

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1725](#)

Main Petitioner: Ann Marie Coccozza on behalf of Families and Friends Affected by Murder & Suicide (FAMS)

Subject: Suicide awareness and support for young people

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make suicide awareness education, information and training mandatory for all high school pupils, teachers, carers and parents and to provide specific ring-fenced funding for this training.

Background

[NHS Health Scotland](#) states that suicide is a significant public health issues in Scotland. [Statistics on suicide](#) reported for 2018 show that:

- There were 784 probable suicides registered in Scotland in 2018.
- The suicide rate for males was three times as high for males (581) as for females (203).
- The highest rate of suicide is in the 35-44 age group for males and 45-54 age group for females.
- There is a recognised link between suicide and deprivation – between 2014 and 2018 the rate was three times higher for people from the most deprived areas compared with those from the least deprived areas.
- While suicide rates are strongly related to deprivation, this inequality decreased between 2004-08 and 2014-18.
- Scotland appears to have had a higher suicide rate than other UK countries since the early 1990s¹. The suicide rate in Scotland is similar to the rate in other European countries.

Research by academics from the [University of Stirling](#), published in April 2019, highlighted a 'a silence around suicidality' in conversations between mental health practitioners and children and young people. The study found, in the

¹ Although caution should be applied in comparing the numbers across different parts of the UK due to different data recording practices.

countries studied, that the term 'self-harm' was used to encompass suicidal behaviour among children and young people and so contribute to a silence around the issue. The study also suggested that children and young people with suicidal feelings don't know where or how to access help, and don't feel listened to by health professionals.

Scottish Government Action

In August 2018 the Scottish Government published a [Suicide Prevention Action Plan](#) ("the Action Plan"). It sets out ten key actions with the aim of reducing the number of suicides in Scotland by twenty percent by 2022. The Action Plan builds on the previous [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013-2016](#).

As part of the development of the Action Plan, the Scottish Government consulted with a range of agencies and people, including those affected by suicide. As part of the [consultation](#) activity, an [engagement report](#) was produced through a partnership between Samaritans, NHS Health Scotland and the Health and Social Care Alliance (the ALLIANCE). The report draws together findings from six events held across Scotland to capture the views and experiences of those close to or affected by suicide and providers of relevant support and services.

The engagement report highlighted the need for improved support within educational settings as a key area where potential action could be taken to support children and young people. A range of options were proposed including:

- Ensuring guidance teachers and other key personnel can respond effectively following the suspected or attempted suicide of someone within their community.
- Education programmes that equip young people with the tools and understanding to discuss the topic with their peers – focusing particularly on the key signs to spot, practical listening skills and ways to ask people about their feelings.
- More post-bereavement services and counselling for children and young people affected by suicide.

More generally, the report argued that more needs to be done in a range of settings, including schools, to understand the impact of trauma and to promote resilience among children and young people.

Training

These points fed their way through to the Action Plan. Action 2 (which focuses on training) recognises the need for mandatory suicide prevention training for a range of frontline professionals, including teachers and other school staff:

"Specific support for children and young people is needed. Teachers, lecturers, and staff at schools, colleges and universities need to have the

confidence to effectively support students who are in distress, or who have been affected by suicide in other ways such as bereavement.”

This section of the Action Plan goes on to note the role of education authorities in ensuring that schools are health promoting, including promoting physical, social, mental and emotional wellbeing. Two commitments are made in this context:

“By the end of academic year 2019/20, every local authority will be offered training for teachers in mental health first aid, using a ‘train the trainer’ model to enable dissemination to all schools.”

“Education Scotland will also continue to support schools in making the links between nurture, Adverse Childhood Experiences and trauma informed practice, to develop effective practice. This will complement the work to implement the National Trauma Training Framework.”

Focusing on Children and Young People

Action 8 specifically commits that all the actions in the Action Plan consider the needs of children and young people. Focusing on Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services (CAMHS) it reiterates the need for training among frontline professionals, including those in educational settings from early years through to university.

