

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN CONFLICT WITH THE LAW: POLICY, PRACTICE AND LEGISLATION

Section 8: Mental Health

June 2026

family is what i **CARE** about! 



Children and Young People's
Centre for Justice

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1. Introduction

All professionals working with children and young people in conflict with the law have a pivotal role to play in prevention, early intervention, and care planning in relation to mental health. The needs of children and young people who come into conflict with the law are now well understood and can often be complex. There is growing evidence that many of these children and young people have histories of high levels of childhood adversity that can lead to trauma responses (Gibson, 2020, 2021; Murphy, 2018; Vaswani, 2018). They also have higher rates of neurodevelopmental issues than would be expected from rates evident in the general population (Williams et al., 2021). These experiences and circumstances, and some of the responses from systems/agencies, can lead to the development of further mental health difficulties later in childhood or adulthood (Fox et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2018). For children and young people with such complex needs, early identification, or differentiation of mental health from additional needs, is vital to inform timely and effective intervention, thereby preventing an escalation in difficulties over time.

Adolescence brings further challenges that can be detrimental to children, as noted in the Scottish Government's [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy \(2023\)](#):

“Periods of transition often put extra stress on children and young people’s pre-existing resilience and coping strategies. The late teenage years are a point when mental wellbeing can decline ... and can also be the point of onset of serious mental illness. Teenage years are also a stage in life where the increased use of online communities and social media can impact mental health, especially for young women. Experiences of bullying, harassment and abusive behaviour put young people at higher risk of poor mental health.”

(Scottish Government, 2023a, p. 14).

There is also growing awareness of the impact of external factors, such as poverty, homelessness and inequality on mental health and wellbeing (Scottish Government, 2023a), issues that many children and young people in the Children’s Hearings System (CHS) and in conflict with the law have experience of.

The work many practitioners from the human services sector (including social work, social care, education and employability) do with children and young people offers excellent opportunities for promoting mental wellbeing and informing decisions about care and intervention. These include a unique perspective across a range of systems and routine contact with children and young people and their families, combining legal knowledge with a role in the application of statutory legislation. This is even more true in the context of current mental health and social care legislation, which promotes a Whole System Approach (WSA) to integrated care.

The aim of this section is to offer guidance to practitioners working with children and young people in conflict with the law where there are concerns about their mental health and wellbeing. It includes: a brief introduction to the link between mental health and those who come into conflict with the law; the policy context; an overview of the typical structure of related health services; and some information on what we know about children and young people's mental health needs and how these are classified, with some general guidance on how practitioners might respond to children and young people who are experiencing

difficulties with their mental health. This section on mental health was previously combined with neurodevelopment, however, given the recent separation of these two within the CAMHS pathways we have followed suit. Section 18 now focuses on Neurodevelopment.

2. Mental health and children and young people in conflict with the law

In 2024, gathering data from the four nations, the Centre for Mental Health carried out an exercise [Mapping the Health of the UK's Young People](#). Key [findings](#) (Doyle et al., 2024) highlighted the number of children and young people experiencing mental health difficulties in the UK has increased at an alarming rate in recent years, compounded by experiences of the covid 19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crises, poverty, and additional marginalisations. A call for action is made to address this crisis given the impact on young people's wellbeing safety, education and future outcomes. The overall data showed that the older teenage years are associated with increased mental health difficulties, particularly in Scotland, where 350 in 1000 16–24-year-olds report experiencing mental health difficulties (Doyle et al., 2024, p. 5). An accompanying [interactive map](#) shows the results of the findings by particular issue, country, and locality.

A UK longitudinal cohort study by Adjei N.K et al. (2021) showed that children who are persistently exposed to maternal mental ill-health and poverty were 4 to 6 times more likely to develop socioemotional problems at age 14, compared to peers from low poverty and adversity backgrounds. Socioemotional problems were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), measuring five scales: hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct disorders, peer problems and prosocial behaviour (Adjei N. K et al., 2021) issues which we will see are often prevalent in children and young people in conflict with the law.

The link between poverty and poor mental health, including these socioemotional difficulties, is well established (Wickham et al., 2017) with data also showing links between poor mental health / socioemotional difficulties and conflict with the law. Although most children and young people who come into conflict with the law will naturally refrain from offending behaviour as they grow older, some will persist with this behaviour into adulthood. Invaluable data from the Edinburgh Youth Transitions and Crime study (McAra & McVie, 2022) shows these individuals are found to be significantly more vulnerable than those who desist (stop) offending in adolescence, having experienced childhoods characterised by higher levels of adverse childhood experiences, poverty, and serious offending (McAra & McVie, 2022).

