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Half of teachers fear harm for students awaiting mental health treatment during pandemic

- **One in five students (4.62) in a virtual class of 22 are now experiencing mental health difficulties, an increase of 20% in just 10 months.**
- **One in five teachers say they have witnessed at least one of their students showing suicidal (16%) and self-harm (21%) behaviours.**
- **Untreated mental health conditions of children stuck on NHS mental health waiting lists are costing schools and specialist education services £69 million a year,**

Teachers say that five students in a virtual class of 22 (1 in 5) are now experiencing mental health difficulties as a consequence of the pandemic, an increase of 20% in just ten months. Meanwhile, half of all teachers (56%), including 46% of teachers in primary school, have feared that at least one of their students will come to harm while waiting for mental health treatment over the last year, compared to one third (32%) in 2018, new figures show.

The survey of 500 teachers by youth mental health charity **stem4** reveals the true extent of the children's and young people's mental health crisis in Britain.

Over the past five months, one in five teachers say they have witnessed at least one of their students showing suicidal (16%) and self-harm (21%) behaviours. Nearly nine in ten (88%) teachers say they have seen pupils suffer with anxiety, and almost half (46%) have witnessed a student with depression. Other common problems include emotional and behaviour disorders (ADHD), aggression and concentration issues (41%), eating disorders (22%), addiction (12%), obsessive compulsive disorders (OCD) (11%), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (8%).

Most teachers predict that the longstanding mental health crisis will bring schools and colleges to breaking point as young people suffer from the effects of the pandemic. 68% of teachers point to isolation and loneliness, 41% to family difficulties, 47% to academic worries and 33% to food poverty.

Teachers now refer one in three (29%) students with mental health difficulties to NHS mental health services [Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)]:

- 34% say referrals are routinely rejected because they do not meet the threshold of severity.
- 31% say waiting lists are closed in their area;
- 29% say referrals are refused because local NHS mental health services have not resumed at full capacity as a result of the pandemic.

When it comes to students who are accepted for treatment, teachers warn that three in ten (30%) of their pupil referrals are stuck on waiting lists for 9 weeks or more. This leads half (48%) of teachers to describe existing health and social care services for students with mental health problems as very or extremely inadequate.

As mental ill health among students rises, and NHS waiting lists continue to grow, the survey – which covered primary schools, secondary schools, and further education colleges across the UK – paints a picture of patchy mental health resources and limited referral pathways for the most vulnerable young people. Teachers say only half (47%) of students with mental health difficulties are able to access the treatment they need to get well, leaving schools to bear the mounting costs of children's and young people's untreated mental health conditions. A quarter (25%) of teachers say they tell parents to find their own expert mental health support for their child, and 17% tell parents to pay to see someone privately if they can afford to do so.

Back in 2018 government proposals to improve mental health provision for young people included funding for a senior mental health lead in every school. The stem4 survey shows that less than half (44%) of schools and colleges currently

have a teacher designated as mental health lead. Just over a quarter (27%) of schools offer some form of early one-to-one counselling, and only (9%) have a comprehensive mental health literacy programme in place.

Dr Nihara Krause, Consultant Clinical Psychologist, founder of stem 4, and creator of apps Calm Harm, Clear Fear, says:

“In July 2020 NHS Digital found that 1 in 6 5-16-year-olds had a probable mental disorder, an increase by a third in three years – from 1 in 9 in 2017. This survey suggests that this official figure underrepresents the reality of what is happening nationally.

“Since the start of the pandemic **stem4** has recorded over 540,000 downloads of our free NHS-approved mental health apps: Calm Harm, which helps manage the urge to self-harm, and Clear Fear, which helps manage the symptoms of anxiety. Just 17% of stem4’s app users are receiving treatment. During the summer A-level exam results fiasco daily downloads rose from on average 2,000 a day to 12,000 a day. When we emerge from this third lockdown, we will see mental health distress on an unprecedented scale

“Teachers witness first-hand the devastating impact that isolation, loneliness, family difficulties, education stresses and poverty is having on our children’s and young people’s wellbeing and mental health. The consequences of this can often be serious and life-threatening. Teachers are desperate to help, yet the necessary early interventions and specialist services are not in place to minimise their negative effect.

“If this government is serious about turning the tide of mental ill health in this young generation, it needs to take urgent action now. What children and young people need is access to evidence-based services at all levels, from early prevention through to expert NHS help.”

■ Untreated mental health conditions of children stuck on NHS mental health waiting lists are costing schools and specialist education services £69 million a year

Teachers told the stem4 survey that every child and young person with an untreated mental health condition requires extra help from teachers, while their parents require support. Teachers say they now spend 3.6 hours (average) per week dealing with the mental health difficulties of their students and monitoring children currently on waiting lists, or who have been rejected by CAMHS after referral, to make sure their conditions do not worsen.

According to a new report published today by charity Pro Bono Economics for **stem4**, the untreated mental health conditions of children stuck on waiting lists for NHS mental health treatment (CAMHS), are costing public services £75 million each year. £48 million of that cost is borne directly by schools and colleges and £21 million by specialist education services. The remaining £6 million falls to social care and other health services.

380,000 children waited an average of 7 weeks for NHS mental health treatment in 2018/19, costing public services the equivalent of £200 per child receiving treatment. 23% (87,000) of these children waited more than 12 weeks for treatment, costing public services an average of nearly £500 per child.

Jon Franklin, Chief Economist at Pro Bono Economics, says:

“Our work highlights that funding decisions for NHS children’s mental health services cannot be made in isolation. Where children are waiting for weeks and months for NHS services, of course there are consequences for the individuals and their families. But schools and teachers are also picking up the tab. The hidden consequences for school costs of lengthy mental health waiting lists for children and young people could be significant.

