Department for Education

Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Notes of Taskforce meeting held remotely via MS Teams on 18 December 2025 (14:00 – 15:30).

Chair

Higher Education Student Support Champion, Prof. Sir Steve West.

Members Present

- Suzy Allinson – Senior Regulation Manager, Office for Students (OfS)
- Hannah Atkins, deputising for Angela Halston – Independent HE (IHE)
- Nic Beech – representing Universities UK (UUK)
- John Bloomfield – Executive Director, AMOSSHE
- Suzanne Carrie – Head of Student Equality and Welfare, Office for Students (OfS)
- Prathiba Chitsabesan – National Clinical Director for Children and Young People's Mental Health, NHS England
- Ben Elger – Chief Executive - The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)
- Peter Fonagy – National Clinical Advisor for Children and Young People's Mental Health, NHS England
- Lee Fryatt – Co-founder, The LEARN Network
- Ellen Graves, deputising for Dr Kate Wicklow – GuildHE
- Jane Harris – Chair, Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Expert Group (MWBHE)
- Jen Hope – Area Director (East Midlands) and Senior Policy Lead (Mental Health), Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Peter Mayhew Smith – Group Principal and CEO, South Thames Colleges Group – representing AoC
- Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Dr Mark Shanahan – member, The LEARN Network
- Jenny Shaw – Higher Education External Engagement Director, Unite Students
- Dominic Smithies – Head of Influencing and Communications, Student Minds

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- Sarah Sweeney – Chair, Association of Managers of Student Services In Higher Education (AMOSSHE)
- Saranya Thambirajah – Vice President for Liberation and Equality, National Union of Students (NUS)

Apologies

- Dr Nicola Byrom – Network Leader, SMaRteN
- Mark Ewins – Head of Mental Health, NHS England
- Polly Harrow – Further Education Student Support Champion
- Matt Lee – Head of Children and Young People's Mental Health Policy, Department of Health and Social Care
- Dr Dominique Thompson – Clinical Advisor, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Student Minds

In Attendance

- Department for Education (DfE) officials

1. Welcome and Introduction

The Chair welcomed returning and new members who introduced themselves to the Taskforce.

2. Update on Actions from Previous Meetings

The following updates were shared with Taskforce members:

- Taskforce members received an update on actions from previous meetings. An updated action log will be circulated alongside the minutes.
- Members were updated on provisional information regarding membership of the Student Minds Mental Health Charter Programme for academic year 26/27.
- Student Minds also updated on assessment and award numbers. Public announcement of award holders is planned for April. A member commented that ministerial support to further boost engagement would be welcomed.

- Several institutions have postponed their assessments. Student Minds believe that these delays are for constructive reasons, such as institutions wanting to complete more preparatory work before assessment.
- Members were also updated on the progress of the FE Mental Health Charter by AoC. AoC have reached out to all colleges to support the remaining sign-ups and are focusing on increasing engagement in the new year. The FE sector is transitioning to the whole college approach evaluation tool, mapping the AoC Charter to the Implementation and Outcomes self-assessment tools (ISAT/OSAT). This aims to measure both the impact and outcomes of the Charter, supporting colleges in adopting a whole-organisation approach.
- A member suggested that the HE sector could learn from FE regarding collaborative group structures and mergers which may address financial challenges. The Chair suggested that as integrated care boards (ICBs) reform, there may be advantages in universities and colleges collaborating at the neighbourhood or locality level to support population health, aligning with new commissioning models.
- Members were informed that the Taskforce GOV.UK page and terms of reference had been updated to reflect the new membership, the new priorities agreed with the Minister for Skills for this next phase of work, and feedback from members – including references to lived experience and the Taskforce's interest in how universities can better support neurodiverse students. DfE officials advised that all finalised papers and minutes had now been published, with the exception of the HE-NHS partnerships report which will be published in January
- Members were updated that a paper on data and evidence will be developed and circulated for discussion at the next Taskforce meeting.

3. Accountability

An initial thought paper on accountability had been circulated to members ahead of the meeting for discussion. The OfS provided an overview of their regulatory levers –including the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), access and participation plans, registration conditions, and the use of risk registers – to support members' understanding of how these mechanisms relate to the wider accountability discussion.

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Several members emphasised the need to define a baseline or minimum expectations for mental health support in universities before meaningful accountability can be established. The group discussed the limitations of voluntary charters, which set out the gold standard, and the importance of clear minimum expectations.
- Several members noted that there needs to be clarification for HE providers on what is the responsibility of the institution, and what falls under the responsibility of the NHS.
- A member noted that it is unclear who universities are responsible to in this area, and that there does not appear to be any means to meaningfully hold universities to

account when things go wrong.
- Members also stressed the need to measure and assess the extent of which universities are complying with the best practice and guidance developed by the Taskforce, and whether this is leading to improvements. A member suggested that staff training uptake could be one measurable indicator.
- A member highlighted the critical role of governing bodies in ensuring accountability, noting that effective governance is essential for embedding mental health priorities. Members discussed the challenges of aligning accountability across autonomous institutions.
- A member stressed the importance of embedding student voices and lived experience in accountability processes, including student oversight and co-creation of measures, to ensure that gaps in provision are identified and addressed.
- The Chair summarised the need to distil existing best practice and recommendations into clear expectations for institutions, link these to governance and regulatory mechanisms, and monitor implementation. The group agreed that further work was needed to develop an effective and appropriate accountability framework. Members agreed this was a good starting point noting that parents with lived experience should be engaged throughout this the work.

4. Independent Review into Mental Health Conditions, ADHD and Autism

Taskforce members were provided with the following updates:

- Taskforce member Peter Fonagy will be leading the independent review into the rising demand for mental health, ADHD and autism services in England, commissioned by the Health Secretary.
- Peter explained that the review covers all ages and focuses on prevalence, drivers of change, service pressures, effectiveness of diagnosis and treatment, and the distinction between need and disorder. Six key questions guide the review, including trends in prevalence, drivers of demand, changes in referral patterns, evolution of diagnostic pathways, the value of diagnosis, and strengthening preventive care.
- Peter described the evidence-gathering process, which includes an expert advisory group and opportunities for external stakeholders to contribute data and evidence. The review prioritises evidence-based input and will consider written submissions from the group.

Actions:

- Peter invited the group to submit further questions and evidence in writing, and the Chair suggested using sector networks to gather relevant data on trends and prevalence for the review.
- The Chair suggested that UUK and AoC could support this research by surveying members, if required.

5. AOB

Taskforce members were provided with the following updates:

- Dr Dominique Thompson will be leading a project on addressing Social Ostracism in HE and creating a subgroup to focus on the work. We will bring updates to Taskforce meetings.

DfE officials noted that they are engaging with the Sheffield Policy Campus, a collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University, to explore opportunities for research support through student applied projects. Officials explained that Sheffield Hallam students had expressed interest in topics relating to mental health, neurodiversity and transitions into HE. Further information will be provided to Taskforce members in due course.

6. Close

Draft minutes for this meeting will be sent early in the new year. Members will be canvassed for availability for the next meeting.

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