



Children's Mental Health

House of Commons, February 8, 2022

Speech by James Murray MP (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op)

On 10 February 2020, when I had been an MP for less than two months, I was glad to be invited to a youth-led mental health summit at William Perkin Church of England High School, in the heart of my constituency, organised by the brilliant Ealing Citizens. On that Monday morning, I listened to young people in their late teens talk about their and their friends' mental health. Not only was their openness inspiring, but they spoke with great intelligence about what support and help they needed from their school and the NHS. When they asked me to contribute to the discussion, I said that, when I was their age, about two decades previously, I could not have imagined talking with such clarity and honesty about mental health. I said I did not think that, 20 years ago, I even understood my own mental health; I certainly never considered sharing my thoughts openly with dozens of my peers.

I promised the young people I met that day that I would make their mental health and that of other young people I represent one of my priorities as their MP. That day, we were not to know that the following month we would go into the first covid lockdown. As we have all gone through lockdowns and restrictions, the importance of mental health for the young people I represent has become even more acute. One of the things the young people at the summit told me was that they wanted a mental health worker at their school whom they could talk to about their mental health, so I arranged a meeting with the Health Minister at the time. The Minister offered no extra support, but referred me to the local NHS. After a series of meetings with the NHS, I was glad when it was confirmed last summer that the NHS would, from September that year, put in place a dedicated mental health worker one day a week in every high school in Ealing North.

That represents important progress with limited resources, and I thank the local NHS for listening to the many of us who made the case for such a service, but when I have spoken to high schools about having a mental health worker one day a week, it has been clear that, although welcome, it comes nowhere near to meeting the level of need.

The truth is that, without a Government who take this seriously and offer the support that is needed, we will never see the transformation that young people deserve. That is why we have committed that the next Labour Government will provide a full-time mental health professional in every secondary school. That is what young people told me in February 2020 that they want and need, and that is what we would make a reality as part of a package that would also include a part-time professional in every primary school, open-access mental health clubs for children and young people in every community, and a guarantee of mental health treatment within a month for all who need it. Our plans for mental health services would be funded by closing tax loopholes for private equity fund managers and removing the VAT exemption from private schools.

I know we need this transformational change because I was told so by young people themselves. As a new MP, I learned so much from that summit in February 2020. Since then, I have made it a priority to keep listening to young people in my constituency, making sure to visit schools whenever covid restrictions have allowed. I was glad to visit Northolt High School and Alec Reed Academy recently. As ever, I am very grateful to students and teachers for sharing with me their time and their views on mental health. As I was in the mental health summit before the pandemic, I have been informed and inspired by listening to young people talk about their mental health and what support they need. A number of the young people I have met have explained their own techniques for looking after their mental health. From their talking about the subject, I and their fellow pupils have learned something, showing the simple but crucial effectiveness of people talking about mental health, understanding how they can help to look after themselves, and having support there when they need it.

Now is the time for us as MPs not just to listen to young people, but to act. Young people need us to do the right thing and put in place the high-quality mental health services they deserve.
