

**PE1725/A**

Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills  
submission of 3 October 2019

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the above petition following consideration at the Public Petitions Committee meeting on Thursday 5 September 2019. The Committee has asked the Scottish Government for views on the action called for in the petition, which is:

*“Calling on the Scottish 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.”*

I thought it would be helpful to firstly outline the wider work going on across Scotland on suicide prevention and the supports available, reflecting our view that everyone has a role to play. This information will also provide the context for the work in schools. I will then respond to the petition points about suicide prevention and support available to young people in schools.

The Scottish Government has made clear its commitment to improving the support available to support children and young people’s mental health, in order to ensure early intervention and prevention of suicide.

Between 2002-2006 and 2013-2017 we saw a reduction of 20% in the rate of death by suicide. Our Suicide Prevention Action Plan, *Every Life Matters*<sup>1</sup>, was developed to continue the strong downward trend in the suicide rate in Scotland and aims for a step change in response and culture around suicide. Those with mental illness should expect the same standard of care as people with physical illness and should receive medication if they need it.

Our Suicide Prevention Plan, supported by an additional £3 million investment, supports a Leadership Group to secure innovation and act as a driver for new work to help prevent suicides across Scotland. This is in addition to the current spending of over £2 million annually on suicide prevention services. The National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group (NSPLG), chaired by former Deputy Chief Constable Rose Fitzpatrick, was established in September 2018 to support the delivery of *Every Life Matters*. Membership of the Group reflects a broad range of delivery partners involved in suicide prevention, including those with lived experience of the impacts of suicide.

In addition to the Suicide Prevention Plan, the Scottish Government funds NHS Health Scotland to provide a range of programmes to improve mental health in the workplace, including Scottish Mental Health First Aid (SMHFA) training. We are committed to continuing support for this work, and in the Suicide Prevention Action Plan, we have committed to fund the development and implementation of refreshed mental health and suicide prevention training.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-suicide-prevention-action-plan-life-matters/>

In terms of further training, ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training) is offered by a range of trainers throughout Scotland and free training materials are provided by NHS Health Scotland. This is a two day course intended as suicide first aid training which aims to enable staff to become more willing, ready and able to recognise and intervene effectively to help a person/young person at risk of suicide.

Training is also available in the safeTALK approach which is a half day course designed to give staff skills to recognise when someone may have thoughts of suicide and to connect those in distress with someone who is ASIST trained. There is also a short general awareness raising course called suicideTALK which can be provided to communities and staff groups by ASIST trainers.

The Committee and Petitioner will also be interested to know that in 2016, as a further preventative measure, the Scottish Government agreed to a small number of pilot areas in which NHS Boards and other agencies are testing a Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) model. DBI is *a 2 level approach provided for all presentations of distress (including self-harm) that have an emotional component and do not require alternative emergency service involvement*. The intervention has a clear vision of providing "connected, compassionate support". The focus on compassion is defined as "a sensitivity to distress together with the commitment, courage and wisdom to do something about it".

There has been significant progress, by 31 July 2019, there had been over 3,770 referrals from front-line services to the DBI Level 2 providers across the four pilot sites (Inverness: Support in Mind; Aberdeen: Penumbra; Scottish Borders: SAMH; Lanarkshire: Lanarkshire Association for Mental Health, Richmond Fellowship and Life Link). An independent evaluation report will be available by March 2021.

In September 2018, as part of Programme for Government we committed to expansion of the Distress Brief Intervention (DBI) programme pilots during 2019 to include people in the 16-18 age group. Referrals to DBI became available for 16- and 17- year olds from 31 May 2019 in Lanarkshire and the Scottish Borders; and from end July 2019 in Aberdeen and Inverness.

The Scottish Government recognise the need to ensure awareness of suicide and its prevention. To support this we provide See Me with £1m per year, up to 2021. See Me is Scotland's national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination and the programme is working to challenge these at work, at home and in educational settings.

I note that the Petition seeks mandatory training for pupils, teachers, carers and parents. As Committee members may be aware, we do not take a prescriptive approach to the curriculum in Scotland. The curriculum is not statutory and therefore it is for individual schools and local authorities which approaches they use, and external partnerships they build, to help them deliver relevant and engaging learning. Therefore, the Scottish Government cannot 'mandate' what is taught to pupils in schools. I will set out below, in some detail, the approaches which are in place which support learning about mental health and wellbeing as part of Curriculum for Excellence.