A Youth Commission on Mental Health involving young people aged 14-22, this Commission has published a [report and recommendations](#) for Scottish Ministers. Education was one of the themes that emerged. It notes a need for teachers to have more knowledge and understanding of how to speak to children and young people as well as how to deal with distress. Having counsellors and trained youth workers in schools to offer support where needed was thought to be one way to take pressure off services and provide support to teachers. This was also felt to offer a less clinical setting to help pupils build supportive relationships. There has not yet been a response from the Scottish Government to this report and its recommendations.

The Scottish Government also established a Children and Young People’s Mental Health Task Force, chaired by Dr Denise Coia to bring together the strands of work relating to children and young people’s mental health from the [Mental Health Strategy 2017-27](#). The [Taskforce report](#) was published on 4 July 2019. It focuses on the importance of making children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing “a demonstrable exemplar of GIRFEC in action.” This should, it is suggested, mean effective partnerships / collaborations covering: children and families’ services; early years and childcare; schools; and the post-school education setting, among other public and voluntary service settings.

Wellbeing in Schools

[Curriculum for Excellence](#) frames the delivery of education in Scotland from age 3-18 years. It is a framework that is intended to help children and young

people gain the knowledge, skills and attributes needed for life in the 21st century, including skills for learning, life and work. It is intended to help children and young people to become: successful learners; confident individuals; responsibility citizens; and effective contributors.

There are eight curriculum areas, one of which is [health and wellbeing](#). Within this area, there is a focus on mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing:

“The mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing of everyone within a learning community should be positively developed by fostering a safe, caring, supportive, purposeful environment that enables the development of relationships based on mutual respect.”

In terms of the principles and practice of CfE, [Education Scotland](#) states that it is the role of practitioners to establish “open, positive, supportive relationships across the school community, where children and young people will feel that they are listened to, and where they feel secure in their ability to discuss sensitive aspects of their lives...”

Education Scotland goes on to highlight that practitioners should promote a climate in which children and young people feel safe and secure; modelling behaviour that promotes health and wellbeing; and encouraging it in others through using learning and teaching methodologies which promote effective learning, and by being sensitive and responsive to the wellbeing of each child and young person. Practical responsibilities include understanding of anti-discriminatory, anti-bullying and child protection policies by all staff and knowledge of the steps to be taken in any given situation, including appropriate referral.

Other initiatives by the [Scottish Government](#) that contribute to positive mental health among children and young people include anti-bullying guidance: [Respect for all: the national approach to anti-bullying for Scotland's children and young people](#) and a commitment set out in the [2018-19 Programme for Government](#) to invest in counselling services across education in Scotland. The commitment is said to lead to around 350 counsellor positions, ensuring that every secondary school has access to counselling services, with availability also extended to local and primary and special schools.

Scottish Parliament Action

In June 2018, the [Health and Sport Committee](#) held a one-off evidence session focused on suicide prevention. The meeting followed the [consultation](#) on the draft Suicide Prevention Action Plan; with the intention of offering the Committee an opportunity to hear views on the suicide prevention action plan prior to its publication.

[Barnardo's Scotland](#) submitted evidence to the Committee highlighting the importance of providing support and services to children and young people both to address their own risks and when facing experiences of suicide among family members. At the [Committee meeting](#) on 12 June 2019, there was also recognition of the needs of children and young people and support being on

offer within the education setting. Toni Giugliano from the Mental Health Foundation Scotland specifically noted the need for teachers to receive adequate training, for resilience building in schools and for those taking part in teacher training programmes at university to receive appropriate training on these issues.

At present the Public Petitions Committee is conducting an inquiry on [mental health support for young people in Scotland](#). This emerged in response to [public petition PE01627](#) by Annette McKenzie on consent for mental health treatment for people under 18 years of age. It aims to understand and suggest improvements on how young people feeling low and / or anxious can get the advice and support they need, particularly for the first time.

The Committee has developed a [diagram](#) that maps the different ways a young person might access the mental health support. It has also received written submissions (available [here](#)) and gathered views from young people, parents / carers and professionals using the digital consultation tool: [Dialogue](#).

An oral evidence session with the Minister for Mental Health Clare Haughey MSP and Scottish Government officials was held on [21 March 2019](#) to offer the Committee an update on the progress of Scottish Government policy in the area of children and young people's mental health services.

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16 July 2019

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