



# Mental Health & Wellbeing in FE

A supplement produced by

**FEWEEK**

In partnership with

**ncfe.**





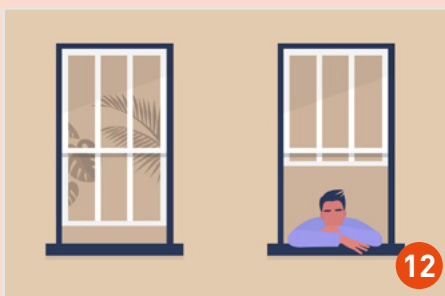
# CONTENTS



4



6



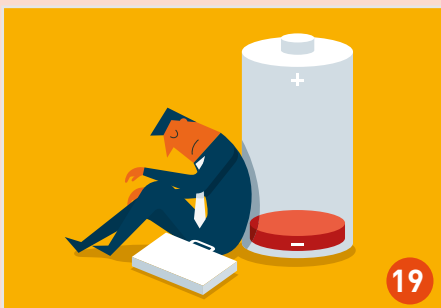
12



14



17



19

**PAGE 3**

Introduction

**PAGE 4**

Gillian Keegan op-ed

**PAGE 5**

Mental health in numbers

**PAGES 6-7**

DfE mental health plans are unambitious and woefully funded

**PAGE 8**

Strategies for improving mental health in FE

**PAGE 11**

Hayley Libretto op-ed

**PAGE 12**

Will Phipps op-ed

**PAGE 13**

Jonathan Isaacs op-ed

**PAGES 14-15**

Lockdown challenges

**PAGE 16**

Richard Rigby op-ed

**PAGE 17**

Sinéad Mc Brearty op-ed

**PAGE 18**

Government should measure impact of policies on mental health, says report

**PAGE 19**

'We live in perpetual crisis in FE and the intensity of leadership is increasing'

**PAGE 20**

Paul Joyce op-ed

**PAGE 21**

Natasha Devon op-ed

## FE WEEK

**EDITOR:**

Nick Linford

**DEPUTY EDITOR:**

Billy Camden

**COMMISSIONING EDITORS:**

JL Dutaut

Jess Staufenberg

**REPORTER:**

Fraser Whieldon

**HEAD DESIGNER:**

Nicky Phillips

**DESIGNER:**

Simon Kay

**SALES TEAM LEADER:**

Bridget Stockdale

**SALES EXECUTIVE:**

Clare Halliday

**FINANCIALS:**

Victoria Boyle

**ADMINISTRATION:**

Frances Ogefere Dell

**PHOTOGRAPHY:**

Ellis O'Brien

iStock

**MANAGING DIRECTOR:**

Shane Mann

**PA TO MD:**

Victoria Boyle

If you are interested in placing a product or job advert contact:

E: [advertising@feweek.co.uk](mailto:advertising@feweek.co.uk)

T: 020 81234 778

In-depth, investigative journalism, determined to get past the bluster & explain the facts for the FE & skills sector

**Subscribe to FE Week today**

[Feweek.co.uk/subscribe](https://feweek.co.uk/subscribe)





# Overcoming a mental health crisis

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
**BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

There have been countless reports and surveys in recent years which all point to one conclusion: the world is facing a mental health crisis.

And this has only been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In March 2021, a survey of 49,000 people in English-speaking countries published by the Mental Health Million Project found almost half of young people face a “clinical level risk” of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety.

This issue is inevitably high on the agenda for the FE sector in England. As we explore on **page 5** of this supplement, a recent Association of Colleges survey found that 94 per cent of their members have students who have attempted suicide in the last twelve months.

While the government attempts to tackle this crisis in education by creating a new Mental Health in Education Action Group, as well as prime minister Boris Johnson appointing former Love Island contestant Dr Alex George as his Youth Mental Health Ambassador, colleges and training providers have had to come up with their own ways of helping their staff and students’ wellbeing.

Throughout this supplement, sponsored by NCFE, we explore what strategies have been adopted, why mental health is on the rise in the sector affecting staff, students and leaders, and what can be done

about it.

We kick off on **page 4** with a message of thanks from the skills minister Gillian Keegan to the sector before exploring mental health in numbers on **page 5**. We then delve into the Department for Education’s mental health plans, which experts warn are unambitious and woefully funded on **page 6**, along with some top tips on strategies to help improve wellbeing in FE.

Moving on to **pages 12 and 13** you will hear from young FE students who provide first-hand accounts of their mental health battles, before the Sixth Form Colleges Association explains why the gap between what colleges can provide in terms of mental health support and what students need has never been greater.

From **pages 14 to 15** we look into what initiatives FE providers have introduced to battle a mental health “tsunami” for staff and students.

The Prince’s Trust then features

on **page 16** and explains how the FE sector often picks up learners who find themselves at rock bottom after secondary school, with mental health charity Education Support calling for FE staff to get a standardised, professional form of psychological support on **page 17**.

**Page 18** explores the key findings from NCFE’s reported ‘Understanding and Overcoming a Mental Health Crisis in 2021’, before we speak with college principal and mental health coach Stuart Rimmer about why distress is increasing among FE leaders.

We finish up by hearing from Ofsted’s Paul Joyce on how the inspectorate’s interim visits in autumn 2021 found the issue of mental health was becoming more prevalent, as well as campaigner Natasha Devon on why the government needs to fund mental health support services properly instead of promoting coping mechanisms.





# Gillian Keegan

Minister for  
apprenticeships  
and skills



## A huge thanks to colleges and providers for their mental health support work

**The FE sector has done a fantastic job switching to online provision – and the wellbeing challenges that brought, writes Gillian Keegan**

The pandemic has been a challenging time for us all. Students, staff and their families right across the country have been affected, but everyone's experience will have been different.

Some will have felt happy and safe despite lockdown, whilst others would have found it challenging, lonely and even traumatic. I am doing what I can to ensure students, as well as the FE teachers and staff who have been supporting them, get the mental health support they deserve as we emerge from lockdown and beyond.

**Everyone has had to navigate a new normal**



On top of the pressures on families of dealing with the pandemic, young people and adult learners have had to cope with school and college closures. No matter your personal situation, everyone has had to navigate a new normal.

One in four people will experience mental health problems each year in England. You

may have experienced mental health concerns yourself, or supported family, friends and co-workers who have.

During the pandemic, we worked quickly to ensure students could access high quality mental health support. NHS trusts established 24-hour urgent mental health helplines in most parts of England for people of all ages.

We also promoted some great mental health resources for students and staff, including the Every Mind Matters platform, which provides top tips on how to maintain good mental wellbeing during the pandemic. The Education and Training Foundation offered mental health and emotional wellbeing advice for FE staff.

I want to say a huge thanks to the colleges and independent training providers up and down the country who have placed mental health support at the heart of their remote education on offer and their reopening plans.

For example, Sheffield College has rolled out its new Uniheads mental health platform, which helps students develop good mental health knowledge and skills.

The award-winning training provider Multiverse has also provided their apprentices with the chance to take part in yoga and meditation classes and virtual social events, making sure their wellbeing is looked after during this unprecedented time. Apprentices can also access trained mental health professionals online through their platform, Spill.

We should all take the time to look after our mental health. What has really helped me is having virtual catch-ups with my family and friends and taking long walks in the beautiful

countryside around my home in West Sussex.

