Department for Education

# Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce

Notes of Taskforce meeting held remotely via MS Teams on 4 August 2026 (10:00 – 11:30).

## Chair

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

## Members Present

- Suzy Allinson – Senior Regulation Manager, Office for Students (OfS)
- Aleata Alstad-Calkins – Deputising for Sarah Sweeney, Association of Managers of Student Services In Higher Education (AMOSSHE)
- Nic Beech – representing Universities UK (UUK)
- Dr Nicola Byrom – Network Leader, SMaRteN
- Suzanne Carrie – Head of Student Equality and Welfare, Office for Students (OfS)
- 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
- Angela Halston – Policy and Engagement Manager Independent HE (IHE)
- Jen Hope – Area Director (East Midlands) and Senior Policy Lead (Mental Health), Association of Colleges (AoC)
- Helen Megarry – Independent Adjudicator - The Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA)
- Dr Mark Shanahan – member, The LEARN Network
- Andy Shanks – Representing AMOSSHE
- Dominic Smithies – Head of Influencing and Communications, Student Minds
- Rosie Tressler – CEO, Student Minds

## Apologies

- John Bloomfield – Executive Director, AMOSSHE
- Prathiba Chitsabesan – National Clinical Director for Children and Young People's Mental Health, NHS England
- Mark Ewins – Head of Mental Health, NHS England
- Polly Harrow – Further Education Student Support Champion

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- Jane Harris – Chair, Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education Expert Group (MWBHE)
- Matt Lee – Head of Children and Young People's Mental Health Policy, Department of Health and Social Care
- Peter Mayhew-Smith – Association of Colleges
- Jenny Shaw – Higher Education External Engagement Director, Unite Students
- Saranya Thambirajah – Vice President for Liberation and Equality, National Union of Students (NUS)
- 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 members.

## 2. Discussion: Office for Students Statement of Expectations on Disability

The OfS shared a presentation updating members on the development of its Statement of Expectations (SoE) on disability and sought feedback on key areas under consideration. Publication is currently anticipated in early 2027, with a review planned following a period of implementation.

The OfS outlined its approach to developing the SoE, noting that the work is being developed through extensive engagement with students, providers and sector stakeholders. This includes:

- A new phase of engagement through the Disability in Higher Education Advisory Panel.
- Workshops with disability practitioners and student services professionals
- Workshops with disabled students to gather insight from their lived experiences and inform the development of the expectations, and with student representatives
- Engagement with provider representative bodies
- Targeted discussions with organisations representing disabled students and other stakeholder groups, including those working in areas such as student access, funding and graduate outcomes.

They noted that they remain open to one-on-one conversations with members who wish to provide further feedback and that they will also circulate a survey to members who wish to provide separate written feedback.

The presentation and discussion first focused on the scope of the statement. The OfS then invited feedback from members the five areas of focus they have identified as important based on prior engagement, insight, and evidence. For all areas, the OfS asked what good looks like and what a minimum expectation could be, what the barriers are to making this happen, how a statement of expectations could support, and any unintended consequences.
The OfS also sought feedback from members on whether these areas were the right areas of focus and whether anything further should be added.

## a. Scope of the statement: mental health, neurodiversity and suicide prevention

- The OfS sought views on the use of the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability within the statement and how the statement could have the greatest positive impact on support for students with mental health conditions.
- The OfS emphasised that the statement is intended to complement, rather than replace, wider mental health and wellbeing work already taking place across the sector.
- The OfS noted that the statement would sit alongside existing guidance, charter marks and frameworks, while avoiding prescription on how providers should meet the expectations.

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Several members welcomed the development of the statement and recognised the opportunity to improve consistency across the sector.
- Several members strongly advocated for explicitly referencing mental health and neurodiversity in the title and framing of the statement, to reflect the broader range of issues it seeks to address.
- Some members expressed concerns that reliance on the Equality Act 2010 definition of disability could exclude students without a formal diagnosis or those who do not identify as disabled, and emphasised the need for an inclusive approach that prevents students falling through gaps in support or moving to a deficit model.
- Members highlighted the importance of ensuring the statement aligns with, and brings together, existing sector guidance, rather than creating an additional standalone framework. The OfS noted they are not able to ensure providers follow specific charters or frameworks, but hope they will be able to point to

alignment and encourage providers to consider existing guidance when they develop their approach to meeting the expectations.

- Members noted the importance of including suicide prevention within the scope of the statement and ensuring that related expectations are reflected throughout the framework.
- Members discussed the anticipatory nature of the Equality Act, and how this impacts sector support for disabled and non-disabled students. Several members agreed that processes are developing within the sector and must continue to do so, this is not seen to be within the scope of the regulator.
- The Chair noted that providers are autonomous institutions responsible for determining how best to meet their legal and moral duties, and that the role of the regulator is to set clear expectations rather than prescribe specific approaches. He encouraged ongoing collaboration between the Taskforce and the OfS as the statement develops.
- Members discussed the potential merits of combining the OfS statement of expectations with Taskforce-produced minimum standards to reduce burden and avoid placing multiple, disconnected pieces of guidance on the sector, noting that while the OfS may position its statement high-level, the Taskforce could independently develop the detailed standards for the regulator to point to and endorse.

