



## SAPHNA's Response to Labour's Review of Mental Health led by Luciana Berger

SAPHNA is a non-affiliated professional organisation and charity that promotes excellence in practice in school nursing. We have a shared passion for improving the health and well-being of children and young people.

### Introduction

The School and Public Health Nurses Association is pleased to provide a submission to this important inquiry being led by our Vice President, Luciana Berger, on behalf of the Labour Party. Our response focuses on the better use of qualified school nurses and their skilled mixed teams to improve outcomes for children and young people's mental health.

NHS England reported that 1 in 5 children and young people had a probable mental disorder in 2023 which is a continuing trend in the increase in prevalence since 2017. The impact of which places unprecedented pressure on children's mental health services<sup>1</sup>. Half of mental health problems start before the age of 14, 75% before the age of 25<sup>2</sup>. Children in their responses to the 'Big Ask' survey in 2023 expressed that they are worried about their mental health because of the impact on their happiness, and how it will affect their education and job aspirations. They articulated that they wanted help at an early stage, within and around school<sup>4</sup>.

Poor mental health is both a contributor to, and a consequence of, wider inequalities. Some groups of children having significantly worse outcomes linked, for example, to gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, being a child in care or being in the youth justice system<sup>5</sup>. Mental health remains the top reason that young people contact school nursing services, seeking support about relationships & family issues, anxiety or panic attacks and depression or low mood<sup>6</sup>.

Mental health is a key public health priority and yet an independent review highlighted missed opportunities to significantly ease pressure on the system by increasing the availability of preventative and early intervention support<sup>7</sup>. Prevention has benefits to both individuals and the wider systems, reducing demand on specialist mental health services, improving educational outcomes, productivity at work, and reducing crime. However, this requires investment and action to promote well-being in children and young people<sup>8</sup>.

Within the Labour's Child Health plan is the priority to end the crisis in child mental health by cutting waiting lists for mental health services, increasing the workforce and delivering an open access to mental health hub in every community<sup>9</sup>.

### School Nurses role in prevention, promotion and early intervention

School Nurses lead the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme 5-19 (25), which provides the evidence base to deliver this agenda. The programme is universal in reach and personalised in response, focusing on the delivery of public health interventions. School nurses, as specialist community public health nurses (SCPHN) who are well placed to improve health outcomes and tackle health inequalities taking a population-based approach. They are the only health professional who provides universal and holistic health interventions to children and young people through their school-aged years, in schools and other settings, and extending into communities, working with parents/carers and partner agencies. This reach enables school nurses to support those more vulnerable children and young people who may be 'not in' or missing education or absent from school.



Their position offers opportunity to build trusting relationships, an essential springboard on which to build therapeutic interventions<sup>8</sup>.

Where appropriately resourced, school nurses can and do positively impact the mental health outcomes for children and young people. School nurses use whole-school approaches to promote mental wellbeing and resilience and prevent mental ill health. They use their clinical judgement and public health expertise to identify risks and needs early and provide early intervention to prevent problems escalating. Utilising the school nursing skills provides return on investment, including cost effectiveness and maximising the benefits for parents, children and young people<sup>8</sup>.

The SAPHNA Vision provides examples about how school nurses provide support [SAPHNA Vision for School Nursing | SAPHNA – School And Public Health Nurses Association](#). These include:

- A programme working with young women transitioning into adulthood, encouraging healthy lifestyle choices with outcomes of improving self esteem and confidence.
- Partnership with education to build resilience skills with the outcome of reducing referrals to targeted and specialist services.
- Use of E-Clinics to improve timely access to emotional health support and preventing escalation of mental health problems.
- Use of electronic health needs assessment to identify problems early, offer an intervention and prevent escalation of issues which might require specialist provision.

Other examples of how the unique contribution that school nurses can make to improving the mental health of children and young people are articulated in ‘stories of school nursing’ which demonstrate the vast range of work, using their specialist skills and expertise to find solutions to health and wellbeing challenges<sup>10</sup>.

#### [Challenges and Barriers to school nursing fulfilling their potential.](#)

Whilst the crucial role that school nurses can play is recognised, the Public Health Grant has seen significant cuts to these very services. The disinvestment in school nurses over the past decade, losing circa 35% of this vital workforce, has resulted in reduced capacity, a postcode lottery of provision and delivery of the HCP 5-19 programme compromised<sup>7</sup>. These reductions coincide, post pandemic with increasing demands for the services. A recent practitioner survey (unpublished) undertaken by SAPHNA shows that school nurses are increasingly been taken away from their public health role to support children and young people on child protection plans, on many incidences their involvement is not appropriate or beneficial to improving outcomes for those children.

#### [Recommendation:](#)

- **GOLD:** A school nurse for every school (supported by a skill mixed team). Public Policy Research report suggested that recruiting 11,500 additional school nurses would involve training costs of £805m and a wage cost of £445m. This investment would support a full delivery of the health child programme, led by school nurses and specifically the [School-aged years high impact area 1: Supporting resilience and wellbeing - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#). For every £1 invested in public health there is a minimum £14 return on investment, through brief interventions and early help, significantly easing the burden on primary, acute and specialist health services, to say nothing of the moral duty to our children.



- **SILVER:** Robust pathways to improve use of resources, remove duplication and improve collaborative working between school nursing, MHST's and CAMHS to ensure that no child falls between gaps in services and has appropriate, timely access to the right support. This would require an re-investment in school nurses to build capacity to deliver. *We have had various programme Targeted Mental Health in Schools (2008-11) and more recently Mental Health Support Teams in School* which have failed to 'join up' and make effective use of existing provision, instead have 'added' in new roles or provision and left gaps. Both TaMHS and MHST's created 2 tier approaches, introducing implementation of programmes in waves over a long period of time which did not (or have not) come to fruition and extended to all areas.
- **BRONZE:** Clearer guidance to schools and wider partners about the role of the school nurse, emphasising how their expertise in public health and population approaches can support promotion, prevention and early intervention as part of whole school approaches. This would require an re-investment in school nurses to build capacity to deliver and respond to the raised expectations.

Please direct any enquiries to Sharon White OBE, CEO SAPHNA, [Sharon@saphna.co](mailto:Sharon@saphna.co)

#### References

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