

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Hynt y gwaith gan Lywodraeth Cymru wrth ddatblygu Cwricwlwm newydd Cymru | Welsh Government's progress in developing the new Curriculum for Wales

CR 09

Ymateb gan: Y Samariaid Cymru
Response from: Samaritans Cymru

Welsh Government's progress in developing the new Curriculum for Wales

Samaritans welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on Welsh Government's progress in developing the new Curriculum for Wales

Samaritans Cymru exists to reduce the number of people who die by suicide. Whilst the causes of suicide are complex, there are many risk factors, and subsequent high-risk groups which increase the risk of suicidal ideation and completed suicide. Young people are a high-risk group for mental illness and suicide in Wales, and as such, it is crucial that the new curriculum for Wales fulfils its commitment to health and wellbeing in a clear and tangible way.

Samaritans Cymru has continued to welcome the new curriculum since the launch of *Successful Futures* in 2015. We believe the possibilities and opportunities of the new curriculum could introduce a new culture of change within mental health reform. With half of all mental health problems beginning by the age of 14, the case for a preventative approach is clear; school years are the crucial opportunity to equip children and young people with the skills they need. Emotional health programmes in schools should be viewed as a form of promotion, prevention and early intervention which could reduce pressure on CAMHS, reduce specific mental health problems and increase academic achievement.

In 2017, we welcomed the announcement of a two-year Welsh Government trial which will allow pupils with mental health problems at more than 200 schools in Wales to access early help from onsite CAMHS practitioners. However, whilst this kind of linking up between education and health

services is essential, we emphasised that our call for action continues to be placed further downstream and in the primary context of early intervention through building resilience; a skill that can mitigate suicide in the future.

Despite the strong focus on health and wellbeing in the new curriculum, we are concerned that the emotional and mental health of children and young people could be 'outsourced'. Whilst the in-reach pilot will '*upskill teachers*' to deal with '*low-level problems within their competence*', it is imperative that this kind of support is available to all teachers and staff across Wales. As a pilot programme, this may offer additional support to pilot areas, but fails to consistently address the issue at hand.

The funding of external mental health programmes for schools raises a similar concern. Whilst we welcome any measures which provide additional pastoral support to children and young people, external programmes shift the responsibility away from schools themselves. During various meetings with teaching professionals in Wales, we have heard on a number of occasions that teachers largely prefer external agencies to come and deliver mental health programmes because they are not confident to deliver it themselves, or crucially, because they don't believe it's part of their role. This is a real concern and one which we must tackle at its source, rather than diverting the problem.

We regularly hear about exemplary schools who are developing the health and wellbeing Area of Learning (AoLE) as a pioneer school. Throughout this development stage, Health and Wellbeing Pioneers have decided against drafting a specific list of '*content*' to sit under the AoLE, on the basis that this may lead to a tick-box approach. This AoLE has been described as a '*purpose-led approach to this part of the curriculum, rather than a content-led one*'. Whilst we believe the current draft of the 'What Matters' statements for the Health and Wellbeing AoLE is promising, without any proposed content, we would express concern for the outsourcing or under-representation of mental health lessons.

Similarly, we believe the current draft of progression steps within the Health and Wellbeing AoLE is very promising. In particular, '*How we process and respond to our experiences affects our mental and emotional wellbeing*' has robust progression steps, which if achieved, could significantly improve the mental health of young people. However, due to the focus on thematic elements of health and wellbeing, rather than a content list, it is currently unclear as to how staff would make sure they are achieving the outcomes.

¹ A new curriculum: The story so far... ([Welsh Government](#))

We have been told that mental health would at the very least, be covered through the statutory Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). The current draft of RSE guidance includes proposed technical guidance for schools, which does indeed list '*Skills for health and wellbeing*'. However, this is a broad category and by no means ensures mental health provision. Within the draft RSE guidance, there is also a signposting section which details external support organisations for children and young people. This section covers bullying, children's rights, equalities, online safety, relationships and sex, sexual health and sexual abuse. There are no specific support organisations listed for emotional and mental health which suggests the topic is not a core element of SRE and therefore we cannot presume teaching staff will view it in this way.

As SRE is statutory, we have enquired as to how this will fit within an AoLE that is thematic and not content led. We have been informed that its statutory nature means it will not belong to one specific AoLE (Health and Wellbeing), and instead will be delivered across all six. We believe the same opportunity should be awarded to mental health; this topic should not just sit under one AoLE. Mental health as a thematic element of the curriculum could fit within a number of AoLEs and content, such as technology, expressive arts and literacy.

We are currently unaware of any commitments to include basic mental health in Initial Teacher Training (ITT). We have consistently called for this throughout the course of our education policy work in Wales. We welcomed the strong focus on this area within *Mind over Matter* and hope the new Welsh Government response in early 2019 will clarify the progress or commitment to ensuring its inclusion. From a practical standpoint, despite the strong and innovative focus on health and wellbeing in the new curriculum, we cannot expect teachers to be skilled and confident to teach pupils about mental health or equipped to talk about emotional distress with a view to signpost effectively or deal with the issue in-house as part of a whole school approach. The widely held view among some that mental health is not a teachers responsibility could be addressed by the inclusion of mental health training in ITT and would position it as a high-priority area. Once again, this is an opportunity to embed a preventative approach to mental health, rather than trying to outsource the issue.

As a final reflection, we would like to raise the issue of sustainability. Whilst we know there are exemplary schools who are delivering innovative programmes of reform in their environments through curriculum design or whole school approaches, we also know these initiatives are often driven by

passionate PSE leads or headteachers. When considering that health and wellbeing is not content led, we need to make sure that schools are prepared to continue successfully if specific leads were to leave the school. Similarly, we need to think carefully about robust mental health provision in cases where lessons are outsourced. Pilot programmes and external practitioners, such as the third sector, can only go so far in supporting the whole school population. It's crucial this isn't viewed as a sustainable way of delivering mental health provision in schools.

Additionally, we would like to reiterate our support for *Mind over Matter* and the crucial work undertaken by the Committee in relation to the emotional and mental health of children and young people. In terms of education specifically, the recommendations put forward in *Mind over Matter* could improve the mental health of children and young people in Wales and form a crucial part of suicide prevention.

Finally, we have welcomed *Everybody's Business*, the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's report on Suicide Prevention. Specifically, for this policy area, we would like to reiterate our support and highlight the urgency of Recommendation 24. The new curriculum provides an opportunist time to make this recommendation a reality; particularly the issuing of guidance to schools on talking about suicide and self-harm. Once again, this forms a crucial part of equipping teachers to talk about emotional distress in an open and confident manner. This kind of guidance could improve the uptake of mental health provision in schools and would leave teaching staff more empowered to take ownership. It's crucial we seize every opportunity to embed the message that talking about suicide and emotional distress does not increase the risk; it reduces it.