## b. Draft areas of focus for the statement of expectations:

### i. The development, implementation and review of policies and procedures that ensure the inclusion and equitable treatment of disabled students

- The OfS indicated that governance and accountability arrangements may form part of this area.

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Members highlighted the importance of drawing upon existing evidence and good practice when developing expectations, including learning from work on suicide prevention and student safety.
- Several members emphasised the need for providers to adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach to mental health and suicide prevention.
- A member suggested that governance arrangements should provide clear oversight of disability, mental health and suicide prevention activity, including regular engagement from governing bodies and academic leadership.
- Members stressed the importance of embedding inclusive practices and consideration of reasonable adjustments within institutional processes and educational programme design.

- A member highlighted the need for policies and procedures to reflect the diversity of the student population, including postgraduate students, apprenticeships, placements and students studying through partnership arrangements.
- Members noted the importance of managing transition points effectively to ensure continuity of support for students.
- A member noted the importance of building in clear expectations on suicide prevention and that clarity, consistency and accountability would benefit all students and staff.

### ii. Clear and accessible provision of information for students

- The OfS noted that this area of focus ties in with OfS regulatory requirements on consumer protection
- The OfS noted the opportunity to reflect on taskforce guidance on compassionate campus and communications when developing this area of focus

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Members emphasised the importance of ensuring students can easily understand what support is available and how to access it.
- Members highlighted the importance of ensuring communication is accessible, consistent and supportive throughout the student journey.

### iii. Appropriate staff training to support disabled students

- The OfS explained that any expectations relating to training should focus on ensuring staff understand their responsibilities and are equipped with role-specific knowledge, rather than relying solely on generic mandatory training.
- The OfS noted that training needs to tie in with processes so that training on support can be operationalised

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- A member raised the importance of individual staff at all levels understanding their personal responsibilities on reasonable adjustments, staff need specific training outlining the duties specific to their role, rather than, or as well as, general mandatory training.

- A member noted that staff working in the sector commonly raise the need for more training to support neurodivergent students.
- A member suggested that expectations should also cover the skills required to proactively identify and respond to students experiencing mental health difficulties or suicidal crises.
- Members emphasised the importance of staff understanding how to make effective referrals and handovers, particularly at points where responsibility for support transfers between individuals or services.

### iv. Efficient and sensitive mechanisms for sharing relevant information about disabled students across departments and services

- The OfS sought views on minimum expectations for information sharing, including how institutions manage risk and reduce the need for students to repeatedly disclose the same information.

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Members noted that students may disclose information to a wide range of staff and services and that support arrangements should reflect the complexity of these interactions.
- Members noted that students are not always clear about the implications of disclosing information to different parts of their institution, and suggested there is a need for greater transparency about how information will be used and shared,recognising that the significant majority of students are adults.
- A member noted that this discussion highlighted a wider concern regarding the framing of the statement around disability. They observed that many students who may benefit from support do not identify as disabled and may therefore be less likely to recognise that the expectations set out in the statement are relevant to their circumstances.A member highlighted ongoing confusion across the sector regarding information sharing, data protection and risk management responsibilities, noting that GDPR is still cited as a concern in an emergency when it has already been made clear by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) that organisations can take decisions based on risk in such situations.
- Members noted existing guidance in this area and suggested that the statement could help improve understanding and consistency of practice.

### v. Sufficient capacity, expertise and resources to support disabled students effectively

- The OfS highlighted that there are considerable financial challenges in the sector but that expectations should support providers to think about their model and ensuring that disabled students are appropriately supported

Taskforce members raised the following points:

- Members acknowledged the significant financial pressures currently facing the sector and the challenges this creates for service provision.
- Several members stressed that expectations should be driven by what students reasonably require, rather than solely by the resources currently available to institutions.
- A member highlighted that there are good examples of shared resources between providers and that this should be encouraged.
- Members agreed that the regulator should set clear minimum expectations, while allowing providers flexibility in how they meet them.
- Members discussed the importance of managing student expectations regarding access to support and suggested that greater clarity around minimum standards could help support consistency across the sector.
- Members emphasised that inclusive practice within learning, teaching and assessment should remain a key consideration alongside specialist support services.

The OfS suggested returning to the taskforce with an update when the SoE is further developed.

## 3. Taskforce Update

- The Chair updated members that, following the change of Prime Minister, Jacqui Smith will remain the minister responsible for this policy area. He noted that she continues to be supportive of the Taskforce's work to develop minimum standards for the sector, and to incorporate the recommendations from the National Review of Student Suicides in to it’s work. She has agreed to extend the Taskforce for a further academic year, alongside an extension of his role as Higher Education Student Support Champion. The Chair expressed his hope that members would continue their involvement with the Taskforce and encouraged them to contact him directly with any feedback, questions or suggestions regarding its future work.

## 4. AOB

- A member highlighted the positive progress being made through the University Mental Health Charter Programme, including growth in the number of Charter members and award holders. They suggested that the Taskforce should also recognise and celebrate examples of effective practice across the sector and requested an update on key learning and progress from the programme at a future meeting. The Chair welcomed this suggestion and agreed that highlighting progress and success should form part of the Taskforce's discussions going forward.

## 5. Close

Draft minutes for this meeting will be sent ASAP.

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