

Debate Pack

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E-petition debate relating to suicide prevention and the national curriculum

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 13 March on e-petition 623390, relating to suicide prevention and the national curriculum. The debate will be opened by Nick Fletcher MP.

1 Background

1.1 Suicide awareness in the school curriculum

Since September 2020, health education has been a statutory part of the curriculum in primary and secondary schools in England. See the Library briefing on [Relationships and Sex Education in Schools \(England\)](#) for more information about these changes.

The Government has published statutory [Guidance on relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education](#) (2019). The guidance sets out what pupils should know about mental wellbeing by the end of primary school and the end of secondary school. This includes discussing mental health conditions, recognising early signs of mental wellbeing concerns and knowing where to seek help.¹

The guidance does not explicitly include teaching on suicide awareness, though it is noted that students may bring up the topic of suicide:

121. There are some important points for teachers in terms of how they approach this content and how they consider their planning. When teaching the new subjects, schools should be aware that children may raise topics including self-harm and suicide. In talking about this content in the classroom, teachers must be aware of the risks of encouraging or making suicide seem a more viable option for pupils and avoid material being instructive rather than preventative. To avoid this, they should take care to avoid giving instructions or methods of self-harm or suicide and avoid using emotive language, videos or images. [Teacher Guidance: preparing to teach about mental health and emotional wellbeing](#) provides useful support for teachers in handling this material.²

Further guidance, issued by the PHSE Association (funded by the DfE), [Mental health and emotional wellbeing teacher guidance](#) (updated 2021) provides additional information on teaching about self-harm and suicide. The guidance does not set out what should be covered in relation to suicide but notes that lessons on suicide may be taught. The guidance focuses on things to avoid in these sessions, such as distressing images, detailed information on methods. It also says extra care should be taken to signpost pupils to sources of support.³

¹ DfE, [Relationships and sex education \(RSE\) and health education](#), 25 June 2019, pp32-38

² As above, p42

³ PSHE Association, [Mental health and emotional wellbeing teacher guidance](#), updated 2021, pp12-13

1.2 Government Review of RSHE

The Government has committed to carrying out a review of the revised RSHE curriculum. On 8 March 2023, Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, responded to a question from Miriam Cates saying the Government was “bringing forward a review of RSHE statutory guidance and will start our consultation as soon as possible.”⁴

[In response to an earlier PQ, Schools Minister Nick Gibb said](#) that suicide awareness and prevention would be considered in the review:

All pupils in schools are taught about mental health as part of the relationships, sex and health Education (RSHE) curriculum, which the Department has made mandatory in 2020 to ensure that all pupils are taught about important topics. Schools can teach older pupils about suicide in an age appropriate and sensitive way.

Ministers are aware of the interest in the inclusion of suicide prevention material in the RSHE curriculum and have written to key campaigners about this important topic.

[...]

The Department is taking a comprehensive, evidence based approach in deciding what should be included and suicide prevention will be considered in the review.⁵

1.3 Guidance and training on mental health in schools and colleges

The DfE had also published guidance on [Mental health and behaviour in schools](#) (updated November 2018). It does not include information on suicide awareness, but it gives advice on topics that can be factors in suicide prevention, including:

- promoting positive mental health in schools
- understanding the link between mental health and behaviour
- identifying children with possible mental health problems
- putting in place support, including working with external agencies.

In December 2017, the Government published a Green Paper on Transforming children and young people’s mental health provision. This was subject to

⁴ [HC Deb 8 March 2023 c298](#)

⁵ PQ 141648 [on Relationships and sex education: Suicide], 15 February 2023

consultation and the Government published [Government response to the consultation on 'Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper' and next steps](#) in July 2018.

The Government said in the response that it would be taking forward proposals to train a Designated Senior Lead for mental health in all schools by 2025 and to fund Mental Health Support Teams, supervised by NHS children and young people's mental health staff.

The document also states the Government is committed to providing mental health awareness training to every secondary school by 2019 and every primary school by 2022. It also refers to a four-year [National mental health 'Link Programme' between schools and the NHS](#), designed to raise awareness of mental health concerns and improve referrals to specialist help when needed.⁶

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Public Health England (now the UK Health Security Agency) launched [Psychological First Aid training](#) for people who care for or work with children and young people aged up to 25.

1.4

Suicide prevention policy

The National Suicide Prevention Strategy (2012)

The national suicide prevention strategy, [Preventing Suicide in England: a cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives](#), was published in 2012. The strategy includes the following on the school curriculum and school prevention strategies:

2.4 The non-statutory programmes of study for Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education provide a framework for schools to provide age-appropriate teaching on issues including sex and relationships, substance misuse and emotional and mental health. This and other school-based approaches may help all children to recognise, understand, discuss and seek help earlier for any emerging emotional and other problems.