Whilst there has been limited research on the mental and neurodevelopmental health needs of children and young people in conflict with the law in Scotland, a study examining the mental health needs of a sample of children referred to [the Intervention for Vulnerable Youth \(IVY\) service](#) in relation to concerns regarding violent behaviour found that on average, although not formally diagnosed, these children displayed symptoms of four psychiatric disorders, with 64% displaying four or more. Symptoms of attachment disorder (92%) and post-traumatic stress disorder (75%) were overwhelmingly represented in this group (Murphy, 2018). A more recent report on the mental health needs of Scotland's prison population found that "There is a notable evidence gap in relation to the mental health needs

of young people in prison” (Gilling McIntosh et al., 2022, p. 10). However, in the absence of this information, estimates of the likely prevalence of some mental health problems were made using modelling from the non-prison population. For those under 21, estimates were that at least 16% would have a long-term mental health condition, 22% a history of self-harm, 35% an alcohol use disorder, 25% symptoms of anxiety over the past week and 15% symptoms of depression over the past week. A 2024 report by the HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland on [Young People's Experience of the Scottish Prison Estate](#) revealed that 69% of under 25s reported having a mental health need in prison, and 36% had a disability or a long-term health condition, with 36% and 29% requiring support for drug and alcohol use respectively.

The most common mental health difficulties for both the general population and the population of children in conflict with the law are conduct, emotional, attention, and substance misuse disorders (The Mental Health Foundation, 2002). This covers the full range of emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties. However, the complexity with children and young people who come into conflict with the law is understood to be relative to the higher frequency of difficulties, the greater severity of the problem, and the fact that multiple problems occur at the same time (Hindley et al., 2017). An additional factor complicating the understanding of individual mental health needs is the potential for under-identifying internalised difficulties (such as anxiety or depression), as these may be obscured by, or manifest as, externalised problems (such as behavioural difficulties). Additionally, children and young people often appear to be below the threshold required for a formal diagnosis yet have subthreshold symptoms across several mental health difficulties, which can have a significant impact on their daily functioning. Finally, the question of how mental health difficulties relate to offending behaviours (if indeed they do) adds further complexity.

There has been a growing body of research linking early traumatic or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) not only with increased risk of serious offending across the lifespan (Fox et al., 2015), but also with increased risk of developing a range of mental health problems in adulthood (Couper & Mackie, 2016; Read & Bentall, 2012; Varese et al., 2012). Early trauma or ACEs can result in children becoming care-experienced, and the stigma and experiences resulting from this can affect mental health (Who cares? Scotland, 2022), this cohort more likely than non-care experienced peers to experience poor mental health and socioemotional difficulties (Sanders, 2020), and to be unnecessarily criminalised (Moodie & Nolan, 2016). These well-established links between poverty, adversity, poor mental health and socioemotional behavioural difficulties which can lead to conflict with the law in childhood and adolescence, as-well as the knowledge that contact with justice systems can perpetuate adverse outcomes (McAra & McVie, 2022), has significant implications of how and when we intervene with families.

There is also a close link between experiencing discrimination or abuse related to identity and mental health problems, with structural inequalities further shaping individual's experiences of mental health problems. For example, research has found that Black and minority ethnic communities in Scotland “are more likely to experience mental health problems linked to factors like poverty and deprivation, overcrowded and inadequate housing, high levels of under-employment, and experience of over-policing and disproportionate incarceration” (CRER, 2026, p. 70). The intersection with other identities such as gender and age also play a role. Prevention and early intervention on a structural level is crucial, however as practitioners we also need to be able to promote good health and

wellbeing, and to both identify and promote recovery from poor mental and emotional health and wellbeing for all children and young people we work with.

3. Policy Context

The UNCRC (1990), now embedded in Scotland's statute in [the UNCRC \(Incorporation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#), sets out the civil, political, economic, cultural and social rights of every child under the age of 18. Within its 54 articles, two are specific to health and wellbeing. These are summarised by [UNICEF](#) as:

Article 24 (health and health services): Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment and education on health and well-being so that children can stay healthy. Richer countries must help poorer countries achieve this.

Article 39 (recovery from trauma and reintegration): Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must receive special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect, and social life.