“Meaningful public debate on this issue is currently hampered by a lack of clear data and information on what different parts of government are spending and how effective that expenditure is. If, as a society, we want to tackle the serious and growing problems with the mental health of the UK’s children then we need more transparency from NHS, schools and other children’s services so that we can see the full picture and deliver coordinated action in an effective way.”

■ stem4’s free, evidence-based, smartphone apps

With children and young people experiencing difficulty and long waiting times in accessing effective treatments, **stem4** has developed four NHS-approved smartphone apps, all based on evidence-based strategies, to help young people in the treatment of and recovery from their mental health difficulties.

These apps – which have been funded by charities including the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Comic Relief, and by generous donations from individuals – are free to use, and do not collect any personal data. They include:

- **Clear Fear**, which uses the evidence-based treatment Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help manage the symptoms of anxiety;
- **Calm Harm**, which uses the basic principles of an evidence-based therapy Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT) to help manage the urge to self-harm;
- **Combined Minds**, which uses a Strengths-Based approach that has been shown to be effective in recovery, providing practical strategies for families and friends to support teenage mental health;
- **Move Mood**, which uses Behavioural Activation Therapy to help improve low mood and manage the symptoms of depression.

Dr Nihara Krause and **stem4** say more needs to be done on a number of different levels to support children and young people with mental ill health issues:

- As a consequence of long delays in access to specialist resources, children's and young people's conditions worsen and they are presenting with complex mental health needs. More specialist CAMHS services with high-intensity specialists are urgently needed;
- Children and young people who have been on a waiting list for help will benefit from some sort of intermediate support. Taking the burden off teachers, this support can help monitor and motivate change before young people access treatment. Evidence-based digital support in preparation for face-to-face services may prove useful in this;
- Children and young people who are experiencing mild-to-moderate mental health difficulties require increased access to specialist early-intervention services. Teachers are at the forefront of addressing this crisis and they need much more support;
- More than half of children and young people with mild-to-moderate mental health problems do not meet CAMHS thresholds, or wait months to be seen. Waiting times need to be brought down to four weeks.

■ What teachers are saying

Teachers' views on mental health provision in schools and colleges, CAMHS and local commissioned services designed to support children's and young people's mental health needs:

"Woefully inadequate and not fit for purpose when the threshold for treatment from CAMHS is so high - you have to be suicidal before they will do anything." *Further education college, Yorkshire & The Humber*

"We are fighting a losing battle. There is never enough time to deal with the mental health of students, we can't afford extra counsellors, the NHS waits are too long." *College, South West*

"Mental health provision in schools has been cut drastically for a number of years and the current restrictions have made the situation come to crisis point." *Primary school, West Midlands*

"The government have failed children with mental health issues. Teachers have been left with the additional task of treating mental health issues for children in schools. We have no training for this, no additional time given and no money." *Primary school, Scotland*

"Teachers have needed to become front line social workers and mental health specialists as well as educators and this is not sustainable or healthy for the young people or staff." *Secondary school, South East*

"CAMHS is very understaffed and overused, and NHS mental health provision is simply not available." *Secondary school, London*

NOTES TO EDITORS

Contact

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References

1. Survey of 500 regionally representative teachers across the UK carried out by Survey Goo between 1 and 4 December 2020.
2. Pro Bono Economics' report: 'The impact of waiting lists for children's mental health services on the costs of wider public services', [Insert link], November 2020
3. [NHS Digital](#): Survey conducted in July 2020 shows one in six children having a probable mental disorder, October 2020

Pro Bono Economics key findings from the 'The impact of waiting lists for children's mental health services on the costs of wider public services', November 2020

1 in 8 children and young people in the UK suffer from at least one mental disorder. However, many have to wait weeks or months to access mental health services. This report, commissioned by teenage mental health charity **stem4**, assesses the cost to the wider public sector that results directly from the untreated mental health difficulties of young people while they are on the waiting list for children's mental health services. The analysis finds that:

- The 380,000 children and young people treated by specialist NHS Children's mental health teams in England in 2018/19 waited an average of just over 7 weeks for treatment.
- The untreated mental health issues for these children and young people whilst on waiting lists are expected to cost public services an estimated £75m per year, the equivalent of around £200 per child receiving treatment. However, an estimated 87,000 (23%) of these children have to wait more than 12 weeks, costing other public services an average of nearly £500 per child.
- £48 million of that cost is borne directly by schools and colleges and £21 million by specialist education services (90%). The remaining £6 million falls to social care and other health services.
- The above analysis does not take into account 35% (250,000) of children and young people who had their referrals closed before they received treatment, since their condition was not seen as severe enough. This means that the costs of children's untreated mental health conditions could be significantly higher than these estimates. If the analysis includes those cases that are closed before treatment, then total costs could increase to around £210m, which suggests that the £75 million figure/scenario is conservative.

About stem4

stem4 is a Wimbledon-based, award-winning charity that supports teenage mental health through mental health promotion. It provides evidence-based mental health education, builds resilience, enhances motivation to change and signposts the way to early intervention. **stem4** focuses on commonly occurring mental health issues in teenagers, including eating disorders, anxiety, depression, self-harm and addiction. The charity works with students, parents and teachers in secondary schools, and with health professionals such as GPs and school nurses through its conference programme and through digitally-delivered workshops suitable for PHSE in schools. **stem4** is also included in the Royal College of GP toolkit.

About Pro Bono Economics

PBE is a research charity that uses economics to support the social sector and to increase wellbeing across the UK. It combines project work for individual not-for-profits and social enterprises with policy research that can drive systemic change.