2.5 The consensus from research is that an effective school-based suicide prevention strategy would include:

- a co-ordinated school response to people at risk and staff training;
- awareness among staff to help identify high risk signs or behaviours (depression, drugs, self-harm) and protocols on how to respond;

⁶ DHSC and DfE, [Government response to the consultation on 'Transforming children and young people's mental health provision: a green paper' and next steps](#), July 2018

- signposting parents to sources of information on signs of emotional problems and risk;
- clear referral routes to specialist mental health services.⁷

The strategy's section on prevention for "people who are especially vulnerable due to social and economic circumstances" also suggests developing suicide awareness programmes that can be delivered in a variety of settings, including schools and colleges. The strategy includes [Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training \(ASIST\)](#), [Mental Health First Aid](#), Safe Start and training carried out by Samaritans as examples.⁸

The strategy also refers to a post-suicide intervention service for schools (since expanded to further and higher education settings) offered by the Samaritans, called [Step by Step](#), which aims to prevent "copycat suicides" and "suicide clusters" following the death of a young person by suicide.⁹

The DHSC publishes annual progress reports on the prevention strategy, setting out current trends, progress and new actions. The last progress report, [Suicide prevention in England: fifth progress report](#), published in March 2021 notes the new, mandatory Relationship, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum, which "includes resources to support teaching about mental wellbeing as part of Health Education"¹⁰ (see section 2.2 below).

Regarding university students, the report says the Universities UK (UUK) report '[Minding our Future](#)' recommended setting up local collaboratives to enhance suicide prevention practice in universities to improve coordination between universities and the NHS, investigate barriers to support, and develop a clinical risk assessment tool. At the time of the progress report, five cities had developed Student Mental Health Collaboratives: Bristol, Liverpool, Manchester, London (UCL in North London), and Sheffield.¹¹

The report also notes actions on mental health and wellbeing (not specific to suicide) including funding mental health advisers in each local authority to upskill education staff to identify early signs of mental-ill health in children and the roll-out of [Mental Health Support Teams in schools](#). There are also developments for university students, including the [University Mental Health Charter Award Scheme](#) and the Student Space website, which includes information on online and telephone [Support services \(studentspace.org.uk\)](#).

The Government has said that is in the process of developing a new National Suicide Prevention Strategy.¹²

⁷ DHSC, [Preventing Suicide in England: a cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives](#), 10 September 2012, p22

⁸ As above, pp29-30

⁹ As above, p41

¹⁰ DHSC, [Suicide prevention in England: fifth progress report](#), 27 March 2021, pp41-42

¹¹ As above, p61

¹² PQ 140371 [on [Mental illness: Males](#)], 13 February 2023

The Cross-Government Suicide Prevention Workplan (2019)

The [Cross-Government suicide prevention workplan](#) was published in 2019 following a recommendation from the Health Select Committee to produce an implementation plan for the prevention strategy.¹³

The section of the workplan focusing on children and young people does not refer to the curriculum or teaching suicide awareness in schools. It includes actions on factors that may increase risk of suicide such as bullying and mental health problems.¹⁴

There are some actions for the university sector, including exploring disclosure agreements for university students, guidance on preventing student suicides (see below) and exploring setting up a Student Mental Health Collaborative between Universities UK, NHS England, Public Health England, Department of Health & Social Care, NHS Confederation Mental Health Network and Office for Students.¹⁵

Local suicide prevention plans

The 2012 strategy set out that all local authorities should develop multi-agency suicide prevention plans for their area. Guidance by Public Health England on [developing a local action plan](#) states:

School based-awareness programmes have shown promise in reducing suicide attempts. Recent research has shown that being at university is a protective factor for suicide, but it is still important that universities are encouraged to provide good mental health support services for their students, and have a suicide prevention plan in place. Universities UK and PAPYRUS' guidance '[Suicide-Safer Universities](#)' provides a framework to understand student suicide and the steps to be taken to make a community suicide-safer.¹⁶

¹³ DHSC, [Cross-Government suicide prevention workplan](#), 22 January 2019

¹⁴ As above, pp 31-33

¹⁵ As above

¹⁶ PHE, [Suicide prevention: developing a local action plan](#), updated September 2020, p62

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Parliamentary material

2.1

Parliamentary questions

Schools: Suicide

26 Oct 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 67120

Asked by: Dr Rupa Huq

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of making suicide prevention a compulsory part of the school curriculum.

Answered by: Kelly Tolhurst | Department for Education

All pupils in schools are taught about mental health as part of the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum, which the department made mandatory in 2020 to ensure that all pupils are taught about important topics.

Schools can teach older pupils about suicide in an age-appropriate and sensitive way. The RSHE statutory guidance advises that schools should approach teaching about self-harm and suicide carefully and should be aware of the risks to pupils from exposure to materials that are instructive rather than preventative. This includes websites or videos that provide instructions or methods of self-harm or suicide. The guidance is clear that if teachers have concerns about a specific pupil in relation to self-harm or suicidal thoughts, they must follow safeguarding procedures immediately.

Relationships and Sex Education: Suicide

24 Oct 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 66976

Asked by: Lisa Nandy

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what assessment he has made of the potential merits of including suicide prevention in the statutory guidelines for the RSHE curriculum.

Answered by: Kelly Tolhurst | Department for Education

Pupils in schools are taught about mental health as part of the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum, which was made mandatory in 2020 for all pupils.