In Scotland, policy and service developments have worked towards achieving these two articles, with a growing and now well-established emphasis on the promotion of a multi-agency approach to maximising mental wellbeing in children and young people. [Getting It Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#), embraces the idea that good mental health and wellbeing are impacted by a variety of family, social, psychological, and community factors. This inference that early identification and promotion of good mental health is everyone's business, not just that of specialist mental health practitioners, has been affirmed by [the promise](#). It promotes the importance of nurturing primary carer relationships and whole-family supports, as well as timely access to specialist mental health supports in promoting optimum mental health and wellbeing. Therefore, in promoting the best possible outcomes for the mental health needs of children and young people in conflict with the law, a comprehensive multi-agency response across different levels of mental health expertise is understood to be vital.

To assure consistency of delivery in relation to health and wellbeing outcomes, Local Delivery Plan (LDP) standards have been created - priorities that are set and agreed between the Scottish Government and NHS Boards to provide assurance on NHS Scotland performance. [LDP Guidance \(2020\)](#) details how these operate. The current performance on standards specific to the needs of children and young people is documented on the [Scottish Government website](#). Wider health and social care integration correlating with the principles of GIRFEC is evident in the Scottish Government's [Mental Health Strategy: 2017-27](#), aiming to achieve parity between mental and physical health provision; a key focus being prevention and early intervention.

Despite such policy initiatives however, there have remained difficulties with children accessing mental health provision through the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), who support under 18s in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2018b). Audit Scotland (2018), and Public Health Scotland now regularly publish national statistics on [CAMHS waiting times](#), including some information on rejected referrals.

As a result of these reports Scottish Ministers commissioned the Children and Young People's Mental Health Taskforce to implement all recommendations and develop a whole system approach to children and young people's mental health in Scotland. In addition, the [Youth Commission on Mental Health Services](#), an independent taskforce commissioned by Scottish Government and COSLA, provided in 2019 recommendations and advice to support the redesign and expansion of the service response to mental health issues from birth to 25 years and has emphasised preventative approaches.

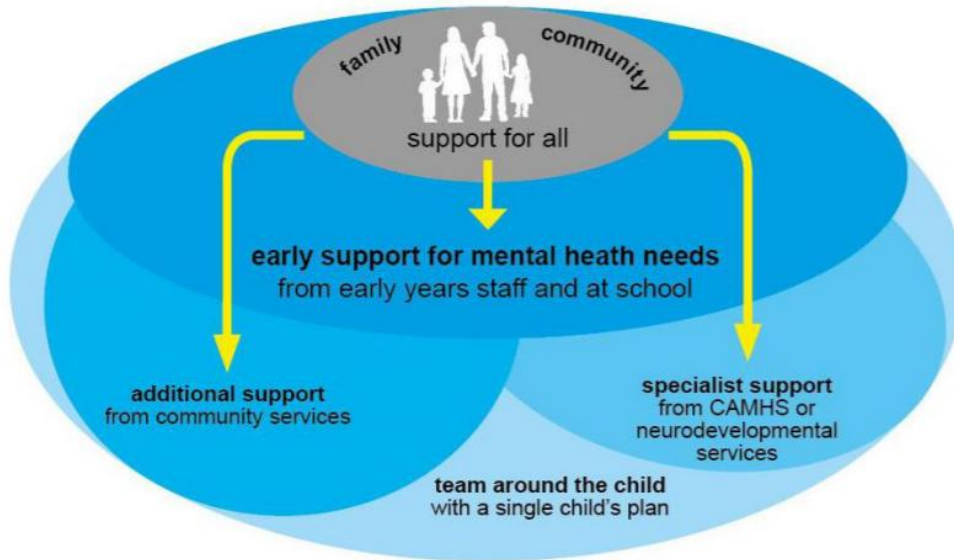
The Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Joint Delivery Board (JDB) - a coalition between Scottish Government, COSLA, third and public sector partners and children and families - operated between 2021 and 2023 to address the need to improve mental health services for children and young people. Eight key deliverables were identified which included enhancing community-based support for mental wellbeing through investment in local partnerships and developing a training programme to increase skills and knowledge of all those working with children and young people. A summary of their work focus, achievements, and future recommendations can be found in their [Final Report \(2023\)](#).

Two significant key deliverables were development and implementation of national CAMHS and Neurodevelopmental service specifications (see [Section 18](#) for further details on the Neurodevelopmental service specification).

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS):

The [CAMHS National Service Specification \(2020\)](#) outlines referral criteria, minimum service standards, and the provisions children, young people and their families can expect. The below diagram illustrates where CAMHS sits within the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing model. Although there is a specific neurodevelopmental pathway CAMHS will support children where mental health problems are co-morbid with neurodevelopmental problems.