I want to thank the entire FE sector who have done a fantastic job switching to online provision to make sure students continued to receive the best education and training possible.

We know the pandemic has impacted the mental health of students of all ages and backgrounds. That's why we pulled out all of the stops to get students back to face-to-face education and training because we know this has huge benefits for their mental health and wellbeing.

As we reopen colleges, protecting students' mental health and wellbeing continues to be our top priority. Our Wellbeing for Education Return programme is bringing health experts together with education staff to respond to anxieties and concerns that some young people may be facing as they return to school or college.

We also recently announced a £79 million boost for our Mental Health Support Teams. They will provide students with early mental health and emotional wellbeing support in schools and colleges across the country.

We are committed to increasing the number of teams from 59 to 400 by April 2023 – supporting nearly three million children and young people.

We continue to provide 24/7 support for young people facing a mental health crisis and follow-up treatment at home where necessary.

The prime minister has recently appointed Dr Alex George as a Youth Mental Health Ambassador to advise the government and raise the profile of mental health education and wellbeing in schools and colleges.

Thanks to his huge social media following, Dr Alex is well placed to signpost to the range of support that is already available and provide input and feedback on what more can be done.

I look forward to working in partnership with the sector to ensure every student receives the mental health support they need, when they need it, no matter what.



# Mental health IN NUMBERS



**1 in 4  
PEOPLE**

will experience a mental health problem of some kind each year in England

## ONE IN SIX

people report experiencing a common mental health problem (like anxiety and depression) in any given week in England



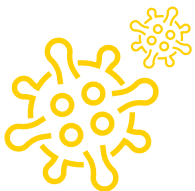
**68% OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

said that their mental health had got worse during lockdown



**85%  
OF COLLEGES**

saw a significant number of students with undiagnosed mental health difficulties in the last year



**56%**

of young people "always" or "often" feel anxious because of the pandemic



**90%  
OF COLLEGES**

saw an increase in students diagnosed with mental health conditions in the last twelve months



**64%  
OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

not in work, education or training (NEET) "always" or "often" feel anxious because of the pandemic



**41%  
OF COLLEGES**

say mental health referrals have been significantly higher since the pandemic began

# 'DfE mental health plans are unambitious and woefully funded'

JESS STAUFENBERG  
@STAUFENBERGJ

**The experts spill the beans on the reality behind the rhetoric from government**

The conversation around mental health has turned up to full volume during the pandemic, with experts warning about everything from a "potential tsunami" of mental illness to psychological wellbeing being "one of the greatest casualties" of the ongoing lockdowns.

But the government was under pressure well before Covid to tackle growing need that was rapidly outstripping supply – perhaps nowhere more so than for colleges and providers, which take a disproportionately high number of disadvantaged learners in need of additional support and yet have lower per-student funding than secondary schools.

And although both the headlines and policies over recent years have focused on young people, a growth in diagnosed conditions and other mental health issues has been tracked among adult learners and further education staff, too. So where are we at now with government policy? And what will be needed post-pandemic?

**"If you've been assessed but still have to wait six months for treatment, are you really any better off?"**

The data became particularly alarming several years ago. Former prime minister Theresa May's government was forced to act



about five years into austerity measures, as research revealed that two-thirds of councils had slashed their Children and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) budget since 2010, while the average maximum waiting time for an appointment had more than doubled since 2011. In 2015, it was revealed NHS spending on young people's mental health services had fallen by £50 million. The following year, figures showed the number of young people self-harming had risen dramatically in a decade, particularly among girls. Demand for adult mental health services, known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT), was also on the up.

At the same time, colleges, providers and schools were being left "high and dry" by services that were sending students in crisis back to them because capacity was overwhelmed. Stress levels of teachers were reported to be "soaring", with one 2015 survey showing 67 per cent said the job was adversely affecting their mental or physical health and almost half going to see a doctor about it.

In response, the government announced funding four years ago for mental health support in schools and colleges – £95 million to train senior mental health leads and £215 million for mental health support teams which included a new role, the "education

mental health practitioner" (EMHP). These practitioners were qualified to run staff training, one-to-one and peer support, and signpost to further services. The pilot, led by NHS England and local clinical commissioning groups, had come from the government's green paper published the same year, called Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision.

But the government's proposals got short shrift. A joint report from the education and health committees gave a withering assessment, taking particular aim at the goal for mental health support teams to reach 25 per cent of the population by 2023. The plans "lacked ambition" and were "failing a generation", thundered the report. Yet in response, the government "completely rejected" the criticism, also dismissing accusations the plans would simply "create new jobs for teachers".

Not for long. Just this month the government pledged to bring forward this commitment by at least eight months so that by April 2023, the number of mental health support teams in schools and colleges would grow from 59 currently, to 400, reaching nearly three million young people. This would be backed by an extra £79 million to support young people's mental health, said ministers.



But experts remain worried. Tamsin Ford, professor of child and adolescent psychiatry at the University of Cambridge, told *FE Week* colleges are the “de facto frontline service for mental health conditions” but goals in the green paper to better train and support staff are too “unambitious and the funding woeful”. For instance, the green paper’s goal that young people should access NHS-funded mental health services within four weeks is not being met. “They’re certainly nowhere near that four-week limit. The risk is that everyone is just being diverted into assessment,” said Ford. “Because there is a huge pressure on services not to have a waiting list, there’s a push for people to be assessed, but that removes treatment slots. If you’ve been assessed but still have to wait six months for treatment, are you really any better off?” Worsening the situation is that education psychologists, who are employed by councils, used to do more preventative work but this role has now been reduced to mainly assessment, she added.

The other issue is the patchy transition between youth mental health services, or CAMHS, and adult mental health services, including IAPT. “If you’re referred for mental health support at 17.5 years old, the children’s service might not be able to see you in time, but then the adult service might be too pushed to take you for a while once you’re 18, so again you can end up waiting,” said Ford. “It’s a mess – and it occurs at the peak of mental health incidence.”

## “Need continues to significantly outstrip what is available”

Her words were echoed by Whitney Crenna-Jennings, senior researcher in mental health and wellbeing at the Education Policy Institute. Her report on access to child and adolescent mental health services last year showed that despite £1.4 billion extra spending since 2015, the proportion of young people not accepted into mental health treatment – known as “rejected referrals” – had not changed in four years. Young people were being rejected because their conditions were either

“unsuitable” for CAMHS, or they did not meet the eligibility criteria. And while average waiting times for treatment had at least fallen, they were still around two months, double the government’s four-week target. It shows that even as some colleges were reporting back positively on their EMHPs, key statistics were still bleak.

“Need continues to significantly outstrip what is available,” said Crenna-Jennings. “The issue is partly with the targets that have been set. Most would agree they are just not close to being ambitious enough.” She pointed out the government is now setting a goal to reach “absolute numbers” of students – three million – rather than proportions, “regardless of the actual prevalence rate” of mental illness. “Parts of the system are falling down, so schools and colleges are having to deal with that,” she added. “And since the pandemic, that need is growing but the rollout of mental health support is not happening fast enough.”

The research reveals the situation since lockdown last year. One in six children aged five to 16 now have a probable mental disorder, up from one in nine in 2017, according to a survey by NHS Digital in 2020 – with Covid and lockdown identified as possible factors. Rina Bajaj, head of training for mental health and wellbeing at the mental health charity Anna Freud Centre, said there has been an increase in anxiety and depression among young people, as well as body image worries and eating disorders. For 16- to 19-year-olds, “loss of peers” and “loss of milestones” around growing up will have a particularly negative impact, she said.

