist mental health care and early intervention is so badly needed.
- 5 In February 2016 ASCL and the National Children Bureau (NCB) carried out a [survey of schools and colleges](#) to gain a greater understanding of the mental health issues they are facing, whether the prevalence of these problems is increasing, how students are being supported, and the availability and effectiveness of local mental health services. The questionnaire to ASCL members had 381 responses. The majority came from secondary school leaders (mostly heads and deputy heads) across England. The survey responses highlighted a range of important findings, set out in the attached briefing, relating to the prevalence of mental health and well-being problems, access to services, referrals, and the new local transformation plans.
- 6 With regard to the current state of children's mental health in England we report that our members are reporting an increase in the rate and types of issues that they are seeing in their schools and colleges. Many who responded to our survey reported increases in the number of students suffering from mental health and wellbeing issues over the past five years. More than half of those who responded to our survey (55 per cent) said there had been a large increase in anxiety or stress, and over 40 per cent reported a big increase in the problem of cyberbullying. Nearly eight out of ten (79 per

cent) reported an increase in self harm or suicidal thoughts amongst students. For more detail see the attached briefing.

- 7 With regard to accessing service provision we report that our members are increasingly concerned about the lack of suitable and timely provision for children and young people suffering from mental ill health. Nearly two-thirds (65 per cent) of schools and college leaders who responded to our survey say they have had challenges in obtaining mental health care from local services in their area for students who need more specialist support, and 53 per cent who have made a referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) rated their effectiveness as poor or very poor. Eighty per cent of survey respondents said they would like to see CAMHS expanded in their area. For more detail see the attached briefing.
- 8 With regard to the quality of specialist provision school and college leaders tell us that as well as the difficulty in accessing local specialist support they also have problems obtaining information about the wellbeing of the young people who are successfully referred. Nearly two-thirds (65%) reported that they had experienced challenges when referring due to the limited capacity of existing services. They also complained of a shortage of services to which students could be referred (60%).
- 9 Where school leaders reported making referrals, they were asked about their experiences of the process. They were happiest with the referral process to in-house counsellors, with 43% reporting that they were 'very happy' or 'happy' with this experience. However, they were least satisfied with the referral process to CAMHS or other psychiatric treatment, where only one in five (20%) reported that they were 'very happy' or 'happy' and nearly two thirds (63%) reported that this experience had been 'poor' or 'very poor'.
- 10 Most schools and colleges offer on-site support to students, such as counselling and sessions with educational psychologists, but a large proportion reported that there was limited funding for these services.
- 11 The importance of mental health services, and in particular of early intervention, cannot be over-emphasised. Early intervention is essential before problems become entrenched and increase in severity. These services are a vital lifeline that many young people cannot do without. Research shows that early intervention helps prevent mental health problems from lasting into adulthood and we know that around half of lifetime mental health issues start in adolescence.
- 12 It is ASCL's view that the findings of our survey reflect cutbacks in CAMHS in many areas of the country over the past five years and the main answer to solving these problems is more resourcing for local services.
- 13 'Future in Mind' recommended a renewed focus on the role of education in addressing the mental health needs of children and young people and this is right. Schools and colleges can and should play a vital role. But they are still not being included in the discussion. With regard to the impact and implementation of the local transformation plans the responses from school and colleges leaders to our survey makes stark reading. Only about a quarter of those who responded were even aware of the existence in their area of the local transformation plans and of those who said they did know about the plans only half said that their school or college had a role in implementing the plan and only 39% said that their school or college had contributed to their local plan.

- 14 The responses to our survey showed that while there is a lot that schools and colleges can and are doing to support children and adolescent mental health there are huge barriers to accessing local support services, particularly CAMHS. There is a widespread desire among school leaders to see CAMHS services expanded. Members tell us that thresholds are too high and waiting lists are too long as a result of serious under resourcing of local CAMHS services.
- 15 I hope that this is of value to your consultation, ASCL is willing to be further consulted and to assist in any way that it can.

Martin Ward  
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Association of School and College Leaders  
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