Diagram 1: CAMHS within the agreed Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing model:



The service specification highlights CAMHS locality teams sit at Tier 3 of a four-tiered intervention model, with Tier 4 covering more acute conditions/cases via regional or national provision. CAMHS locality teams are said to have a role in supporting lower tier universal and targeted community services, supporting the wider system of mental health care for children under GIRFEC. Specialist CAMHS are for under 18s “with clear symptoms of mental ill health which place them or others at risk and/or are having a significant and persistent impact on day-to-day functioning” (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 10). CAMHS locality teams will provide services for a range of mental health issues (covered on page 4 of the specification) such as ‘moderate to severe emotional and behavioural problems, including severe conduct, impulsivity, and attention disorders’. In addition, they will be supported by services providing more specific expertise for those with more complex/specific difficulties (detailed on page 5), including need for inpatient care, experience of complex trauma, and forensic risks and needs.

Forensic Mental Health Services:

Forensic CAMHS (FCAMHS) “supports a range of agencies and professionals in addressing the mental health and risk management needs of young people presenting with high-risk behaviours. This is conducted through clinical consultations and specialist assessments. This will often include young people in the criminal justice system, prison and secure care. This service should be delivered on a regional basis with links to and from the National Secure Inpatient Psychiatric Service” (Scottish Government, 2020), however FCAMHS is only currently available in Greater Glasgow and Clyde. The proposed inpatient service, [Foxgrove \(NSAIS\) for Scotland](#), will provide inpatient care for up to four 12–18-year-olds who have complex difficulties, need a high level of care, and present a significant risk of harm to others.

The wider [Independent Forensic Mental Health Review \(2021\)](#) - ‘The Barron Review’ - recommended the creation of a single national forensic mental health system and a new

NHS Board for forensic mental health services in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021). In relation to children and young people, the following recommendations were made:

- The new planned National Secure Adolescent Inpatient Service (NSAIS) does not fall under the remit of the new Forensic Board.
- The NSAIS sets up a service to provide access to forensic specialist expertise for local CAMHS teams to support clear pathways into and out of the NSAIS.
- A clearly defined pathway be agreed between the new Forensic Board and the NSAIS for young people who need to transition to adult forensic mental health services.
- Clear interim arrangements put in place for young people who require forensic or learning disability inpatient facilities prior to the NSAIS being opened.

In response to the above review the Scottish Government commissioned a short life working group to “attempt to review and propose a redesign of the planning and governance of the delivery of the health care component of forensic mental health services within the wider health and social care landscape” (Government, 2023b, p. 3). It's [Final Report of Option Appraisal Process \(2023\)](#) provided for clarity a definition of Forensic Mental Health Services:

“Forensic mental health services provide person-centred, safe and effective assessment; care and treatment; for persons with severe and disabling mental health disorders* who pose a risk of harm to others; and who have come to the attention of the criminal justice system (or whose behaviour poses a risk of such contact); in conditions of therapeutic safety and security in hospital (high, medium or low), or in the community and in criminal justice custody.”

*as defined in the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, whether or not they are, or may be, managed under its provision” (Government, 2023b, p. 7). Following sessions with stakeholders the group concluded there is desire for change, though closer to strengthening and building on current systems than systemic transformation.

Adolescent Mental Health in Custody & Secure Care:

Further developments have also taken place in relation to mental health provision in custody and secure care. The [Report on Expert Review of Mental Health Services at HMP&YOI Polmont \(2019\)](#) concluded two high level strategic issues warranting attention were the lack of proactive attention to the needs, risks and vulnerabilities of those on remand and in the early days of custody, and the systemic interagency shortcomings of communication and exchange of information that inhibits the management and care of young people entering or leaving the establishment. Specific recommendations were made about: reducing social isolation; improving the sharing and transmission of information for children and young people entering or leaving custody; developing a bespoke suicide and self-harm strategy for children and young people; taking a more strategic and systematic approach to prison healthcare; developing an enhanced approach to the suicide prevention work; having more consistent learning and review processes to maximise learning; and the Scottish Government having a central coordination point, to review and learn from national and international practice (HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland, 2019).