Colleges have noticed. Ninety per cent said students diagnosed with mental health conditions had increased, according to the Association of Colleges. Worse, 94 per cent reported students who had attempted suicide in the last 12 months, over half of which said that was an increase. Richard Caulfield, national lead for mental health at AoC, said colleges are admirably spending more on mental health and wellbeing initiatives, but need better funding. “We could especially do with additional support for the transition for those coming out of schools now,” he said.

The mental health of staff has been badly hit too. In October last year, 84 per cent of teachers described themselves as feeling “stressed” or “very stressed”, a significant jump from 62 per cent in July, according



Tamsin Ford

to the charity Education Support, which focuses on mental health for teachers (see opinion piece, page 17). Clare Stafford, chief executive officer at the charity Charlie Waller Trust, which also provides mental health training for schools and colleges, said college staff have been put in “anxiety-provoking” situations in the pandemic, such as having to accredit students for practical courses, without getting to spend much time with them.

Going forward, policymakers must carefully consider the needs of colleges in any new initiatives, given their vulnerable learner population. “Too often, ‘and colleges’ just appears as a suffix added to ‘schools’,” said Stafford. Their specific contexts must be looked at “not least because they educate large numbers of people who may not have had a very positive experience” of school.

It mustn’t be understated that many colleges have taken innovative approaches to the mental health challenge, with new insights into trauma, adverse childhood experiences and attachment rolled out across the country. Almost all colleges now have at least one mental health “first aider”, said Caulfield, and many are positive about the mental health support teams where they can access them.

But the challenges in the longer-term are huge. Experts are agreed that a bigger, more joined-up response is required.

A DfE spokesperson said protecting student and staff mental health “continues to be our top priority”, adding mental health support teams have seen a £79 million boost. Best practice resources will be shared with the sector, they added, while NHS trusts are running emergency 24-hour mental health helplines.

# Strategies for improving mental health in FE

**FE Week spoke to three mental health researchers to find out what makes a difference: Dr Hei Wan Mak, research fellow in quantitative social science at UCL, Dr Alexandra Burton, senior research fellow in behavioural science and health at UCL, and Dr Katherine Young, lecturer at the Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Centre, King's College London University.**

**1** Create an atmosphere where it's fully accepted to talk about mental health - including a place to go and talk about it, where there is someone who is confident listening to those concerns. Ensure it's a public conversation around the college.

**2** Train staff and learners to know what to look out for in case someone needs help: becoming socially more withdrawn, behaviour issues, expressing a lot of worries and anxieties, ongoing difficulty sleeping and so on.

**3** Engage with the whole family, not just the learner. Colleges could "map out" the links each learner has in terms of a support system. This can flag who is vulnerable and, if a learner is struggling, who the college can turn to and who in particular will need more support.



**4** Find third sector organisations and charities to help provide support if NHS and other public services are overwhelmed. Both staff and students might stand a better chance of getting help quickly through these routes.

**5** Know the five steps to mental wellbeing advised by the NHS and share these with staff and learners:

- I. Be connected to other people: strong relationships increase resilience.
- II. Be physically active: this raises self-esteem and causes chemical changes

in the brain (this should be a physical activity the person likes, not just any physical activity).



III. Learn new skills: this can build a sense of purpose.

IV. Give to others: this can provide a sense of reward and self-worth.

V. Pay attention to the present moment: mindfulness can help people enjoy life more.

**6** Be aware that screen time can increase depression, so be conscious of how much time staff and learners are spending with screens rather than face-to-face with other people or outside. Social activities via digital devices might not result in the emotional connection that boosts wellbeing.



**7** Arts and cultural engagement boost wellbeing, increase life satisfaction levels and reduce loneliness. Whether it's doing animation or digital art work, or reading for pleasure, painting, drawing or musical activities, try to ensure people have

time for and access to the arts.

**8** Help promote early intervention in earlier education phases. Early supportive and preventative measures are the best way to reduce the incidence of mental illness and crises in teenage and later years.



**9** Remember that people are affected differently by different contexts. The mental health of some learners and staff may have improved during the pandemic, as various stressors have been removed. Never assume that everyone is having a particular response to a situation.

**10** Check in with yourself. As a staff member, you can only sustainably support others insofar as your own mental health is in good condition. Look into IAPT (Improving Access for Psychological Therapies), which aims to provide talking therapies for adults, and charities like Education Support and the Charlie Waller Trust for help.





ncfe.

# improving mental health outcomes in education.



With the ongoing effects of the global pandemic and the social pressures facing students daily, there's never been a greater need for mental health intervention in education.

## Our solutions can support you to make a difference:



Mental health qualifications developed to support and raise awareness of common issues



Qualifications in suicide awareness and reduction - the first of their kind in the UK



High quality provision to support CPD and progression for educators and students



A free practitioner's guide to supporting students' mental health and wellbeing



An innovative app from Fika to support your students' mental fitness and improve outcomes.



**Find out more**

**Visit:** [cache.org.uk/mentalhealth](https://cache.org.uk/mentalhealth)

**We're proud to be working in partnership with a number of inspiring organisations to improve mental health outcomes.**

**cache**



LearnBox

aelp

**Fika**   
Mental Fitness

# Taking steps; reducing suicide



**The number of suicides continues to rise, with 1 in 5 of us suffering from suicidal thoughts.**

Suicides may not be predictable, but they **are** preventable. High quality education can raise awareness, and equip people with the skills to connect with those at risk.

**Together we're moving forward with suicide reduction; one step at a time.**

We've collaborated with mental health training experts to bring you a package to help save lives. This includes qualifications which are the first of their kind in the UK, **designed to raise awareness and reduce suicide**, and high quality digital learning resources to support delivery.

**Find out more and make a difference.**



[cache.org.uk/steps](https://cache.org.uk/steps)



[steps@cache.org.uk](mailto:steps@cache.org.uk)



# Hayley Libretto

Health and social care  
level 2 student, London  
South East Colleges



## If I'd had better support, I might not have dropped out of education for so long

**Getting a good therapist at last and a new set of experiences brought hope, writes Hayley Libretto**

I left school when I was 14 because of my mental health. I had become anxious and depressed and I couldn't leave my house at points. I had to repeat year 10, but then it got so bad I dropped out again. Now, I'd really like to work with young people struggling with their mental health, or as a social worker. Or perhaps rescuing greyhounds! I'm not sure yet, but I'm feeling more positive.

The main thing that made a difference was a good therapist, a special programme I did with The Prince's Trust, and my college.

I'd always hated getting up early and going to school, but when I was in year 8 I just shut down. I even swapped schools because I thought that would solve everything, and then I just realised, I can't do this, it's exhausting. I would go into school for three days a week, sometimes two days.

Sadly I don't think the school support on offer was very good at all. There was a lady I spoke to once or twice at school and she sort of said, "you've got to get through it, keep going". But I couldn't just get through it. Then I was signed up for tennis lessons, and I thought this isn't really what I what I need, I can't

just do tennis and power through this. It was just a joke, honestly. I needed to talk.

