

Student Mental Health Action Plan

September 2024

Joint ministerial foreword

Scotland's 24 colleges and 19 universities offer a diverse range of courses and welcome students not just from Scotland but from the rest of the UK, the EU, and across the world. Our institutions are vibrant communities where students embark on journeys of learning and personal growth. We recognise, however, that this journey can be exciting and, at the same time, challenging. Moving away from home for the first time, making new friends, and adapting to new ways of learning are significant events.

Students also live, study and work in our communities and, like all of us, they are not immune to setbacks in their health. It is crucial that they can access all the support available to them to help them through those difficult times.

The Student Mental Health Action Plan acknowledges these challenges and places student wellbeing at its core. It sits within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the Workforce and Delivery Plans published last year which set out our wider ambitions on Scotland's mental health and wellbeing.

It is built on three levels of prevention - having measures in place to stop students getting ill in the first place; facilitating early detection and support when students start to struggle; and ensuring access to the right treatment and management for those who need it.

The five actions outlined in the Action Plan are informed by these principles and build on the significant investment already made by the Scottish Government in local services and on the good work already underway in our colleges and universities and the third sector.

The Scottish Government is committed to fostering and strengthening effective partnership working across the sectors. We will look to institutions, NHS Boards, and Health and Social Care Partnerships to work with us to jointly deliver the actions set out in this Plan.

Working together, we can ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive both academically and personally. By taking forward the actions set out in the Plan we can continue to build a Scotland where every student feels supported, valued, and empowered to achieve their full potential.

Graeme Dey Minister for Higher and Further Education

Maree Todd Minister for Social Care, Mental Wellbeing and Sport

Introduction

The Student Mental Health Action Plan (the Action Plan) is a roadmap for enhancing student mental health and wellbeing within the Scottish further and higher education systems.

It builds on the broader [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) and sits alongside its companion documents, the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Workforce Action Plan](#) and the [Mental Health and Wellbeing Delivery Plan](#). These overarching documents explicitly emphasise the significance of supporting student mental health and wellbeing, in a trauma-informed way, and the role of those who work with students. They also commit to 'work with colleges and universities to ensure the mental health and wellbeing needs of students are met, and utilise investment in supports and services with a focus on early intervention' and to 'explore opportunities to improve acute services pathways and promote the value of embedding student mental health agreements within institutions through NUS Think Positive'.

The Student Mental Health Action Plan and its five actions are informed by Public Health Scotland's [Three Levels of Prevention](#):

Level One - Health promoting measures which reach to all sectors of the student population to create resilience and wellbeing in all students, regardless of whether they have any mental health distress or condition. These can be informed by the [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#).

Level Two – Intervening early if a student is at risk of a particular outcome or problem or if the student has started to struggle with a condition or negative experience or emotions. Action here is about enabling access to the early help they need from a diverse range of community-based services.

Level Three – Supporting students who have established mental health problems and conditions so that they do not deteriorate and are able to function at a good level throughout their academic journey. This will require close working with appropriate health professionals, further student empowerment to manage conditions, access to timely clinical care, and support for continued engagement in studies.

To achieve these objectives, the Action Plan acknowledges the provision already in place in college and university campuses, highlights the opportunity for institutions to work with the Third Sector, local government and other healthcare providers around prevention and emphasises the need for strengthening partnerships between institutions, student bodies, local NHS Boards, and Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs). This collaborative approach builds upon existing successful partnerships and the effective student-institutional collaborations already in place through [NUS Think Positive's Student Mental Health Agreements](#).

This Action Plan, while recognising the diversity of students as well as the multitude of different learning environments in colleges and universities, outlines a strategic

approach to fostering collective support for student mental health and wellbeing. It emphasises the need to give students the tools to effectively manage their own mental health and wellbeing and their right to receive equity of access to more intensive help and support when this is needed and clinically appropriate. It acknowledges the profound impact of trauma and underscores the expectation that all actions related to college and university mental health and wellbeing be trauma-responsive.