More recently a report [Understanding the Mental Health Needs of Scotland's Prison Population \(2022\)](#) concluded that there needed to be “joint and co-ordinated action from justice, health and social care and third sector providers” in order to overcome the structural challenges of supporting the mental health needs of individuals in prison (Gilling McIntosh et al., 2022, p. 6). Custody must be avoided for children and young people to best support their mental health, with the [Children \(Care and Justice\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) recognising that if children must be deprived of their liberty, it should be in secure care, with no children detained in the prison estate in Scotland post 28 August 2024, following the commencement of relevant sections of the Act. Community rehabilitation remains the preferred disposal option for children and young people, in line with [Sentencing young people guideline](#) for under 25's.

In relation to secure care, the [Secure Care Pathway and Standards in Scotland \(2020\)](#) set out what all children in, or on the edges of, secure care should expect across the continuum of intensive supports and services, including in respect of their mental and emotional health and wellbeing, before, during and after any stay in secure care. If the Standards are to be fully implemented and meet the aim of improving experiences and outcomes for children and young people, all agencies with roles and responsibilities, including mental health and specialist support services, are required to be involved. In September 2024 CYCJ published their Scottish Government commissioned [Reimagining Secure Care reports](#), advocating for an integrated model of care centred on the needs of children and families, with support available when and where it is needed. The Government have considered the findings and published their [response](#) in June 2025. The response stated that:

“This approach lays the foundation for gradual, well-supported transformation - progressing at a pace that aligns with the evolving needs of children who require intensive care and support, both now and in the future. That is why our response will be delivered over two phases:

- Phase 1 (2025-26 – 2027-28): Capacity restoration and reinforcement
- Phase 2 (2028-29 – 2029-30): Road-testing / readiness for ‘reimagining’” (Scottish Government, 2025, p.3).

Recent Policy Developments and Workforce Supports:

The [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy \(2023\)](#) aimed to ‘reset’ the approach to ‘mental health for everyone’, following the Covid-19 pandemic, recognising mental health as a continuum comprising a range of needs, with some impacted disproportionately due to external factors such as poverty and inequality. It aims to ensure:

- Improved overall mental wellbeing and reduced inequalities.
- Improved quality of life for all people with mental health conditions, free from stigma and discrimination.
- Improved knowledge and understanding of mental health and wellbeing and how to access appropriate support.
- Better equipped communities to support people’s mental health and wellbeing and provide opportunities to connect with others.

- More effective cross-policy action to address the wide-ranging factors that impact people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Increased availability of timely, effective support, care and treatment that promote and support people's mental health and wellbeing, meeting individual needs.
- Better informed policy, support, care and treatment, shaped by people with lived experience and practitioners, with a focus on quality and recovery.
- Better access to and use of evidence and data in policy and practice.
- A diverse, skilled, supported and sustainable workforce across all sectors.

The [Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Delivery Plan 2023-2025](#) describes what will be done during this period to meet strategic targets. The [Mental Health and Wellbeing: Workforce Action Plan 2023-2025](#) reinforces the critical role of both the core mental health and wellbeing and the wider mental wellbeing workforce in promoting positive mental wellbeing, preventing poor or further deteriorating mental health, and in providing timely, effective support, care and treatment. It aims to develop a diverse, skilled, supported, and sustainable workforce, setting out how to do so under the 5 overarching aims of Plan, Attract, Train, Employ and Nurture, with time focussed outcomes identified for each, alongside case studies exemplifying current good practice. Practitioners working with children in conflict with the law are key partners in any mental health response, given their role in assessing need and supporting our most vulnerable children and families.

To support all relevant practitioners, a [Mental Health Improvement and Suicide Prevention Framework](#) has been produced by NHS Education for Scotland, NHS Health Scotland and the Scottish Government, which defines the knowledge and skills specific to roles and responsibilities in relation to mental health improvement and the prevention of self-harm or suicide. Associated [learning](#) resources have been developed across the four identified levels (informed, skilled, enhanced and specialist) to support improvement. A revised [Suicide Prevention Action Plan](#) has also been developed for 2026-2029. The NHS Education for Scotland (NES) [National Trauma Training Programme](#) offers similar packages of support relating to trauma-informed practice, accompanied by [A Roadmap for Creating Trauma-Informed and Responsive Change: Guidance for Organisations, Systems and Workforces in Scotland \(2023\)](#).