Schools can teach older pupils about suicide in an age-appropriate and sensitive way. The RSHE statutory guidance advises that schools should approach teaching about self-harm and suicide cautiously. Schools should be aware of the risks to pupils from exposure to materials that are instructive rather than preventative, including websites or videos that provide

instructions or methods of self-harm or suicide. If teachers have concerns about a specific pupil in relation to self-harm or suicidal thoughts, they must follow safeguarding procedures immediately.

Pupils: Mental Health Services

21 Oct 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 63047

Asked by: Kim Leadbeater

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, if he will make an assessment of the potential merits of including teaching on suicide and self-harm prevention in the national curriculum; and what steps he is taking to help ensure students starting examinations have access to mental health and other support services.

Answered by: Kelly Tolhurst | Department for Education

All pupils in schools are taught about mental health as part of the relationships, sex and health education (RSHE) curriculum, which the department made mandatory in 2020 to ensure that all pupils are taught about important topics.

Schools can teach older pupils about suicide in an age-appropriate and sensitive way. The RSHE statutory guidance advises that schools should approach teaching about self-harm and suicide carefully and should be aware of the risks to pupils from exposure to materials that are instructive rather than preventative, including websites or videos that provide instructions or methods of self-harm or suicide. The guidance is clear that where teachers have concerns about a specific pupil in relation to self-harm or suicidal thoughts, they must follow safeguarding procedures immediately.

Schools and other education providers should be preparing all children and young people for examinations and should have strong pastoral support in place to help pupils deal with any worries they might have throughout the year.

Ofqual has a series of dedicated resources on exam anxiety and stress. This includes a practical guide for students on coping with exam pressure, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coping-with-exam-pressure-a-guide-for-students/coping-with-exam-pressure-a-guide-for-students>(opens in a new tab). The NHS have also produced advice and guidance aimed at parents and carers on supporting their child through examinations, accessible at: <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/children-and-young-adults/advice-for-parents/help-your-child-beat-exam-stress/>(opens in a new tab).

Pupils and Students: Suicide

20 Sep 2022 | Written questions | Answered | House of Commons | 44937

Asked by: Damien Moore

To ask the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is planning to take

in the proposed 10-year suicide prevention strategy that will help tackle suicides among school and university students.

Answered by: Andrea Jenkyns | Department for Education

The government is committed to doing all we can to prevent suicides. We continue to work with experts and to review our plans to ensure they are fit for the future. The mental health and wellbeing of students in schools and universities, including suicide prevention, is a government priority. The department has been working closely with higher education (HE) providers, schools and health colleagues to ensure students are supported.

As part of a coordinated, whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing, the department is committed to ensuring schools provide safe, calm, and supportive environments, with access to early, targeted support. This is vital in preventing the onset, progression, and escalation of ill mental health. We are enabling schools to introduce effective, whole school approaches to mental health and wellbeing by committing to offer all state schools and colleges a grant to train a senior mental health lead by 2025. This is backed by £10 million in 2022/23. Over 8,000 schools and colleges, including half of state-funded secondary schools in England, have signed up so far.

The department is also expanding access to early, targeted mental health support by increasing the number of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) in schools and colleges to 400 by 2023, covering around 35% of pupils in England, with over 500 planned to be up and running by 2024.

Alongside these initiatives, we are promoting good mental health amongst children and young people through the school curriculum. Health education is compulsory in all schools and has a strong focus on mental wellbeing. Pupils are taught where and how to seek support for themselves as well as others. At secondary level, teachers may choose to discuss issues such as self-harm, addiction, and suicide when teaching these topics.

In addition to this, the department is funding a large-scale randomised control trial of approaches to improve pupil mental health and wellbeing in schools. The 'Aware' arm of the trial is testing approaches to mental health awareness teaching, including Youth Aware of Mental Health, which has good international evidence of reducing suicidal ideation. Moreover, colleges funded through the £5.4 million college collaboration fund have developed new ways to support student and staff mental health and wellbeing, with resources available to all further education providers online.

We also expect all universities to engage actively with suicide prevention, intervene to support students at risk, and act sensitively when a tragedy occurs.

The department supports the Suicide-Safer Universities framework, led by Universities UK (UUK) and Papyrus. This framework supports university

leaders to prevent student suicides, and support students and families after the death of a student. Its approach has been widely adopted and is a key component of the University Mental Health Charter, led by Student Minds, which aims to raise standards in mental health provision across the sector.

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News articles

[From the North: Should suicide prevention be put on the school curriculum?](#)

ITV

24 January 2023

[Three Dads Walking: A busy year in 'the club no-one wants to join'](#)

BBC

24 December 2022

[Why Compulsory Suicide Prevention Education Must Be Added To The School Curriculum](#)

Teaching Times

28 November 2022

[Schools pick up the pieces as suicidal kids turned away from CAMHS](#)

Schools Week

11 February 2022

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Further information

[Samaritans: In schools](#)

[PAPYRUS Prevention of Young Suicide](#)

[National Suicide Prevention Alliance](#)

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