To address the multifaceted needs of students, the Action Plan focuses on five key areas, identified as priorities for action by stakeholders and research ([Thriving Learners](#)):

- **Promoting mental and physical health and wellbeing to prevent mental ill health:** Enhancing student awareness of physical and mental health, raising awareness of available resources which support mental wellbeing.
- **Early intervention:** Helping students and institutions to develop early intervention strategies, identifying potential mental health concerns and providing timely support to address emerging issues. This can be achieved through fostering a supportive and inclusive, trauma informed, whole institution approach which recognises the barriers that can prevent students accessing support and reduces levels of mental health stigma.
- **Provision of services:** Improving access to mental health services to ensure students have appropriate and accessible options for support. Institutions and NHS Boards should work together to ensure that students with more complex mental health needs can access the services and treatments they need.
- **Partnerships and collaboration:** Strengthening partnerships between institutions, student bodies, healthcare providers, and community organisations to create a comprehensive network of support for students.
- **Data collection and evaluation:** Regularly collecting and analysing data to monitor progress, identify areas for improvement, and inform future interventions.

Student mental health and wellbeing

Across Scotland, students, in particular younger students, face a unique set of challenges as they transition from secondary to tertiary education. These can include adapting to new learning styles and assessment methods, adjusting to independent living away from home, managing finances, and building new social networks. While these experiences can be exciting, rewarding, and help to build skills and resilience, they can also contribute to mental wellbeing concerns.

A 2020 study by [Think Positive](#) found that students are most likely to have concerns about mental health at the start of their studies while See Me's 2022 [Scottish Mental Illness Stigma Study](#) highlighted the negative impacts of stigma on accessing services and study retention in further and higher education.

These issues have been compounded by the lasting social and medical effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Student Mental Health Action Plan is informed by the [Thriving Learners](#) research, conducted by the Mental Health Foundation in collaboration with [Universities Scotland](#) and [Colleges Scotland](#), which further highlights the significant impact of mental health challenges on students. This Action Plan outlines the Scottish Government's response to the research in support of student mental health and wellbeing.

Scotland's student population comprises over half a million full-time and part-time students enrolled in colleges and universities. The [Thriving Learners](#) reports highlighted that college and university students are diverse with, for example, around 60% of university and college enrolments being under the age of 24. The most recent [Higher Education Statistics Agency \(HESA\)](#) data for 2022-23 highlighted that 17% of students in Scotland had a disability. The [Thriving Learners](#) survey of college students found that 23% of respondents described their sexual orientation as LGB+, 16% as bisexual, 7% as gay or lesbian, while 67% of respondents described themselves as straight.¹ 5% of respondents in the college survey identified as being transgender.

The Thriving Learners research revealed that nearly three-quarters of university students reported low wellbeing, over a third experienced moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression, and nearly half felt the need for professional help due to a serious psychological issue. A similar trend was observed for college students. The research also revealed that different cohorts of students face their own unique challenges. In colleges, for example, a significant number of bisexual, gay or lesbian students had high rates of depressive symptoms, while transgender students had noticeably lower wellbeing and general health than students who did not identify as transgender. A major issue for black and minority ethnic students was accessing culturally appropriate services.

A recent report by [Student Minds](#) highlighted that international students are concerned about a range of issues including their own mental and physical health as well as academic performance and making friends. There is also evidence that there is a disproportionate number of international students being admitted to hospital for psychiatric treatment.

Equally, postgraduate research students whether domestic, from the rest of the UK, or from across the world, can also face particular issues such as loneliness, anxiety, and difficulty maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Part-time and distance learning students are also likely to face similar issues around loneliness and work-life balance.

These findings, from a range of reports, underscore the necessity of addressing student mental health concerns. While much of the research was conducted during

¹ This nomenclature aligns with that used in [Scotland's Census 2022](#), published at the end of June 2024.

the pandemic, its implications remain relevant given the lingering effects of Covid-19 and continuing pressures around the cost of living.

Essential to the success of the Action Plan is what Universities UK describe as a [whole institution approach](#) whereby 'all aspects of university life promote and support student and staff mental health.'

The Action Plan outlines key areas for collaborative action to address these challenges, and the need to support students to effectively manage their own mental health and wellbeing, with a focus on the three levels of prevention / early intervention.

Student financial support

We recognise that financial stress can be a significant contributor to student mental health concerns. Providing adequate financial support and information on issues such as [council tax](#) can help alleviate these anxieties, especially in the face of increased living costs.

In response to increased costs, the Scottish Government has taken strong measures to assist students including uplifts to the undergraduate support package and, in 24/25, the provision of a Special Support Loan and uplifts to the postgraduate support package.

Students, including those with a mental health condition and those with Additional Learning Needs, who may have extra costs because of their impairment, can also apply for financial support whilst studying a course of Higher Education through the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). Further information on DSA including eligibility criteria is available from the [Student Awards Agency Scotland](#).