NES have also produced the [Children and young people's mental health & wellbeing: a knowledge and skills framework for the Scottish Workforce](#). This framework, published in April 2021, takes a rights-respecting approach, and is intended to be useful for the development of all staff who work with children, young people, and their families. In addition, guidance has been produced to support the transition of individuals moving from children's mental health services to adult mental health services (Scottish Government, 2018a). A new framework [Supporting Children and Young People Experiencing a Mental Health Crisis](#) has also been published (Scottish Government, 2026). This framework promotes a 'no wrong door' whole system approach meaning that services encountering a child or young person experiencing a mental health crisis should be:

- Available in a way which meets the child or young person's needs wherever they require help;

- Centred in equity, equality and rights;
- Trauma-informed, and;
- Attuned and responsive to what children and young people really need (during and after a crisis, including a focus on recovery) (p. 7)

Relaunched in 2023, as an interactive online resource, [The Matrix: A guide to delivering psychological therapies in Scotland](#) provides useful guidance on common mental health needs and outlines evidence-based approaches to meeting these needs. Their [Early Intervention Framework for Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing](#) highlights the importance of considering developmental and systems contexts and work with parents when formulating individual interventions. The section on [Mental Health Difficulties Across the Lifespan](#) details features of, prevalence and recommended treatments of various mental health presentations, with specific tables of treatment recommendations for children and young people available for each. [Populations Requiring Special Considerations and Adjustments](#) specifically covers, amongst others, psychological therapies for Forensic Populations, Neurodivergent People, Conditions Specific to Childhood, and Intellectual/Learning Disabilities, with most content expected in 2025. Whilst focus is on specialist psychological or mental health practitioners in delivering or supervising intervention in NHS contexts, practitioners with a range of experience and training working with children and young people can be supported by specialists in delivering interventions and at various levels of intensity. These interventions can range from self-help and information sharing to highly specialist intervention - depending on level of need. The matrix also highlights that when delivering interventions to children and young people there is consideration of: age and developmental stage; relevant systems and context of issues; the role of parent/carer(s), who may indeed be the intervention focus; and the importance of collaborative working.

The [Mental Health Foundation](#) website has a variety of resources on how to look after your mental health, including specifically for [children and young people](#) and those supporting them. Their 2021 report [A Wellbeing Society: Delivering Good Mental Health for All](#) called for a prevention agenda to empower individuals, families, and communities to protect and improve their mental health and for all political parties to adopt a "mental health in all policies" approach. It remains to be seen how far new policy initiatives will go to creating their aimed for a 'wellbeing society'.

In September 2024, the Scottish Government published the updated [Children and young people - community mental health and wellbeing: supports and services framework](#) which sets out how the supports that children, young people and their families require in relation to their mental health and emotional wellbeing should look like within communities, with a focus on accessibility.

4. Mental health difficulties: classification and diagnosis

The [American Psychiatric Association](#), via the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and the [World Health Organisation](#), via the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) produce classification systems (current versions are the DSM-5-TR and ICD-11 respectively) which offer diagnostic criteria for mental disorders/mental health conditions.

These systems can define and diagnose certain conditions; however, the task of identification is more complex. For example, the experience of mental ill-health or emotional distress can be considered normative at times. As such, rather than discerning if a problem is simply present or absent, there is a need to consider severity and impact, guidance in which is less clear.

These prevailing classification systems do not offer guidance on how to understand or prioritise difficulties when an individual meets the diagnostic criteria for multiple disorders. Nor do they comment on how different difficulties develop, or are maintained, or how they interact with each other over time. This is important to bear in mind, as we know that complexity and co-morbidity of mental health difficulties is common when working with children and young people in conflict with the law. It should also be borne in mind that children and young people can often be sub-threshold on a number of different diagnoses, which can result in greater impairment than would be indicated by the diagnostic profile. This can also have implications in terms of reduced access to intervention and prevention of further escalation (DeJong, 2010).

It is recommended when considering the mental health of children and young people in conflict with the law that a biologically, socially, and psychologically informed case formulation, which can account for all presenting concerns together, as well as speculate on their development and maintenance, should be sought (Johnstone & Gregory, 2015). It is suggested that clinical features that cut across diagnoses (e.g. emotional dysregulation may drive mood difficulties, violent behaviour, and interpersonal difficulties etc.) are important to pay attention to, likely reflecting important intervention targets. Practitioners who have knowledge about a child or young person, their history, and experiences, can make a significant contribution to the development of a highly individualised case conceptualisation.

5. Types of mental health difficulties

This section provides an overview of the mental health disorders/conditions that are experienced most frequently by children and young people, and signposts to best practice information in relation to these.

