

Universal Periodic Review: UK 4th Cycle

Children's mental health

Suggested questions for the UK:

- What measures are being taken at UK and devolved level to invest in universal preventative and early intervention children's services to prevent an increase in mental ill-health among children, including vulnerable groups?
- What steps are being taken at UK and devolved level to ensure specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are well-funded (on par with adult services) and accessible to all children at the point of need? What steps are being taken to reduce waiting times?

Suggested recommendations for the UK:

- The UK and devolved governments should invest in universal preventative and early intervention children's services to prevent an increase in mental ill health among children and ensure
- The UK and devolved governments should ensure CAMHS are adequately resourced, are accessible to all children who need them, and take steps to reduce waiting times.

Significant barriers in accessing mental health services

There has been little progress on recommendation 134.166. Mental health problems amongst children in the UK are increasing. Meanwhile, access to support is significantly compromised by high thresholds for referral to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), long waiting times and lack of provision for particular groups such as the early years.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the steps taken by the UK and devolved governments to manage the health risks have had a particularly profound impact on many children, especially those whose rights were already most at risk. A record number of children and young people were referred to mental health services as Covid-19 took its toll, with a sharp increase in eating disorders, self-harm, and in referrals to CAMHS.^{1 2 3} The impact of the pandemic for children with pre-existing mental health concerns has been especially traumatic, including those who experienced bereavement, isolation and greater risk⁴

¹ Royal College of Psychiatrists (2021) '[Record number of children and young people referred to mental health services as pandemic takes its toll](#)' [Press Release](#)

² For Wales, see Welsh Government (2020) [Review of the impact of mass disruption on the wellbeing and mental health of children and young people, and possible therapeutic interventions](#)

³ Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Northern Ireland's Mental Health Champion outlined in a briefing to the Northern Ireland Assembly's Education Committee (March 2022), "[that young people's mental health has been more heavily impacted by the pandemic and the restrictions, than any other age group](#)".

⁴ for example, see Young Minds (2021) The impact of COVID-19 on young people with mental health needs <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports-and-impact/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

In England, it's estimated that one in six (17.4%) six- to 16-year-olds have a mental disorder.⁵ In Wales, three children in every classroom have a diagnosable mental health condition, with levels of stress, anxiety and self-harm rising⁶. Suicide in England and Wales is among the leading causes of death for five- to 19-year-olds⁷. Too many children continue to experience fragmented pathways and have to reach crisis point before they can access any intervention and support⁸. There remains a need for greater investment in child-led community therapeutic support services for those children who do not meet CAMHS eligibility thresholds yet require support to help prevent problems escalating.

For children with more acute needs, under-investment in mental health services remains a huge concern, despite additional investment of £1.4bn committed in England from 2015-16 to 2020-21⁹. On average, the NHS in England spends £225 for every adult and £92 for every child.¹⁰ Children wait, on average, two months to begin mental health treatment¹¹ but this can be as much as 6 months in some parts of Wales¹². Young people experience difficulties transitioning from CAMHS and many see support cut off at 18.¹³ In Wales, many children are falling through the gaps between child and adult services, leaving many abandoned, isolated and ignored.¹⁴ Children are still admitted to adult mental health inpatient wards.¹⁵ In Wales there has been at least 156 admissions of CYP to adult mental health units since 2019¹⁶.

In Scotland, more than 20% of referrals to CAMHS are rejected.¹⁷ Referral criteria vary across Scotland and the system is difficult for children and their supporters to understand, signposting to other services is often inadequate, and young people report becoming ineligible after turning 18 during the long waiting time. Scotland continues to miss targets on waiting times, with only 70.3% of children seen within 18 weeks at the end of 2021 (target is 90%).¹⁸

In Northern Ireland, 1 in 8 children and young people experience emotional difficulties and 1 in 8 children and young people meet the diagnostic criteria for common mood and anxiety disorders.¹⁹ Urgent concerns include: suicide rates much higher than other UK jurisdictions; increasing incidence of self-harm; increasing anti-depressant prescription rates; poor emotional well-being; eating disorders; low levels of self-esteem; bullying, particularly via social media and online platforms; increased anxiety, particularly in young children;

⁵ This has increased from a rate of one in nine in 2017. NHS Digital (2021) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2021: Wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey](#)