Eventually I went to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). It was such a long waiting list. With one therapist I didn't get anywhere but I couldn't bring myself to say I didn't want to speak to them. Then in August 2019 I got the therapist who I have now and I absolutely love her. Someone once said having a good therapist is like having a good pair of jeans, and it's true.

In September the same year I also went on The Prince's Trust programme. It was my twin sister who found out about it through college. I'd heard about it before but for some reason I didn't think it could be an option for me, because I was miserable. But I went into college to meet Jane, the lead for the programme. I was so nervous, which seems



ridiculous now - but she is the nicest woman.

It's a 12-week programme where you get to know your team, go on a residential trip away, do a community project and do work experience. On the residential we did canoeing and raftbuilding. It was scary but it was such a good week and we really got to know each other. We also made mental health leaflets and handed them out. We had to give a presentation, and I was so proud of what we'd done but also didn't want to stand up and talk. We did it though!

My work experience was at a farm. I was so happy, I love animals. Being in that kind of environment also put me out of my comfort zone. Even though most people were really friendly, I was constantly terrified I would mess up. But it felt good going home - I'd think, 'I've done a good thing today, I can relax now'. Now when I'm looking for a job I can think, well, I've done that.

**I thought, I can't just do tennis and power through this** ”

Looking back, school just doesn't suit everyone. It doesn't mean I should have had to drop out - I should have been able to access more support. I would hate to meet someone who was like me from a few years ago.

But my tutor at college now is a gem. I can speak to teachers at my college a lot better. There's something about a staffroom in a secondary school, it's like they're hiding behind the door.

Mental health needs to be spoken about more. When I started struggling I was so ashamed of what was happening. I didn't understand why I kept having panic attacks. We need to teach people coping mechanisms before they struggle. If I'd had better ways to deal with it, maybe I wouldn't have dropped out for so long.



## WILL PHIPPS

Healthcare science  
extended diploma  
student, West  
Herts College

# Lockdown gave me the longest bout of bad feelings I've known

**Online learning is just not what students signed up for – and is not nearly as good as face-to-face interaction, writes Will Phipps**

Lockdown has been my biggest struggle. I'm a very extroverted person and like many of us I love seeing people face-to-face. I'm not a very bureaucratic person and I don't really like waiting for emails. Hence why I really have struggled with online learning.

Before the pandemic, like many of us I've had my own trials and tribulations. I'm gay and non-binary and have been on my own journey. I found year 9 and 10 particularly hard, because I was really struggling. Everyone experiences poor mental health, but minority groups do even more so. It really did impact me. But not as much as the lockdown. That's been the most substantial and long-term bout of bad feelings I've experienced.

The thing that's kept me going during online learning is my three jobs in healthcare.

I'm a first responder, which is an individual who responds to clinical emergencies. For example, I do a lot of work on films as a filmset medic. I also work as a healthcare assistant at a mental health hospital near me, taking care of people with illnesses such as schizophrenia or Huntington's. Most of the time I work as a care assistant at a nursing home.

Without work, I really would have deteriorated in terms of my mental health. I seek purpose and I want to be able to help people on the basis of their health needs. College is a gateway and it's meant to help you go onto a diploma and higher education, so if I hadn't felt I was following my dream career through work, the lockdown would have impacted me much more. I might have stopped everything.

Online learning is not what you signed up for, which is a classroom with interactive experiences, such as the lab work we do for



microbiology and biochemistry. In the first lockdown, we got to share our frustrations with each other. But by the time the third lockdown came, that really put the nail in the coffin.

I'm the student governor for my college, so I know a lot of the staff. I used to go to the main campus for the governance meetings and I'm not doing that any more. So I've missed that and the social aspect of the college.

## "The third lockdown really put the nail in the coffin"

Like many people, I have definitely experienced lockdown depression. With me it manifests in a lack of self-care and my surroundings get really messy. It feels quite hypocritical doing my job as a care assistant when I'm saying to a patient, "you're on a weight-reducing diet, let's not eat that" – but then here's me eating a whole pack of bourbons...

I was trying to pick up more shifts at the care home, because I thought if I wasn't going to look after myself, I might as well get paid to look after someone else!

I'm really excited for normality to return and just being able to walk down the high street, to see mates and go for a coffee. But I don't want us to come out too quickly, and have to go into lockdown again. I'm worried we might be rushing it.

One thing that would have really helped during lockdown is not feeling you're being left to do it all alone. Teachers have struggled too – their profession has been turned upside down.

But sometimes teachers start the online lesson and say, "ok, we're doing this assignment", then that's it, you're left to your own devices. If that had been a face-to-face lesson, we would have been covering new content.

The other thing that would be really nice is sending a card to students, as a physical reminder, saying "hang in there, we value you, you're worth this education". It's different than getting an email. There's something special about a physical reminder. It would bring us together.





**JONATHAN  
ISAACS**

Policy and Membership  
Services Manager,  
Sixth Form Colleges  
Association

## Mental health needs to be a key part of the government's strategy to help catch up and level up

**The gap between what colleges can provide in terms of mental health support and what students need has never been greater, writes Jonathan Isaacs**

The Covid pandemic has presented colleges and students with a series of unprecedented challenges: lockdown and the shift to mass online learning, developing grades without exams and overseeing a system of mass testing, to name but a few. Even before Covid, many colleges lacked the resources to provide students with the support they needed. We know that more than three quarters of school and college sixth forms (78 per cent) have had to reduce or remove student support services or extra-curricular activities – with significant cuts to mental health support.

In the summer of 2020, SFCA worked with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to assess the impact of lockdown on young people's mental health. The evidence base to date had been mixed – some studies had found severe impacts, but others had found that teenagers' mental health had either suffered less than adults or, in some cases, even improved during the pandemic.

However, the BIT review found that adolescents are at a heightened risk of developing mental health problems compared to other age groups. Social distancing and college closures have resulted in reduced contact time, fewer social opportunities and an increased reliance on technology. Some young people have also been unable to access the mental health support services that were available pre-lockdown. Laura Cain, a mental health first aider and instructor at St Mary's College says the pandemic has severely affected her college. "The lack of social interaction for

both students and staff has been extremely difficult. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health challenges that colleges are facing but the resilience showed by students and staff has been extremely encouraging".

The pandemic has affected students in a variety of ways, from cancelled industry placements to disruption in preparations for university and the workplace. We know that qualification delivery has suffered and students have not been able to access the extra curricular activities or support services in the usual way.

**“There is a discussion to be had around funding for complex needs and mental health generally”**

Returning to colleges will undoubtedly be difficult for both staff and students, but over the past year, colleges have shown their resilience and willingness to provide the best possible education and support for their students under the most difficult of circumstances.

There are numerous intervention methods and organisations that can support colleges during the pandemic. The BIT review suggests that college-based therapy and mindfulness interventions lead to a reduction in depression and anxiety. Apps like Headspace and Calm can provide staff and students with emotional support. Encouraging and developing exercise

programmes and promoting the benefits of a healthy sleeping pattern has also been shown to improve anxiety and depression symptoms.

Sixth form colleges have worked with organisations such as Minds Ahead to provide specialist support and training to senior leadership teams in colleges. Education Support is an organisation that is dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of all college staff. Their website provides various programmes and helpful guidelines for improving staff mental health.