5.1 Anxiety

According to the [APA, Anxiety Disorders](#) differ from typical feelings of nervousness and anxiousness as they involve excessive fear and anxiety. Anxiety disorders are the most common affecting around 30% of adults at some point in their lives. Anxiety is experienced as a feeling of unease, like worry or fear, and is a relatively common childhood difficulty which can be thought of as a collection of affective, physical, cognitive and behavioural symptoms. Broadly speaking, it can be viewed as a reaction in response to some feared stimulus (e.g. needles, separation from caregiver, thoughts of illness, negative evaluation, failure, etc.). The object of fear can be highly subjective and diverse, however, there are several distinct types of anxiety presentation which are common in children and young people.

In terms of the differing anxiety presentations, brief but severe episodes of anxiety may be experienced as a panic attack, during which acute physical symptoms become so intense

that an individual feels as if they are losing control, choking, or may die. Following the experience of a panic attack an individual may become highly anxious about having another and adjust their lifestyle in the hope of preventing further instances. This often involves avoiding going outdoors, or doing so alone, which is called agoraphobia.

Other types of anxiety presentations include generalised anxiety, in which an individual has worries about many things, and thus potentially exhibits symptoms in response to many stressors. Alternatively, anxiety can be specific to a very particular stimuli (e.g. dentists, vomit, needles, birds, etc.), which is a phobia. Anxiety can also present with regard to separation from caregivers, or in response to the need to speak (selective mutism), both of which tend to manifest more so in early childhood. Alternatively, anxiety or panic can manifest primarily in the interpersonal context and arise due to fear of rejection (social anxiety). This is particularly common in adolescence, impacting self-confidence, relationships, and education/employment, leading to avoidance of situations and interactions that heighten anxieties - symptoms also manifesting as upset or anger at times. Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is also a form of anxiety where anxiety arises secondary to a distressing obsessive thought, belief or prediction. Compulsive or ritualised behaviours are then used to prevent a feared outcome and thus reduce anxiety. Anxiety often presents alongside depressive mood or substance misuse or as part of a traumatic stress reaction. As with other emotions, it is normal to experience anxiety. Public Health Scotland commissioned [Health Behaviour in School Aged Children \(HBSA\) Scotland Survey \(2022\)](#) which showed that, at age 15, 19% of boys and 49% of girls were classed as having moderate or severe anxiety; equating to 1 in 3 children in Scotland. The threshold for mental health services will be the extent of impact the anxiety is having on everyday life. Hypervigilant states may lead to overestimation of threat, and associated defensive or aggressive behaviours, which may be of significance to children and young people in conflict with the law.

Interventions vary depending on the particular presentation and age and stage of the child or young person. Behavioural therapies or cognitive behavioural therapies (CBT) with the child/family are often effective and are considered evidence-based in terms of anxiety treatment. Psychopharmacological interventions may be offered in the short term in more severe cases. Where there are multiple presenting problems, of which anxiety is just one, a more multi-faceted or eclectic intervention may be tailored to individual needs.

For more in-depth information, [NICE](#) have produced various guidelines, which can be consulted depending on the specific anxiety in question. In addition, NHS Education Scotland have also developed an online training resource - [An introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Anxiety](#) - and there is a section on anxiety disorders in [The Matrix: A guide to delivering evidence-based psychological therapies in Scotland](#). Scottish Action on Mental Health (SAMH) have also produced a guide to [Understanding Anxiety](#) which discusses causes, symptoms, and ways to manage anxiety in more detail, as well as signposting to other resources and services.

5.2 Disruptive, impulse-control, and Conduct Disorders

All children display behavioural problems at times. However, if issues such as defiance and poor emotional regulation continue for lengthy periods, and/or behaviours are out of the

ordinary and repeatedly break the established rules in their environment, then a Conduct Disorder may be present (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2015).

According to APA [Disruptive, Impulse Control and Conduct Disorders](#) are: “a group of disorders that are linked by varying difficulties in controlling aggressive behaviors, self-control, and impulses. Typically, the resulting behaviors or actions are considered a threat primarily to others’ safety and/or to societal norms”. Most frequently identified in children in conflict with the law is Conduct Disorder (CD) which is marked by a repetitive and persistent pattern of aggressive, defiant, and antisocial conduct. A diagnosis of CD can be made when a child is aged between six and 18. Younger children with conduct problems might be diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD). To meet the criteria for CD, a child’s behaviour must be significantly out-with what would be expected, given the child’s age and/or stage of development. Examples of such behaviours include initiating fights, bullying, cruelty to others or to animals, destructive behaviour, stealing/robbery, fire-setting, severe violation of rules/defiance, and weapon use. ICD-11 information on conduct disorders states “Criminal behaviours may occur impulsively or opportunistically, or in relation to substance use or intoxication.”, and that “Clinical assessment and diagnosis should focus on the broader pattern of behaviour rather than solely on the criminality of specific behaviours or incidents.”, reinforcing the need for individual assessment and formulation, taking into account any diagnosed CD, but also other possible drivers for behaviours.