Students studying a course of Further Education can receive an additional element of funding called Additional Support Needs for Learning (ASN). It can be used to support a disabled student who, because of their disability, is obliged to incur additional personal expenditure arising from their attendance at college. ASN is administered by colleges and the amount allocated to students through ASN varies depending on the student profile and their needs. In addition to ASN, disabled students can also receive student support (as a bursary, childcare, hardship).

In 2021-22, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) issued clarification that students with disabilities, supported learners and students whose educational development does not match a standard progression model may be supported over an extended timeframe and on a non-standard pattern of progression. This support from the [SFC](#) is ongoing. The Scottish Government firmly believes that by addressing the root causes of financial stress and promoting wellbeing strategies, we can empower students to achieve their educational goals and contribute meaningfully to society.

Local services, acute care, and access challenges

Stakeholders have raised concerns about the accessibility of community services and referral pathways for students to NHS Scotland community and specialist mental health services.

Colleges and universities provide various therapeutic supports and preventive measures. These include, facilitating access to [student sport and exercise](#), institutional access to a range of wellbeing and support services, the provision of chaplaincy services, and institutional support for student associations which, in turn, provide a framework for a wide range of student clubs and societies which foster a sense of community and belonging.

We recognise the autonomy of institutions and the need for locally-based responses to local challenges. Institutions need to identify what works best for them. That said, we commend the efforts already made by colleges and universities in promoting mental wellbeing and suicide prevention. We continue to encourage them to meet the expectations set forth by [Universities UK](#); and to consider the recommendations of [Student Minds](#), and the ongoing work of the [Charlie Waller Trust](#).

These interventions, however, cannot offer comprehensive psychological, psychiatric, or acute treatments nor should they be expected to do so. We also acknowledge that other issues which affect student mental health and wellbeing, such as gender-based violence, will also require that institutions have in place support mechanisms and referral pathways to professionals.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and attendant Delivery Plan 2023-2025 acknowledge the limits of what institutions can do. Accordingly, we will work with institutions to enhance their understanding of their roles, identify key partners, and highlight available resources and funded supports, enabling better connections.

The five actions set out in this Action Plan seek to address the challenge of supporting good mental health for students, including helping students to develop resilience and to support their own mental health and wellbeing. The Action Plan underscores the importance, not just for institutions to work to address these issues, but for the NHS Boards, local authorities, and Health and Social Care Partnerships to work with them to do so.

Student voices

This Action Plan sits within a suite of documents under the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy which was informed by student voices and the Action Plan itself was shaped through early engagement with the [Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group](#). Membership includes NUS Think Positive and NUS Scotland. These student representative organisations also contributed to the Action Plan at its consultation stage.

Definitions

This Action Plan is closely aligned with the [Scottish Government's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) and shares the following working definitions of commonly used terms, as agreed upon following consultation with stakeholders:

Mental health is a part of our overall health, alongside our physical health. It is what we experience every day, and like physical health, it ebbs and flows daily. Good mental health means we can realise our full potential and feel safe and secure. It also means we thrive in everyday life.

Mental wellbeing is our internal positive view that we are coping well psychologically with the everyday stresses of life and can work productively and fruitfully. We feel happy and live our lives the way we choose.

Mental illness is a health condition that affects emotions, thinking and behaviour, which substantially interferes with or limits our life. If left untreated, mental illnesses can significantly impact daily living, including our ability to work, care for family, and relate and interact with others.

Mental illness is a term used to cover several conditions (e.g. depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia) with different symptoms and impacts for varying lengths of time for each person. Mental illnesses can range from mild through to severe illnesses that can be lifelong.

Mental wellbeing, mental health and mental illness are linked to a combination of factors covering biology (e.g. genetics, health and neurodiversity), psychology (e.g. thoughts, emotions and beliefs) and social factors (e.g. culture, poverty and discrimination). These three areas combine with a person's life experiences to impact our state of mind. This impact varies over time, does not progress in a straight line and is specific to an individual.

Prevention and early intervention

Action One: Better access to local and national prevention and early intervention services.

Community-based and digital services

Students live and study in our communities and can access the wide range of services and measures of support which are available to members of those communities. The Scottish Government is investing heavily in early intervention and prevention approaches, evidence-based digital supports and community-based mental health and wellbeing services, allocating over £130 million since 2020 on community-based supports and services alone. These supports can and should be accessible to students. This funding is supporting a range of initiatives across Scotland, including:

- Support for grassroots community-based projects, through our [Communities Mental Health and Wellbeing Fund](#) for adults. These address social isolation, loneliness and mental health inequalities, with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention.
- Community Mental Health and Wellbeing Supports and Services funding for local authorities enables them to provide community-based mental health supports for children and young people (including students) up to the age of 24 (26 if young people are care experienced).