The Scottish Government is not able to mandate the content of teacher training, again my response below will set out the resources and information which does, and will, support professionals' understanding of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

I do not think that it would be appropriate for the Scottish Government to attempt to compel parents and carers to undertake training in any particular subject. I have a clear expectation that schools will, where appropriate, work in partnership with parents, carers and appropriate local or national organisations, to support children and young people who are experiencing concerns about their mental health and wellbeing.

I am, however, clear about the need for information and advice to be available to parents and carers on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and prevention of suicide. The approaches I have outlined above support awareness raising within society, including with parents and carers.

The petition also seeks specific ring fenced funding for this approach. The Scottish Government provides funding to local authorities through the block grant. This includes funding for education authorities. It is for local authorities to prioritise the use of their resources in line with local priorities and circumstances.

We have made absolutely clear the commitment of this government to promoting and supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. In the 2018/19 Programme for Government, we committed an extra £250 million to improve mental health services, including providing school nurses and counsellors in secondary schools, colleges and universities. This commitment forms part of the broader response to the challenge of support provided by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. It will provide a quicker, more effective response to some of the issues which affect children and young people's mental wellbeing. I trust that this information is helpful in providing reassurance on the Scottish Government's commitment to supporting improved support for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing.

As indicated earlier, I will now turn to the work in schools to promote mental health and wellbeing and prevention of suicide.

In schools, health and wellbeing is a curricular area in its own right, with a distinct set of experiences and outcomes. Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has an important role to play in promoting the health and wellbeing of children and young people and all of those in the educational communities to which they belong.

We believe that every child and young person should have access to emotional and mental wellbeing support in school so we want to ensure that all teachers and staff are confident in supporting their needs. All adults who work in schools have a responsibility to support and develop mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing. Positive relationships within an ethos and culture of mutual respect are the building blocks to developing children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and helping them to make the right choices and cope when they are faced with challenging situations.

The Scottish Government and Education Scotland provide guidance and support to schools and local authorities to help them carry out their responsibilities. Some local authorities will have their own professional learning offer based on local needs and this may include a focus on mental wellbeing. Specialist third sector organisations will also work with local authorities and schools to implement programmes to support the mental wellbeing of children and young people.

Through our national approach of getting it right for every child, Scottish education has a key focus on wellbeing and relationship-based approaches to support children and young people to grow up loved, safe and respected. An understanding of how early experiences can impact on children and young people's development and, for example, their behaviour emphasises the importance of relationships in shaping later outcomes. This is at the heart of what underpins much of the Scottish policy landscape and curriculum.

Relationship based approaches such as a nurturing approach help schools to develop an awareness of early adversity and trauma and are therefore a pivotal part of realising the Scottish Government's aim of preventing and mitigating the impact of childhood adversity. Earlier this year, Education Scotland launched '*The Compassionate and Connected Classroom and Community*' resource and coaching for practitioners to help them support upper primary aged children. This helps children to cope with challenges and adversity and develop their confidence, resilience, compassion and empathy. Almost all authorities have now received the two day coaching session.

I mentioned the Scottish Mental Health First Aid (SMHFA) Training which is available to improve mental health in the workplace. Education Scotland continue to support the delivery of SMHFA Training for Children and Young People in secondary schools communities. The aim of this is to train staff within secondary school's to increase their confidence in approaching young people who they think might be struggling with a mental health problem. This training will complement the range of mental health strategies that are already in place within the local authorities.

The Committee and Petitioner will be interested to know that the Scottish Government, in partnership with Education Scotland, are developing a comprehensive suite of mental health resources which will help all school staff to support children and young people in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. This will enhance the mental health strategies already available to schools and will be published by the end of 2020.

I set out earlier that we have committed significant support through Programme for Government to improve children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. In our 2018 Programme for Government we committed to invest in school counselling services across schools in Scotland. The commitment will ensure that every secondary school has access to counselling services, whilst also improving the ability of local primary and special schools to access counselling.

In addition, there will be an additional 250 school nurses by 2022, and a new community wellbeing service for 5-24 year-olds and a new 24/7 online/telephone crisis support service.

I trust that the information I have set out above will reassure the Committee of our commitment to the prevention of suicide, including through schools, and that we have a comprehensive approach in place through a wide range of actions which will deliver the approach sought, albeit in a different way from that sought by the Petitioner.