Going forward there is a discussion to be had around funding for complex needs and mental health generally. Colleges and local support services need better financial support. The gap between what colleges can provide in terms of mental health support and what students need has never been greater. Mental health support needs to be a key part of the government's strategy to help catch up and level up as we emerge from the pandemic.



## LOCKDOWN CHALLENGES

# How FE providers are battling a mental health 'tsunami' for staff and students

**FRASER WHIELDON**  
**FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

## Colleges and training providers open up about protecting the mental health of students and staff during the Covid-19 pandemic

Colleges and training providers have employed a range of truly inventive measures to tackle growing mental health issues among staff and students, by focusing on physical activity, introducing online counselling, and ramping up use of existing measures like health advisers.

Supporting organisations such as the Association of Colleges and Amazing Apprenticeships have also been producing resources and putting on events to reinforce providers' efforts.

Here we explore why the pandemic has led sector bodies to boost mental health support services, what this has involved, and whether these measures are here to stay.

### What is causing the sector's mental health issues?

The first thing providers say when asked this was mental health was already a concerning issue in the sector before coronavirus.

Anna Morrison, director of Amazing Apprenticeships, said she had seen through her work with the Beds and Herts Provider Network that mental health challenges to learners "were coming up the agenda, and was something staff were feeling concerned about".

Meanwhile, around three-fifths of Havant and South Downs College (HSDC) students declare a mental health diagnosis each academic year, ranging from anxiety to bipolar disorder, according to the college's sport maker Kirsty Harley.

But the damage to young peoples' mental health has been "magnified" by the pandemic,



Anna Morrison

says Preston's College enrichment officer Zoe Bidula, due to students being cut off from their social groups by lockdown while they have tragically lost family members.

Kay Burton-Williams, designated safeguarding lead for Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet), says the "process of grieving can't happen in the way that it normally does to people," causing a "significant impact" and contributing to a "mental health tsunami".

Bidula gave a poignant insight into her particular stresses: her partner is classified as 'at risk' and at the time of writing, was still awaiting a vaccine.

She spoke of the "anxiety" around "making sure that when I go home, I'm not passing it on to my children or my partner".

Working from home has had a big impact on mental health during the pandemic: staff have come under pressure juggling teaching students while home schooling their own children, and having to come to terms with new technology before they can teach anyone at all.

That has also been a problem for adult learners, who training provider Learning Curve say have felt "overwhelmed due to balancing remote learning and home schooling".

Another issue flagged was how government has been changing and publishing new guidance at near-enough the last minute over and over again, which has further damaged staff's mental health, leaders say. "Oh god, massively," says Hopwood Hall College's head of student support and equality Nimisha Mistry-Miah, when asked if it had affected them.

"The fact that the guidance hasn't been clear, questions haven't been answered swiftly enough.



Nimisha Mistry-Miah

"You can't plan, and even when we do plan, they say 'right well, we're doing a U turn now', and it's literally the day after, so there's so much turbulence."

### What are providers doing about it?

BMet has signed up for online mental health service Togetherall, which Burton-Williams says can be accessed anonymously by staff and students 24/7 using their college email address.

From there, they can access chat groups for people suffering similar problems; for example, bereavement.

Users can also draw how they are feeling without the need to use words, or undertake self-help courses.

It was chosen as it "gave us everything in a really user-friendly platform that is safe, secure, anonymised, and also gives that that community for people to be able to talk about how they're feeling".

Togetherall has "excellent" safeguarding measures in place, Burton-Williams said, so if a student or staff member displays concerning thoughts, the service's clinically experienced staff provide a "clear pathway" for that being referred back to the college.

Hopwood Hall College has been training



# LOCKDOWN CHALLENGES

its staff in becoming trauma-informed, which Mistry-Miah said was because Covid-19, arguably, has become a “new form of trauma”.

The training involves teaching staff how trauma can affect people, and has meant students can disclose problems to a member of staff, without that employee having to be a member of the student support team.

The college has also recently hired a new occupational health adviser, who has found their job focus much removed from that of their predecessor.

While the previous postholder focused on jobs like getting the long-term sick back into work, “the focus is much more about wellbeing this time around,” Mistry-Miah says.

Learning Curve says it has rolled out a “wide range of activities” to counter-act staff feeling isolated and the adversity of home schooling.

They set different working hours to make time for staff to teach their children, and gave them Fridays off to help them avoid the queues at supermarkets.

Employees have also used ‘Workplace from Facebook’, a targeted version of the social network for companies, to keep in touch, join in remote exercise sessions, take part in family competitions, and receive weekly live updates from the chief executive.

For students, the provider has also introduced art courses, delivering packs to learners’ homes and holding the classes online.

The provider has also opened WhatsApp support groups and partnered with local food banks “to make sure we were able to give earners all of the support they needed”.

Amazing Apprenticeships has focused on virtual wellbeing workshops, run with apprentice mental health specialists Gen Healthy Minds and the AELP, and a booklet of support activities contributed by participants in that series.

The five workshops are available online, free of charge, and cover topics such as working from home and mental resilience, over the course of an hour each.

The booklet includes recommendations to reach out to old friends, encouraging apprentices to create time capsules, and suggesting they take a Swedish-style ‘Fika’ coffee and cake break.

Morrison says a “positivity” webinar they held during National Apprenticeship Week was

watched by nearly 1,000 apprentices live, and 1,000 times on catch-up.

“We’ve had such amazing feedback from these webinars,” she added, and providers have told her they “were their lifeline. It made the difference of them being able to cope with a situation.”

During lockdown, AoC Sport has been running exercise challenges for Association of Colleges and Natspec member providers, as “physical activity supports and helps people’s mental health and wellbeing,” says competitions development officer Matthew Hinchley.

The first, Around the World in 30 Days, tasked staff and students with travelling, on foot, 46,975 miles, the equivalent of going around the earth. While the second, the Lunar Challenge, had them aiming for 238,855 miles, roughly equivalent to a one-way trip to the moon.

Their progress has been logged in the exercise app Strava, and there have been spot challenges during the Lunar Challenge, such as collecting litter during participants’ exercises.

That social element can itself help “reduce the isolation” students feel, says Hinchley.

Thousands of people have taken part, with the first challenge being completed in just 11 of its 30 days. The second challenge was completed with weeks to go until the end, and students and staff made it 463,000 miles.

HSDC took part in both challenges, and Kirsty Harley said it made some people “very competitive, which was a positive, though we just wanted people to be active”.

She stressed that staff buy-in was key as

“you could tell when the staff got bored” because it hit student uptake.

Yet it ended up being mainly staff who took part, as Harley says: “I think they just realised how important it was to take them out of their day, to just go and do something that wasn’t in front of the screen.”

One person whose buy-in has been “really good” has been the principal Mike Gaston, who has been logging his efforts on the app and supporting others by giving them ‘kudos’ – Strava’s equivalent of the Facebook or Twitter like.

## “The focus is much more about wellbeing this time around”

### Will the issues persist after the pandemic?

As the UK climbs out of coronavirus measures, providers say they will need to stay the course on mental health support.

“You don’t suddenly flick a switch back to feeling normal,” Burton-Williams explained. “This will actually have a long-lasting impact on people’s mental health wellbeing, how they approach their lives, how they feel.”

Learning Curve implied its support measures would continue after the pandemic, with their spokesperson saying: “We feel we are in a really strong position to continue to support our staff and learners even better as we come out of the pandemic.”

