

Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy – Colleges Scotland

Comments - September 2022

Introduction

Colleges Scotland is the collective voice for the college sector in Scotland, representing its interests and ensuring that colleges are at the heart of a world class education sector that is recognised, valued and available to all. Colleges Scotland, as the membership body, represents all 26 colleges in Scotland, which deliver both further education and around 24% of the provision of all higher education in Scotland.

In this capacity, Colleges Scotland has held membership of both the Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group and the Equity Short Life Working Group as convened by the Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council respectively. This has involved working with Jon Vincent, Principal, Glasgow Clyde College and the Lead Principal for Mental Health on behalf of the College Principals' Group to articulate the college sector view around both strategic and practical elements of Scottish Government policy in relation to student mental health and wellbeing.

On behalf of the college sector in Scotland we welcome the opportunity to provide our views regarding the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to the Scottish Government and around what a new mental health and wellbeing strategy for Scotland should look like.

Overview of Current College Sector Context

In the 2018 Programme for Government (PfG) the Scottish Government committed to “providing more than 80 additional counsellors in Further and Higher Education over the next four years”, with an investment of around £20 million, with this funding commencing from Academic Year 2019/20 onwards. The purpose and principles behind this commitment have not changed since the original announcement.

Colleges are now working towards a financial cliff-edge situation, given the lack of certainty at this stage around whether there will be continued funding for counsellors beyond the end of Academic Year 2022-23. This also creates ethical risks for institutions in recruiting counsellors for one academic year, only for the services to be withdrawn in the following academic year if further funding is not guaranteed or brought into mainstream provision.

As a result of the investment in this space to date, as well as the further investment from the Scottish Government in the form of student association funding, there will be raised expectations from learners across colleges around the levels of mental health support available to them.

The college sector will also be launching the findings of the Thriving Learners Research Survey in partnership with the Mental Health Foundation in the Autumn, with initial findings providing stark evidence of the challenges facing students in this context and the continued need for services.

Key Comments

Role of Language

We are supportive of the vision of the Strategy of “*Better Mental Health and Wellbeing for all*” in addition to the four key areas of focus as identified in the Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan, as well as the definitions and intended outcomes as proposed within the document.

To complement these areas of focus, we would recommend that a fifth key area is added to the document around *Ensuring consistency of distinction between mental health and mental illness*.

The role of language around mental health is crucial, as is the need to ensure distinction between mental health and mental illness to ensure that audiences, including college students and staff, understand the different ways in which mental health challenges and mental illnesses and injuries can present in real world environments. Our view is that mental illnesses and injuries should be raised to a similar platform as physical illness and injuries to underpin this difference.

If this language can be employed and understood, this could bring about a require culture change around approaches to supporting mental health and wellbeing, including in colleges. This distinction would also provide a strong foundation to underpin the delivery of the other four key areas of focus.

Role of Scottish Government Directorates and Cross Portfolio Working

As an overarching comment we would strongly urge the need for joined up working across Scottish Government Portfolios to ensure that the ongoing development of the Student Mental Health Action Plan is informed by the development of the revised Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

In light of the lack of progress made to date in taking forward the development of the Student Mental Health Action Plan since the initial announcement of the Programme for Government in September 2021, we now wish to make clear our expectations of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and those key areas that we jointly believe must be included by the Scottish Government.

If these expectations are agreed as actions from the Strategy and delivered, then there will be significant strides made towards better mental health and wellbeing for all across Scotland’s colleges.

We would expect these expectations and key areas to be reflected in the Student Mental Health Action Plan as this is drafted ahead of a Spring 2023 publication date and for the development of the revised Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to be informing this process, with the Mental Health Directorate within the Scottish Government actively engaging with the Advanced Learning and Science Directorate to ensure consistency of approach across Directorates and Ministerial Portfolios.

On this basis, the following comments offer our views on how the vision and associated key focus areas can best be delivered in the college sector across Scotland.

Creating the Conditions for Good Mental Health and Wellbeing

The view of mental health professionals working across the college sector is that in order to create the conditions for good mental health and wellbeing in colleges there has to be a clear designation of the role of colleges and college staff in creating and maintaining these conditions.

Presently, colleges as tertiary education bodies are able to provide spaces for students in distress and create conditions to support good mental health and wellbeing, but there is a limit in terms of

their capacity to support individuals experiencing mental illness and injury, given their levels of resourcing and staffing in comparison to statutory services.

In order for colleges to maintain a focus on creating conditions for good mental health and wellbeing, there must be a clearly articulated and agreed system in which those individuals can be referred to statutory services where required and where the respective roles of colleges and statutory services in supporting individuals are recognisable to all.

This system has to be underpinned by clear communication channels and service pathways between colleges, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and adult services, to ensure all learners are identified and supported at an early stage through periods of mental illness and injury.