Community-based supports and services are designed to promote prevention and facilitate early intervention. They offer a variety of activities, including sport, exercise, nature-based activities, social spaces, art and culture and therapeutic approaches. They also focus on connecting people and providing community spaces to foster social interaction. The Scottish Government also supports organisations that promote volunteering and provide opportunities for sport and cultural experiences.

There are a number of services and supports that can be accessed digitally that provide quick access to important information and resources which can help students manage their mental health and wellbeing effectively and without delay. Timely support can come through several routes:

[NHS 24's Mental Health Hub](#) is accessible through the 111 service and provides a 24/7 compassionate service to anyone requiring mental health support, or if they are in distress. It provides access to Psychological Wellbeing Practitioners (PWP) who are specially trained advisors who work in mental health and are supported by Mental Health Nurses (MHNs). PWP can offer advice on coping with mental health symptoms. They can also recommend and connect people with other services if needed. PWP can access a range of both NHS Scotland and third-sector organisations to find the right support.

[NHS inform](#), [Mind to Mind](#), [BEAT Eating Disorders](#), [Breathing Space](#), [SAMH](#), and [Samaritans](#) provide a range of information and advice for those feeling anxious, stressed, low, or having problems sleeping or dealing with grief.

The Scottish Government is also supporting a number of organisations that offer digital resources and supports to help tackle stigma around mental health and access to therapies across Scotland. These include [See Me](#) (Scotland's national programme to end mental health stigma and discrimination), and [Near Me](#) (our national platform for video consultations) which enables people to attend mental health appointments via video chat if they wish to. We have also launched group therapy functions in Near Me. Similar to digital therapies, online appointments can offer people access to group support without needing to attend in person.

There are also 33 evidence-based computerised Cognitive Behavioural Therapy treatments (cCBT) available online across Scotland, some accessible without a referral from a medical professional. Some of these treatments are supported by psychological therapies services. These digital treatments can support people with issues such as insomnia, low mood, and anxiety.

We have also increased access to internet enabled cCBT so that people can speak to a mental health professional online. Online access to trustworthy mental health support can be helpful for those, needing out-of-hours support, or who find it difficult to attend in person services.

Local community-based services, and the wide range of support materials available to students, which an institution can signpost to, should be articulated in each institution's [Student Mental Health Agreement](#) and set out in the [Think Positive Hub](#) which brings together projects, services, resources, and news relating to student mental health, for students and those who support them.

Suicide awareness and prevention

The Scottish Government is committed to tackling the root causes of suicide. Our ten year suicide prevention strategy, [Creating Hope Together](#), and accompanying [Action Plan](#) were published jointly with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) in September 2022 and set out a clear plan to reduce suicides in Scotland and address the inequalities which lead to suicide. The Scottish Government has also published its [Year Two Delivery Plan 2024-26](#).

We have created an innovative partnership model - Suicide Prevention Scotland - to lead the delivery of the Suicide Prevention Action Plan, and create a suicide prevention community for everyone working on suicide prevention in Scotland. Effective partnership working is crucial to our approach to suicide prevention. We are using academic evidence, lived experience, practice evidence and data and intelligence to support all sectors to come together and support work on suicide prevention in Scotland. This includes creating a range of resources such as guidance to support local area action planning, locations of concern, and suicide clusters; suicide prevention training and learning resources, building peer support, identifying and supporting people at risk through a relationship and person-centred

approach to supporting people at risk of suicide – which we refer to as [Time Space Compassion](#).

The Scottish Government strongly encourages colleges and universities to work closely with Suicide Prevention Scotland and local suicide prevention leads (typically employed by local authorities or health boards), to develop their own suicide prevention plans and to integrate mental health and wellbeing into their teaching programmes.

The resources developed by Suicide Prevention Scotland can assist colleges and universities in the development of their plans which should be informed by academic and practice evidence, data and intelligence and involve people with lived experience in their development. Institutional suicide prevention plans, and the language used to articulate them, should also be informed by the principles set out in Time Space Compassion.

Awareness of self-harm support

The Scottish Government, jointly with CoSLA, published a dedicated [Self-Harm Strategy and Action Plan](#) in November 2023. The aim of the Strategy and Action Plan is for people who have self-harmed or are thinking about self-harming, to receive compassionate, recovery-focused support, without fear of stigma or discrimination.