Harley expects her college will have to increase their support once students return, as “the long-term effects of what we’ve been through in the last year is going to really affect some students going forward”.

She said current students have said they are “scared” about how safe returning will be, and current year 11 students looking to enter college will also need support.

So, it looks as though providers will have to soldier on supporting staff and students, as they always do.





**RICHARD  
RIGBY**

Head of policy  
and public affairs,  
The Prince's Trust

# The pressure on post-16 education to support mental health is greater than ever

**The FE sector often picks up learners who find themselves at rock bottom after secondary school, writes Richard Rigby**

The turbulence of adolescence is often brushed under the carpet as simply an “awkward” age. Rarely do we fully understand the extent of its potential impact on young people’s mental wellbeing and future prospects.

Josh left school at the age of 15 with no qualifications. When he came to The Prince’s Trust aged 16 he was very isolated and becoming reclusive, struggling to make eye contact or communicate with anyone. This experience is all too familiar for those who reach the end of secondary school feeling worse about themselves and their future than when they started.

Recent research from The Prince’s Trust and the Education Policy Institute analysed over 5,000 individuals in England born in the year 2000, and measured their mental and emotional health at ages 11 and 14, and again at 17.

Sadly, the research shows that on average young people’s wellbeing and self-belief fall through this period of education, while psychological distress rises.

Therefore, the task often falls to those working in post-16 education to support young people like Josh - to pick them up from rock bottom, and help them discover a renewed sense of purpose and positive direction for their future.

Although this has long been the case, it has been exacerbated by Covid-19 which has brought with it lost learning, social isolation, and bleaker employment prospects.

This year’s Prince’s Trust Tesco Youth Index revealed that half of 16- to 25-year-olds say their mental health has deteriorated since the start of the pandemic.

Now 41 per cent of 16- to 17-year olds say they have needed more support with their mental health since the pandemic began.

This all means that the pressure on post-16 education to support learners’ mental health and wellbeing will be greater than ever.



The government is aware of this. Earlier this month, it announced plans to increase the number of mental health support teams in schools and colleges from 59 to 400 by April 2023. Access to community mental health services will also be expanded.

**“We need more courses, run by more staff”**

But as much as we need more specialist mental health practitioners, we also need more courses to engage those who need help – run by more staff, who are given more time to provide dedicated support.

Following the financial crash of 2008, youth unemployment went through the roof, and so did demand for The Prince’s Trust’s most intensive personal development programme, Team.

Forty per cent of further education colleges in England use the programme to support 16- to 25-year-olds to build their confidence, employability, and teamwork skills, whilst gaining a nationally recognised qualification.

With unemployment now set to peak towards the end of 2021 and remain high throughout 2022, we envisage that demand for programmes like Team will also soar.

We know that the support of programmes like Team can be life-changing for young people, with three-quarters of those who participate in Team going on to other college courses or into employment.

But with more than half of the young people who take part now self-reporting a mental health problem – up from one-quarter only six years ago – we cannot underestimate the intense support that will be required.

Government funding will need to keep pace with the costs of providing a quality experience to young people facing a variety of mental health problems, from anxiety to depression.

Although the Treasury has promised to protect 16 to 19 funding, the sense from many of our partners is that it will need to go further at this year’s spending review.

As for Josh, he now has his very first qualification and has his sights set on an apprenticeship.

According to this year’s Youth Index, 78 per cent of young people are hopeful for a better year ahead.

But further action is required to make this a reality.





**SINÉAD  
MC BREARTY**

Chief executive  
officer, Education  
Support

# College staff should get a standardised, professional form of psychological support

**Educators do a significant amount of emotional work that is not always understood by wider society, writes Sinéad Mc Brearty**

Our charity was set up by teachers, for teachers. It's our belief that better wellbeing and mental health for staff results in much better teaching and learning. This shouldn't be a controversial idea, but it seems the case still needs to be made today – 144 years after we were first set up.

There's a huge amount of emotional work going on in colleges, and this needs better recognition. Staff do a lot of caring work with young people. It's significant, but not well understood in wider society.

During the pandemic, the psychological burden of that work has been greater for some than others. Over time, this can become damaging. Our research shows a concerning peak of stress among education leaders. They've had to deal with changing guidance and struggling staff and students. Just managing all the uncertainty is really demanding.

We work on three levels: the individual, the workplace and the wider policy environment.

For individual members of staff, we have a 24/7 helpline (see below), staffed by accredited counsellors. It is free and independent. About 15,000 educators use that line every year, and seven per cent of calls are from those clinically assessed as at risk of suicide. So this work is vital, and can be lifesaving. But it's also there for people who are feeling out of sorts and not quite themselves – not only those in crisis. Sometimes it can be really helpful to have a conversation with someone separate from the rest of your life.

Education staff can also apply to us for a small grant if they're in financial difficulty. We've had applications from teachers sleeping in their cars because they've become

homeless. Supply teachers came to us in great numbers in the first lockdown, because of uncertainties around furlough. We also provide digital resources for teachers and line managers, around issues like anxiety and bereavement.

That takes us to the second strand of our work. This involves us supporting colleges and schools to really listen to and understand their staff. Colleges can use our employee assistance programme to refer staff for counselling and general support.

We also run programmes for school leaders and want to expand this to college principals too. We provide reflective spaces for leaders to come together and look at how they're operating, and whether they're holding on to a large amount of stress. Leaders can speak openly in a peer group or in an individual supervision session. The college community is close knit, so we're thinking through the confidentiality and anonymity issues for the peer model. We're working with the Association of Colleges, the Education and Training Foundation, and Sixth Form Colleges Association to understand what would be most beneficial.

Finally, we use our research to advocate for policy change. I would pick three key priorities for policymakers. The first is retention: really talented educators are

leaving the system because they are burnt out. Many educators are also about to enter a period of providing extra support to students as everyone looks to recover from Covid. They've been doing that in a time of insufficient resources, when continuous professional development has particularly suffered. So the government must give college principals more funding so they can support their staff adequately.

**“We’ve seen a concerning peak of stress among education leaders”**

Secondly, educators need to feel properly trusted. People in this sector are so committed and passionate about what they do. Our FE lecturers in particular can be overlooked. They can be left with the feeling that they're not trusted and there's always another inspection, observation or new policy. They need to feel more trusted to make their own professional judgments.

Finally, we should standardise emotional and psychological support for educators. A routine part of the job is dealing with things that can be emotionally difficult to process. We need a consistent, standardised, professional form of support available to all. They do deeply important work. This is support they are entitled to.

**Education Support's 24/7  
helpline is 08000 562 561**

**To apply for financial support  
visit [www.educationsupport.org.uk/helping-you/apply-grant](http://www.educationsupport.org.uk/helping-you/apply-grant)**



# Government should measure impact of policies on mental health, says report

**FRASER WHIELDON**  
**FRASER@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

FE leaders have called on government to measure the impact of their policies on the mental health of staff and students and for an early warning system focused on apprentices' wellbeing.

These recommendations have been made in a new report by the Campaign for Learning, part of the NCFE charity group, titled 'Understanding and Overcoming a Mental Health Crisis in 2021'.

The report focuses on the mental health of post-16 students and staff through essays and proposals from multiple further and higher education representative bodies, think tanks and business organisations.