Such a system would also ensure that colleges are fully aware of those learners entering college education who have previously presented with mental illness and injury and can tailor their support to create the conditions for good mental health and wellbeing, and in doing so facilitate the successful progression and completion of learning.

Access to Advice and Support for Mental Wellbeing

Equity of Access to Sufficient Mental Health Services Across Colleges and Universities

In light of the current position, wherein equity of access has not been delivered across colleges and universities, we would expect the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to recommit the Scottish Government to realising this ambition in practice, to ensure every learner regardless of their entry point into the tertiary education system receives the same quality of service.

We must recognise, also, that demand for those services has increased significantly during the pandemic from what was already a high level. Colleges regularly cite a doubling of demand over this period, rising of course from an already high level. Responding to this demand is vital for the students concerned.

It is also a strategic public health and health services concern with support for colleges offering a vital and more efficient route to addressing need for many individuals than for them to rely solely on NHS provision, often accessing that only when their circumstances have worsened.

Embedded Co-Operation Between Colleges and NHS Mental Health Services

Whilst college provision can address mental health needs early and minimise the need for referral for many, referral is often necessary, and it is important to make this as effective as possible. Insight shared from frontline practitioners and staff has evidenced that there is clear need, through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, to co-ordinate more sustained and systematic referral pathways and connections between college services and those intensive support services available through the NHS. This would both enhance institutional services whilst preventing a backlog within NHS services.

We would expect the Scottish Government, through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, to underpin an agreement on streamlined referral pathways and co-operation partnerships for students, as recommended in the Thriving Learners Study in November 2021. This should be established through a creative and action-orientated dialogue with all health boards.

Improving Services

In terms of improving the types and availability of mental health and wellbeing support in the college sector, we would suggest that there should an improvement in the diversity of services

available to both students and staff, in order to complement the core counselling support that has been in place across colleges.

In December 2020, Colleges Scotland submitted a funding proposal to the Scottish Government for increased investment in a range of mental health services. This was accepted, with £4.4m of additional funding being provided as a result of Covid-19 consequentials received from the Scottish Government by the UK Government.

This funding enabled the delivery of services for Peer-to-Peer Student Support, Nightline Support and the provision of Mental Health Mentors and Co-ordinators but was discontinued for Academic Year 2022/23. Reintroducing funding for these early intervention services would go a long way to delivering better mental health for college students and staff, reducing the risk of individuals reaching crisis points, whilst improving the types and availability of support and services to these groups.

Simultaneously, the re-introduction of these services would maximise the capacity of existing counselling services to support those students presenting with mental illness and mental injury and who require significant intervention.

Funding

If the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy is to be successfully implemented in the college sector, there must be long-term sustainable and flexible funding for Mental Health Services in colleges. As previously raised with Scottish Government and Scottish Funding Council representatives, any revised Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy must be underpinned by a long-term sustainable and flexible funding model for mental health services across tertiary education, to meet the requirements of learner's post-pandemic, and to ensure institutions have appropriate capacity to realise the ambitions of the plan in practice.

We would expect a revised Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy to be underpinned by long-term sustainable resource commitments from the Scottish Government. Funding over a planning horizon of 3 to 5 years is important so that services that rely strongly on individual professionals can be sustained and to also enable institutions to be able to plan their provision of services for students and staff in line with academic year planning cycles.

Immediate Actions for the Scottish Government

For colleges across Scotland to be able to realise the delivery of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in practice, there must be clear direction from the Scottish Government and from Ministers around what future mental health support will look like for the college sector in terms of resource and service.

The starting point for this is the confirmation of funding for Academic Year 2022/23 and clarity that Scottish Government will provide the financial support to enable colleges to deliver the provision of counselling services for the Scottish Government, realising the ambitions of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy in practice.

We would also strongly advise the Scottish Government that the development of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy should be informed by the learner voice. Colleges Scotland, working closely with the Mental Health Foundation, convened a Learner Advisory Group, composed of representatives from student associations from across the college sector. We would be happy to make connections to this group to allow for these students to provide their views regarding the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Conclusion

Colleges across Scotland have been, and will continue to be, supporters of good mental health and wellbeing for both their students and staff and will be supportive of the ambitions outlined in the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. But for colleges to be able to deliver against these ambitions in practice, there must be a clear commitment from the Scottish Government to ensure resource is in place.

More broadly, there must be a clear connection between the themes taken forward through the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the ongoing work to develop a Student Mental Health Action Plan to give clarity to institutions and sector stakeholders around expectations of future service delivery for the benefit of better mental health and wellbeing for all in the college sector.

We would welcome the opportunity to engage with the Mental Health Directorate within the Scottish Government, working through the Advanced Learning and Science Directorate, to inform the development of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, and to enable the Scottish Government to hear directly from student and staff representatives.

Colleges Scotland
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