We are committed to exploring opportunities to include safe and evidence-based self-harm learning content and materials in educational settings, and building person-centred support and services across Scotland, including for students.

We are currently funding bespoke self-harm support services through [Self-Harm Network Scotland](#), run by [Penumbra](#). Self-Harm Network Scotland provides one-to-one support for anyone aged 12 and over across Scotland, there is also a national webchat service offering people help out-of-hours, up-to-date, reliable and accessible advice for anyone affected by self-harm on their website, and free training sessions available both in person or online. The Scottish Government strongly encourages colleges and universities to work closely with Self-Harm Network Scotland to increase its knowledge and approach to supporting people who self-harm, and to promote the bespoke services it offers.

Action: The Scottish Government will bring together colleges and universities, Public Health Scotland, Third Sector partners, Suicide Prevention Scotland, CoSLA, and The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education Scotland to facilitate and enhance connections to services and support available locally, and to national organisations that offer prevention and early intervention services.

We encourage institutions to put in place suicide prevention plans and to integrate mental health and wellbeing, including awareness of suicide and self-harm, into their teaching programmes.

Student Mental Health Agreements (SMHAs)

Action Two: Robust institution-wide planning, local cooperation, and support for students through Think Positive and Student Mental Health Agreements.

To ensure a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to prevention and early intervention in support of student mental health, each institution is strongly encouraged to develop a [Student Mental Health Agreement \(SMHA\)](#) or similar approach.

This document should serve as a central platform where the institution and its student body collaborate to set out all existing mental health and wellbeing initiatives including those outwith the college or university setting.

During 2022-2023, Think Positive supported 86% of all colleges, universities and students' associations in Scotland to promote and develop their mental health support offer through the Student Mental Health Agreements project. SMHAs should be the platform where links to local authority and third sector service provision are identified and set out. West Lothian College and Dumfries and Galloway College, for example, have worked with their student bodies to develop such agreements which have enhanced the range of local services students can access. These are set out in Appendix One.

Collaborative action through SMHAs will also better facilitate access to a range of digital services such as [NHS 24's Mental Health Services \(Mental Health Hub\)](#), [Mind To Mind](#), [Breathing Space](#), [Spectrum Life](#), [SilverCloud](#), and [Togetherall](#).

There are also opportunities in SMHAs for closer working between institutions and local mental health services, suicide prevention groups, [Alcohol and Drug Partnerships](#) and other specialist addiction support groups.

Many local authority areas are revising their local suicide prevention action plans in light of national strategies, and there is now an opportunity for colleges and universities to inform this work.

SMHAs should continue to reflect the diversity of their student population and include information on how students can support their own mental health and wellbeing through access to, and participation in, student clubs and societies, including sport and culture, peer support, and the provision of opportunities for students, if they so wish, to identify with and participate in a faith community of their choice. Developing local approaches to tackling stigma around seeking help for mental health and wellbeing concerns should also be a key strand in a SMHA.

All students at college or university, including those on clinical, vocational or professional placements, should have awareness not only of these mental health and wellbeing resources and how to access them, but also of sources of financial advice.

We will work with institutions to ensure they are aware of the range and breadth of resources which are freely available, so that they may develop a local approach which best meets their needs.

A significant number of students live in student residences provided by universities and in Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). That number, given the increase in PBSA provision, is likely to grow. Not only should these be maintained to a high standard, but colleges and universities should provide to all tenants residing in college, university, or privately-run PBSA, and clinical, vocational or professional placement accommodation, information on available student support and how to access this. This should be available in formats other than online, and frontline staff working within all types of student accommodation should have ready access to this information in order to provide advice when needed.

Action: We will continue to support and invest in the work of Think Positive over the duration of the Action Plan so that SMHAs can be drafted, maintained, and refined. This builds on the long-standing commitment that the Scottish Government has demonstrated towards the initiative.

To make this happen, the Scottish Government will bring together institutions, Public Health Scotland, See Me, Think Positive, PBSA providers, local authorities, and third sector organisations to share best practice from across the sector on how students can access information and wellbeing services.

Staff awareness and training

Action Three: Facilitate and enhance access to mental health resources and training for all university, college, and PBSA staff to continue to become mental health aware.