⁶ Senedd (2018) Mind Over Matter [The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People in Wales \(senedd.wales\)](#)

⁷ Suicide and injury or poisoning of undetermined intent accounted for 17.1% of deaths among males aged five to 19, and 13.8% among females, in England and Wales. Office of National Statistics (2020) [Deaths registered in England and Wales 2019](#)

⁸ Barnardo's (2020) [In our Own Words](#)

⁹ The NHS Long Term Plan allocated £2.3bn for mental health. However, there haven't been any further commitments for green paper funding and long-term plan funding beyond 2023/24. Children and Young People's 23 Mental Health Coalition (2021) [Members' Report 2021](#)

¹⁰ Children's Commissioner for England (2020) [The state of children's mental health services](#)

¹¹ Only around a third of children (32%) with a probable mental health disorder are able to access treatment. Children's Commissioner (2022) [Children's Mental Health Services 2020/21](#)

¹² See for example (June 2022) <https://nation.cymru/news/figures-reveal-appalling-waiting-times-for-young-peoples-mental-health-services/>

¹³ Education and Health and Social Care Committees (2018) [The Government's Green Paper on mental health: failing a generation](#)

¹⁴ Mind Cymru (2022) [Sort the Switch](#)

¹⁵ In 2018-19, 592 children were admitted to adult mental health inpatient wards – over three times the number admitted to adult wards the previous year (196). Article 39 (2020) [Children in Hospital \(Mental Health\) Statistics Briefing](#)

¹⁶ Due to there being no publicly available data in Wales regarding how many children are admitted to adult mental health, this figure is based on FOI requests.

¹⁷ Public Health Scotland (2022). [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\) waiting times.](#)

¹⁸ Public Health Scotland (2022). [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services \(CAMHS\) waiting times.](#)

¹⁹ NI Youth & Wellbeing Survey <https://hscboard.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/youth-wellbeing-prevalence-survey-2020/>

limited policy and practice in the areas of perinatal and infant mental health; high levels of self-harm and suicidal thoughts among LGBT young people.²⁰

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) 2018 review of mental health services²¹ evidenced the system was under significant pressure, struggling to respond to the scale of need and complexity of issues in a context of chronic historic under-investment. The NICCY report also documented long waiting times; a postcode lottery for access to services; and lack of understanding about services, leading to inappropriate or rejected referrals. Recent figures indicate that over 2,000 children and young people are now routinely waiting for their first CAMHS appointment.²²

Despite the high rate of children and young people with mental health needs in Northern Ireland, the budget for CAMHS represents only 9% of the total mental health budget for the jurisdiction.²³

Recommendations referenced from the UK's UPR 2017 (3rd cycle)

134.166	Strengthen measures to foster access of vulnerable populations to public services and social and health services	Côte d'Ivoire A/HRC/36/9/Add.1 - Para. 3	Supported
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About us

Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)

CRAE works with around 100 members to promote children's rights and monitor government implementation of the CRC in England. See: www.crae.org.uk Contact: lking@crae.org.uk

Together (Scottish Alliance for Children's Rights)

Together is an alliance of almost 500 NGO and individual members that works to improve the awareness, understanding and implementation of the CRC in Scotland. See: www.togetherscotland.org.uk Contact: juliet@togetherscotland.org.uk

Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group

The Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group is a national alliance of non-governmental and academic agencies tasked with monitoring and promoting the CRC in Wales. It is currently facilitated by Children in Wales, the national umbrella organisation. See: www.childreninwales.org.uk Contact: sean.oneill@childreninwales.org.uk

Children's Law Centre

The Children's Law Centre is a registered charity and specialist children's human rights centre in Northern Ireland, founded on the principles enshrined in the CRC. See: www.childrenslawcentre.org.uk Contact: fergalmcferran@childrenslawcentre.org

²⁰ CLC submission to UNCRC, December 2020 <https://childrenslawcentre.org.uk/?mdocs-file=4166>

²¹ NICCY Mental Health Review <https://www.niccy.org/about-us/our-current-work/mental-health-review-still-waiting/still-waiting-a-rights-based-review-of-mental-health-services-and-support-for-children-and-young-people-in-northern-ireland/>

²² Northern Ireland Assembly Question AQW 1206/22-27 (Answered June 2022). <http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=375331>

²³ FOI received by the Children's Law Centre from Department of Health NI, 30th June 2022