Association of Colleges chief executive David Hughes, in his essay, reported a growing number of college leaders asking: "How do we support our current students return to college and how do we help students transition into college in September 2021?"

Anna Morrison, director of Amazing Apprenticeships, later writes the mental health crisis in the skills sector is "both apparent and concerning".

A recent AoC survey found 83 per cent of colleges had seen mental health referrals increase in September 2020, compared to September 2019.

And 94 per cent of colleges reported they had had to deal with attempted suicides in the twelve months before the survey.

In order to head off problems in transitioning learners to college, providers have run summer programmes for those "who may need more support in the move from their previous setting," which Hughes hopes "can be re-introduced this summer".

"Colleges are rising to the challenge, but we need decision makers to do so as well," he concludes.

He recommends the government introduce "a national fund to support the transition and retention of 16-year-old students into colleges in September 2021",

and that the government should measure the impact of their policies on the mental health of staff and students, and for colleges to sign the AoC's mental health charter.

Morrison said that on top of concerns about their finances, social interaction, and of passing the virus on to family, apprentices also had specific concerns, including meeting their off-the-job-training requirement, whether their training provider and employer would survive the pandemic, and how their assessments will be completed.

She called for "extra investment" to prevent mental health issues rising among apprentices, which should be spent on "equipping those who support apprentices with skills to identify early signs and build programmes with wellbeing at their core".

This should be in addition to making "enhanced" face-to-face mental health support, including peer-to-peer, available for apprentices. And for "clearer signposting" to mental health services "with equitable access for all apprentices of every age".

Their points are reinforced in NCG chief executive Liz Bromley's essay, where she writes the "disappearance" of classroom teaching, social interaction, access to equipment, and part-time retail and hospitality jobs had damaged learners' mental health.

"These pressures," on top of exam and

employment worries, would "compromise the mental health and fitness of the most resilient students".

Among her recommendations is one for mental health and wellbeing "to sit at the top of the FE agenda," with colleges having "properly resourced" support services and monitoring "the impact of poor mental health on progression and attainment".

The report also includes recommendations for staff, with Jenny Sherrard from the University and College Union writing the pandemic has "greatly exacerbated many of the long-standing structural pressures which put a strain on the mental health of those working in post-16 education".

A UCU survey of 10,000 members from December found 82 per cent believe increased workload had negatively impacted their mental wellbeing to varying degrees.

Her recommendations include employers "moving beyond sticking plaster interventions and getting to grips with these major structural causes of stress and anxiety amongst staff.

"Top of the agenda is addressing excessive workloads and ending insecure employment."

Lifelong learning is promoted in the report by Fiona Aldridge, director of policy for the Learning and Work Institute, who says it can "provide young people and adults with opportunities to develop skills and gain qualifications to help them progress out of

poor quality, low paid work," which can improve their mental health.

General secretary of the Workers Educational Association Simon Parkinson calls in the report for a pilot of "referral programmes," after WEA's Impact Report found its students "visit their GP far less frequently than the national average".

The association also wants to see a national directory of "social prescribing options," including adult education courses, so patients can be referred to options which meet their needs.





# ‘We live in perpetual crisis in FE and the intensity of leadership is increasing’

**BILLY CAMDEN**  
**BILLY@FEWEEK.CO.UK**

**FE Week speaks with East Coast College principal Stuart Rimmer, who is also chair of the Association of Colleges mental health portfolio group, to find out the challenges of FE leadership that impact wellbeing**

Stuart Rimmer recently authored a report for the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) called “voices from the tight rope” in which he surveyed 82 college principals and chief executives.

He found that 45 per cent experienced distress three to five times per week, with an additional 10 per cent suggesting the occurrences were over five times.

So why is this happening?

“We live in perpetual crisis in FE and therefore the intensity of leadership is increasing,” the East Coast College principal tells me.

“There are lots of reasons for that but we are starting to get a lot more direct conflicting things to manage as a principal and chief executive now.

“There is college finance versus quality or the constant change of policy and regulation and threat of sanction combined with public perception as well as huge workloads which are not manageable in normal working hours. All of that comes through very strongly and what that leads to is just an amplification of pressure.”

And while these pressures existed before Covid-19, the pandemic has only exacerbated distress levels.

“The biggest challenge for me is around remote leadership,” Rimmer says.

“In FE one of the joys of it is that it is a very personal endeavour. It is very upfront and close and actually what it means is leaders have suddenly had to work with levels of autonomy that they have not been prepared for. Or work



in ways that are less engaging in some respects.

“I also think the pressure at a time of crisis requires you to do a good job - it is not optional to do a good job.

“We find the external pressure of the requirements of extra needs of students who are in acute needs, and let’s face it is about the students, and our staff are finding themselves in higher pressure scenarios as well.”

He explains that leaders are emotionally and cognitively restricted right now because their “worlds become a smaller place, we are operating from bedrooms, and then there is the physical restriction as we’re not allowed to be onsite and close to people at the moment.

“That means the world has got really small and quite intense.”

One aspect of the pandemic that certainly hasn’t helped leaders is the constantly late and ever-changing guidance from the government on how they can and cannot operate.

But while this issue has added to leaders’ distress, Rimmer says it has proven their “resilience and bravery”.

“The reason I bring that into the question you ask is that we are like boxers who keep getting hit in the face repeatedly over months and months, we just keep getting up.

“There is a cost

to doing that resilience and I think lots of people are experiencing personal cost.

“The bravery is that whilst people who develop policy have actually showed some pretty poor leadership through the crisis, the bravest of leaders just keep sailing their own ships.”

But as in almost all businesses, any distress felt at leadership level can inevitably filter down throughout the company. This is no different for colleges and FE providers.

“Distress doesn’t happen in isolation,” Rimmer says. “We have to recognise that all staff in the FE sector have done just a stunningly good job of responding in their own ways.

“I think we need to do a lot more research around understanding distress at all levels of college staff life.

“We have to do a lot more training in how to manage distress.

“I would also like to see safe support networks put in place for senior leaders so they have got an outlet to help manage their distress.”

Rimmer’s biggest ask for policy makers is for them to impact assess wellbeing for any policy they put through.

“They should just see if the policy, before it is put through, if it will have an unintended consequence and negatively effect staff working in colleges and if it does, they shouldn’t do it or at least implement it with eyes wide open.”



Stuart Rimmer



**PAUL  
JOYCE**

Deputy Director  
of FE and Skills,  
Ofsted

# Let's hope that 'less trying circumstances' are here to stay

**During Ofsted's interim visits, many of the leaders we spoke to raised the issue of mental health, writes Paul Joyce**

The past twelve months have been an exceptionally tough time for everybody connected to further education and skills, from teachers and trainers to students and apprentices. Not having that social contact and the reliable structure of in-person learning can be really challenging.

Throughout the autumn term, Ofsted carried out interim visits to FE providers to see how they were coping with the unique demands posed by the pandemic. These visits did not lead to judgements and we weren't trying to catch anybody out. What we wanted to do was to find out what was working in the FE world, and where there were further learning opportunities. We collated our findings and produced reports based on what our inspectors were told. During our visits, many of the leaders we spoke to raised the issue of mental health; it's clear they were acutely aware of the potential impact of lockdown on their students and wanted to consider how they could provide appropriate support.

Isolation from friends and peers can be really difficult, as can the lack of structure that on-site learning provides. Even where providers were able to offer on-site learning at various points through the year, we were told that some learners, particularly those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), were worried about using public transport to commute.