The Mental Health and Wellbeing: Workforce Action Plan 2023-2025 underscores the significance of college and university academic and support staff in promoting mental health awareness and suicide prevention. Our work on tackling gender-based violence in colleges and universities also recognises their key role. These individuals serve as crucial points of contact for students, making it imperative that they possess comprehensive mental health knowledge and skills which they can deploy in a trauma-informed way. Additionally, student wardens and accommodation staff play a vital role in providing initial support in student residences.

The Workforce Plan outlined areas of broader investment that can support colleges and universities. Public Health Scotland (PHS) and NHS Education for Scotland (NES), for instance, have partnered to develop online digital resources specifically tailored for the Scottish workforce. In addition, our [National Trauma Training Programme](#) provides a range of training, support and resources to help institutions ensure their workforce is able to support students in a trauma-informed way.

These learning resources are accessible to all members of the workforce, regardless of prior training, providing an opportunity to refresh their knowledge and skills on mental health, suicide prevention, and self-harm. NES resources such as [Mental Health Improvement, and Prevention of Self-Harm and Suicide](#), [Cruse Scotland](#), and the [National Trauma Training Programme](#) can guide college and university academic and support staff, as well as staff in halls of residences and purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA), in selecting the most suitable level of learning.

Additionally, further learning resources are available from Public Health Scotland, including [Scottish Mental Health First Aid](#), [safeTALK](#), [ASIST](#), [Healthy Working Lives](#) and [See Me](#).

Colleges, universities and accommodation providers should consider how best they can make this training available and accessible for all their workforce.

Action: The Scottish Government will lead a joint effort with Public Health Scotland, NHS Education Scotland, Suicide Prevention Scotland, NHS 24, See Me, trade unions, institutions, and accommodation providers to raise awareness of the availability of these resources and their relevance for different mental health issues, and to encourage their uptake and use.

Data sharing

Action Four: Explore mechanisms to improve data sharing between schools, colleges and universities.

When a young person transitions from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to adult mental health services, they complete a Transition Care Plan (TCP) with their CAMHS Team. Similarly, some children and young people may receive support through a "child's plan" – a multi-agency approach that forms a cornerstone of our [Getting It Right For Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#) policy. These plans enable professionals to share information with key individuals who support children and young people across different agencies.

At present, however, there is no consistency on how this information can be shared directly with colleges and universities, or guidance on what young people and their families may wish to do to prepare for this transition.

Recommendation Seven of the Thriving Learners research in relation to [colleges](#) suggests that "local authorities and schools" should "work together to develop a standardisation of minimum data-sharing expectations between schools and colleges around mental health and wellbeing supports of students." (page 76). UCAS actively promote the benefits of declaring a mental health condition at the application stage.

The Scottish Government is also aware of the work of the UK Government's [Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Task Force](#) in relation to the UCAS application process and analytics.

In addition, the UK Department for Work and Pensions has also launched an Adjustments Planner to support disabled students and a Health Adjustment Passport, which could inform the development of a similar passport-type scheme for student mental health and wellbeing.

Action: The Scottish Government will work with institutions, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), CoSLA, and prospective students to explore what information institutions require, to inform continuity of support for newly-enrolled students, and how students and their families can be supported to request and share this information with colleges and universities.

Our actions in this area will also be informed by an ongoing dialogue with the UK Government's Task Force, as UCAS has a UK-wide remit.

Enhancing access to support

Action Five: Better access to clinical support and acute services

All students should ensure that they are registered with their local GP practice. All students, whether registered or not, can also access their local out-of-hours GP service. Colleges and universities cannot provide, nor should they be expected to provide, specialist clinical support. We recognise that some students may require additional support from NHS Scotland's primary and secondary healthcare services.

These can include scheduled or unscheduled care and access to interventions delivered by the appropriate professional, in a wide range of settings including hospitals. The psychological interventions and treatments are outlined in the [National Psychological Therapies and Interventions Specification](#).

In most instances, clinician-led services in Scotland are covered by the [Scottish Government's core mental health quality standards](#). The standards provide a platform to ensure consistency of care and set out what patients can expect from these services regardless of where in Scotland they are accessed. Through this Action Plan, we aim to work with partners to improve access to appropriate care pathways for students who are more likely to need these services.

There can, however, be obstacles to students accessing these services, and we recognise that students may be more likely to present in unscheduled and out-of-hours care settings and services.

To address this, we aim to strengthen the connections between institutions and healthcare providers, encourage students to register with their local GP services, be aware of how to access out-of-hours support, and establish effective escalation and de-escalation pathways to enable those who support students to direct them to the appropriate care at the right time.

The four universities in Edinburgh worked in partnership with the three Health and Social Care Partnerships in Ayrshire to embed a Mental Health Officer at the college. This has improved student access to local NHS services and joint working with the college. These examples are further set out in Appendix One.

Action: The Scottish Government will bring together institutions, NHS Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs) and other partners to facilitate better access, for students, to the support they need from primary and secondary care services.

We will also explore how data collection and analysis on student use of primary and secondary mental health services can be enhanced.

We will facilitate links with NHS Boards and HSCPs to create better partnerships, and more effective communication between institutions and Boards and HSCPs.

We will work with institutions, NHS Boards, and HSCPs to highlight existing good practice, across Scotland, in areas where effective local solutions have already been put in place.

We will work with institutions to highlight existing crisis and distress services, such as the NHS 24 Mental Health Services, so that students are aware of these supports and can make effective use of them if they need immediate support.

Conclusion

The Action Plan sets out actions to enhance student mental health and wellbeing and what institutions can do to support this, working together and with their local Health Boards, local authorities, Health and Social Care Partnerships, and with their student body through SMHAs.

The Scottish Government will support institutions as they work with Health Boards, Health and Social Care Partnerships, local authorities, and Think Positive in this process.

Following the publication of this Action Plan, we will work with Scottish Funding Council to ensure that the Action Plan is reflected in the SFC's assurance processes and review the mechanisms to support it. We will also review the role of the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group to shape its future role in relation to this Action Plan.

We believe that by fully accessing the wide range of preventative, supportive and clinical services locally provided by the public and third sector, and by working collaboratively, student mental health and wellbeing can be nurtured, and students supported through their education journey, enabling them to achieve their aspirations.

Appendix One: Case studies

Examples of good practice within colleges and universities and collaboration with external organisations

Universities in the City of Edinburgh

With approximately 70,000 students in Edinburgh, there is added pressure on local primary care, mental health services, and third-sector organisations. The demand for these services is rising, driven by a range of factors including increased awareness of mental health issues, the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people's mental health and wellbeing, and a growing student population.

Evidence showed that students in the city underwent repeated mental health assessments, often receiving fragmented care across different organizations, with a disproportionately high use of crisis and in-patient services.

To address these challenges, a partnership comprising universities across Edinburgh (the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, Queen Margaret University and Heriot Watt University) and local Health and Social Care Services (Public Health, Strategic Planning and Commissioning, Community Mental Health, Primary Care) has been established to close gaps in mental health service provision and enhance service quality.

The participating institutions are actively implementing strategies to promote positive mental health and wellbeing, offering support for students with mental health issues through a range of initiatives which make use of online resources and brief counselling sessions.

Their work is informed by Universities UK's [Mentally Healthy Universities](#) research which emphasizes a 'whole-university' approach that integrates mental health considerations into all aspects of university life. In addition, the Universities UK [Minding our Future](#) document and the Royal College of Psychiatrists' [Mental Health of Higher Education Students](#) report each highlight the benefits of collaboration between universities and Health and Social Care services in delivering improved and more integrated mental health support for students.

This collaborative effort has resulted in several successful initiatives aimed at improving student access to care services, such as developing information sharing protocols and providing senior university staff with secure access to healthcare records so that patient/student information can be shared securely. Additionally, efforts are underway to raise awareness among healthcare professionals of university mental health services, and to improve opportunities for students to access third-sector services and other supported self-management initiatives.

Moving forward, the partnership aims to establish collaborative care pathways across institutions and NHS mental health services; standardise data collection methods for students accessing primary care and specialist mental health services;

develop transition of care guidelines; and create a dedicated student mental health pathway and service in Edinburgh. These actions are expected to lay a strong foundation for further service improvement and better support for students' mental health needs.

Ayrshire College

The Mental Health Liaison Officer (MHLO) at Ayrshire College is an equally funded partnership between Ayrshire College and the three Health and Social Care Partnerships that make up NHS Ayrshire and Arran Health Board.

The MHLO is a Band 6 registered Mental Health Nurse employed by the Health Board, who has the skills and knowledge to manage the unpredictability of mental health risks and crises that students may present with, and can effectively liaise with local mental health services.

The role promotes an early intervention model of support for the students. The MHLO provides students with education and resources to keep them mentally healthy which reduces the vulnerability to a mental health crisis such as suicidal ideation or self-harm.