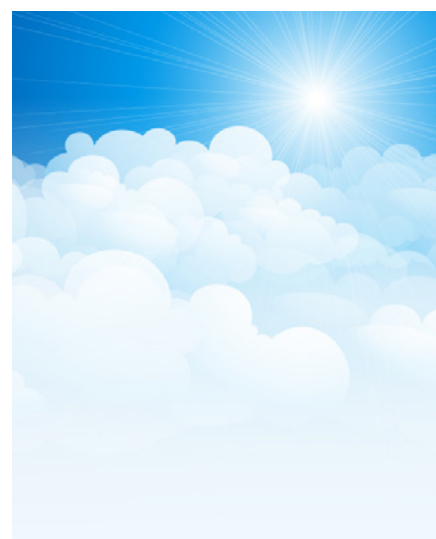
We also know that remote learning, although generally well carried out, has been more successful for some than others, and this has caused frustration. Learners enrolled on more practical courses experienced frustration at the prospect of online learning – many had selected

these courses explicitly because they were practical. We heard that deaf learners reported that following lessons on a screen could become tiring, and that they often missed visual cues. Learners with SEND sometimes struggled not only with access to lessons, but also with access to the additional support services that they could usually rely on.

Our inspectors were told how providers had responded to the challenges faced by their learners. In some instances, there was a renewed emphasis on supporting learners' emotional resilience, as well as hiring additional counsellors and support staff. We also saw providers enhance parental engagement (where appropriate), increase communication and use virtual tours to build confidence in their Covid-19 safety measures.

## **“There was a renewed emphasis on supporting learners' emotional resilience”**

It's worth bearing in mind that many of these challenges are situational and, with the vaccine roll-out being so successful, there is cause for optimism. Providers are now reopening and learners are being reunited with peers and returning to the familiar structure of education. For many people who have struggled under lockdown restrictions, the return to normality should be enough to brighten their outlook. A high-quality learning experience, with all of the engagement, contact and routine that comes



with it is a vital route to learner wellbeing.

However, we must acknowledge that a small number of learners will have seen their mental health deteriorate more seriously. There are concerns about a rise in reports of eating disorders and self-harm and, in the most severe cases, suicidal thoughts, according to England's Mental Health of Children and Young People Survey.

In our wider role, we have often stressed the link between the education and social care sectors. We noted that school and college closures led to a dramatic fall in the number of children being referred to social care, because teachers are often the people who spot when something is wrong at home. The same is true of serious mental health issues and the link into appropriate health services. Teachers and trainers know their learners; recognising the signs of someone in distress can be so important. But we can't expect teachers to diagnose or treat mental illnesses. What matters the most for providers is that the structure is in place to make the right referrals, at the right time, to the right services.

Let's hope that 'less trying circumstances' are here to stay.



# Natasha Devon

Mental health and body image campaigner



## Stop telling young people to have 'resilience' and start fixing the system

**The government needs to fund mental health support services properly instead of promoting coping mechanisms, writes Natasha Devon**

"Resilience". If you've been anywhere near any kind of educational environment during the past five years it's a term you will have encountered in relation to mental health and wellbeing. The problem is we don't have an agreed definition.

There is, in my experience, a huge discrepancy in the way people use the term "resilience". Old school trads tend to use it interchangeably with "stiff upper lip", as though resilience to emotional or mental distress is an attitude we can choose to switch on.

New-to-mental-health evangelicals will frame resilience as a "toolkit", as though if we can only teach young people some breathing exercises and how to do mindfulness it will negate any and every potential wellbeing issue.

And then there's the rest of us – those who understand that resilience has relatively little to do with the individual and everything to do with their environment and circumstances.

The definition of resilience according to psychologists is "the number of meaningful connections a person has in their life". I would describe it more broadly as "the support a person has available to them".

It encompasses everything from having a strong sense of belonging, a place where they feel safe, a person they can discuss difficulties with and expedient access to appropriate therapeutic services in the event mental health



issues arise.

It's that last element which is so often (and so ironically) absent from discussions about young people's mental health, particularly at government level.

In 2015, when I was briefly the government's mental health champion for young people (I lasted nine months before being fired for being publicly critical of education and austerity policies), "resilience" measures in schools and colleges happened concurrently with £80 million cuts to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and £700 million cuts to the early intervention grant.

Earlier this year, it was announced that former Love Island contestant Dr Alex George will be the government's Youth Mental Health Ambassador, as well as £7 million into a "whole school approach" to mental health.

No one seems to be entirely sure what this

£7 million will buy, but there are concerns it will be used to train school staff (no mention of colleges, as per usual) in spotting symptoms of poor mental health and signposting to further support. Which is, of course, only valuable if there is further support to signpost to.

Half of all mental illness manifests in symptoms by the age of 14 and three quarters by the age of 21, with the transition to higher education frequently cited as a vulnerability point.

Those statistics were true even before the horrific year many university students have endured as they have been effectively locked down in campus accommodation attempting to do all their learning via a laptop.

Meanwhile accessibility issues continue in adult mental health services, which kick in at the age of 18.

Only 6.7 per cent of mental health spending is dedicated to young people, meaning 75 per cent of them are forced to wait so long for treatment that their condition gets worse or they get no help at all.

Yet this isn't just about health funding. Because resilience is also about communities.

It's about having parents who aren't knackered from working unmanageable hours, teachers and lecturers with the time and autonomy to treat you like the complex, three-dimensional human you are and community spaces like libraries and sports clubs available to access for all.

**Building resilience in young people takes a whole-society effort and would require radical change of policy**



Mental health is also linked strongly with racial, religious, gender and disability-based discrimination which, given as I write the government is putting through a bill which could effectively ensure people are given a longer prison sentence for defacing a statue than for rape, doesn't appear to be top of their priority list.

In short, building resilience in young people takes a whole-society effort and would require a radical change of policy.

It's time to stop trying to give young people coping tools for a fundamentally broken world and turn our attention to fixing it.

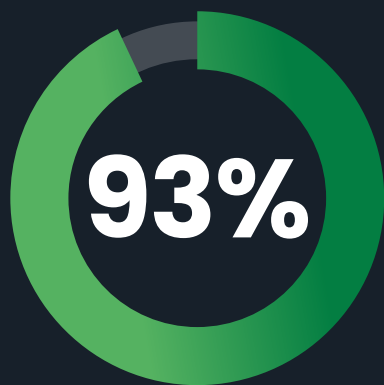
# Transform your students' mental fitness in just 5 minutes a day

NCFE has teamed up with Fika to bring you an innovative mental fitness app, created by expert performance psychologists.

Proven to reduce stress and improve outcomes, the platform is the first of its kind and we're offering **one year free usage** to a limited number of further education providers.

## Why choose Fika?

-  Support your Ofsted performance
-  Improve study outcomes
-  Enhance your students' experience
-  Increase the employability of your students
-  Improve students' resilience
-  Boost your students' confidence



of users said that  
**Fika has a positive impact**  
on their educational life

## Get involved!

If you'd like to find out more about how you can improve the mental fitness of your students for free, visit our website or get in touch with our team.



[ncfe.org.uk/fika](https://ncfe.org.uk/fika)



[fika@ncfe.org.uk](mailto:fika@ncfe.org.uk)