Whilst the role does not operate on a caseload basis, the MHLO provides opportunities for students to access 1:1 advisory and signposting support through a referral-only system managed by the Student Services Advisors at each of the colleges' campuses. There, students are provided recommendations of supports and resources to address their concerns and follow-ups are often offered to evaluate the effectiveness and progress. This approach promotes patient autonomy and self-management.

Since the introduction of the Board's Mental Health Practitioners' Service in 2018, there is less need for the MHLO to liaise with a range of different mental health services as GP surgery-based mental health nurses are best placed to help students.

The MHLO identifies when a student requires further clinical input and will liaise with the Mental Health Practitioners' Service at the student's surgery and arrange an appointment or referral on their behalf. Student feedback highlighted the efficacy of this approach. Students are less anxious and feel more in control at their surgery appointments because discussions have already taken place in advance.

The MHLO works with academic teams to provide 30 – 60 minute psycho-education sessions across the curriculum on topics such as improving emotional health; how to manage stress; anxiety coping techniques; and suicide prevention.

The success of the role is maintained by promoting its advisory support and psycho-educations functions.

Dumfries and Galloway College

Dumfries and Galloway College and its Student Association have worked collaboratively to develop a Student Mental Health Agreement (SMHA) which has enabled the development of approaches to support student mental health and wellbeing and student attainment. These are:

Here For You campaigns – The Student Association with the College’s Equality and Diversity Forum planned and implemented a series of ‘Here for You’ events. These included providing necessities for students such as access to local food banks, Christmas appeals and facilitating a number of events which brought key partners on site to connect students with regional and local services supporting personal finance, accommodation and wellbeing.

Digital wellbeing and safeguarding – The College developed digital, including self-service, referrals for students who may be remote or lack confidence to seek help via staff. This allowed students to refer directly into adviser and counselling services. College students co designed and developed the digital wellbeing pod which offers a range of wellbeing advice. This has been enhanced by the College partnering with Spectrum Life which offers students 24/7 mental health support and guidance but also important out of hours safeguarding.

Basic needs – The College continues to provide free breakfast and lunch for students and additional food vouchers for students the College identifies as extremely vulnerable. The College has purchased water bottles for students to ensure they access water and stay hydrated and has developed self-service areas on campus so students can bring their own food.

Staff training and capacity – The College has invested in staff training, including counselling. It has refined its approach to students who have advised, on application, they have a mental health condition but have declined support, by putting in place mechanisms to reach out to them and support them, through the College’s Advisory Team, throughout the year.

Partnership working – The College continues to work with partners, such as Citizens Advice and has partnered with University of the West of Scotland to offer additional training and support for staff through the University’s medical academics. The College seeks to develop shared activities and events for students including sport and physical activity. The College, in recognition that many students need lower-level interventions to support daily mental health, resilience and managing daily life, is exploring with Dumfries and Galloway Council Youth Work Service how it can better utilise this local authority service to help students.

West Lothian College

West Lothian College worked with West Lothian College Student Association, supported by NUS Think Positive, to develop a Student Mental Health Agreement (SMHA). This has enabled the development of shared strategic objectives and evaluation frameworks to improve student mental health and wellbeing and support wider learning outcomes.

The SMHA was developed by the SMHA Lead Group which consisted of lead staff, student association officers, and students. Their work was informed by consultation with students, staff expertise, external research including Think Positive's report [Improving mental health and wellbeing support for Scotland](#), and good practice from other institutions.

The starting point was a student consultation to establish their perception of a mentally healthy college, what support students could currently access and their ideas of how to improve health and wellbeing. This highlighted that factors, external to the College, impacted student mental health and wellbeing. These included poverty (cost of living, food, money, housing), relationships, poor nutrition/diet, lack of physical exercise, smoking, alcohol and drugs and stigma.

This provided an opportunity to work with external organisations, which led to the College being part of the Fast Online Referral Tracking (FORT) system, developed by the West Lothian Advice Shop to enable partners to refer students for external help. This enabled students to access additional support for food, clothing, benefit advice and domestic abuse issues. Integration with FORT also allowed the College to review its core health and wellbeing support for students.

Allied with this SMHA work, the Colleges' award-winning Trust project, developed to support students who are not ready to proceed to mainstream qualifications due to trauma, created a space to partner with more external organisations. These organisations visit the college to support all students, providing specialist support and advice.

These services, integrating with those already provided in the wider community, have played a key role in supporting students and building resilience. It means that the College can better support its students, maximising all the local resource and support available. The SMHA process has enabled this to happen.



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