For a diagnosis of CD some other conditions must be excluded, including psychotic illness or ADHD. CDs have been described as the single most costly disorder of childhood and adolescence as they are difficult to treat, tend to be intergenerationally transmitted, and are associated with poor outcomes in a range of domains (criminality, mental health, physical health, educational attainment, social/occupational adjustment) (Carr, 2006).

CD’s are often present along with ADHD, depression, and substance misuse, and have a high correlation rate with adverse childhood experiences, and poor educational performance, substance use and conflict with the law (Sagar et al., 2019). To best understand risk in a child or young person who presents with CD, an understanding of an individual’s unique aetiological factors and antecedents is required.

In terms of interventions in adolescence, there is some evidence for the efficacy of anger management interventions when the presentation is considered to be mild. Where difficulties are severe, family and systemic therapies are reported in the literature to be the most effective interventions (NES, 2015). Consistent, positive parenting practices can be effective in treating aggressive and oppositional behaviours, but require parental capacity and motivation, and along with other psychosocial interventions such as individual skill building, can be effective (Buitelaar et al., 2013). For children and young people in conflict with the law, rather than individual therapy, a more complex multi-agency response is required. Effective treatment must be multi-modal, involving family and social systems-based interventions, and cover multiple areas over a lengthy period, crucially beginning with providing the individual and their family with psychoeducation on their condition and potential longer-term outcomes (Sagar et al., 2019).

With regard to CD, local CAMHS thresholds apply, and currently there may be variation in referral criteria. It is recommended that if practitioners would like support with assessment, formulation, and treatment of a child or young person with potential CD, that they contact

their local CAMHS team for advice about making a referral. The [NICE guideline on Antisocial Behaviour and Conduct Disorders in Children & Young People](#) also offers a more in-depth consideration.

5.3 Depression

The APA define [Depression \(major depressive disorder\)](#) as “a common and serious mental disorder that negatively affects how you feel, think, act, and perceive the world” with around 29% of adults having been diagnosed with depression at some point in their lives. Depression is generally a persistent low mood, however, there are different subtypes which can be diagnosed. The common feature of all of these is the presence of sad, empty, or irritable mood, accompanied by somatic and cognitive changes that significantly affect the individual’s capacity to function. Signs of depression exist across the domains of perception, cognition, affect, behaviour, somatic, interpersonal and behaviour (Carr, 2006).

Depression often first appears in late-teens to mid-20s. Depression symptoms in children often include persistent sadness/low mood, being irritable or grumpy, losing interest in things they used to like, feeling tired/exhausted, and possible self-harm and/or thoughts of suicide (NHS, 2023). Depression is more common in adolescents than younger children, and may occur alongside other difficulties such as CD, anxiety, ADHD, or as part of a traumatic stress reaction. A 2022 study revealed that at age 15, 24% of boys and 31% of girls had low mood, with a further 8% of boys and 25% of girls at risk of depression (Inchley et al., 2023, p. 25).

Depression can arise for many reasons; life events like bereavement, or a home/school move, or by longer term issues such as family difficulties, bullying, abuse, or family history. Early intervention in children and young people is vital to promote more positive long-term outcomes and avoid recurrent episodes (Davey & McGorry, 2018; Johnson et al., 2018). There are a range of treatments accessed via CAMHS services, and there may be alternatives in the community for mild to moderate cases. These include cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), family therapies, and interpersonal therapy (IPT) in adolescence. There is a section on depression in [The Matrix: A guide to delivering evidence-based psychological therapies in Scotland](#). Additionally, there is a [NICE guideline: Depression in children and young people](#): identification and management which covers effective interventions for mild to severe depression.

To get the right support, the child must have someone they trust to talk to, to reassure them their feelings are normal, and things can get better. It can also be helpful to talk to friends or others experiencing depression, learning what helps them and that they are not alone. Tips are available from the NHS on [Talking to Teenagers](#), whilst [The Mix](#) offers supportive online chats and groups for 13- to 25-year-olds.

5.4 Trauma and stressor related disorders

[Section 5](#) on Trauma and Adversity, discusses trauma in more detail, and the prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, including the impact of traumatic events and stress, on the developing child. Below we will look at where diagnosable conditions can develop following

trauma experience, with it helpful to first watch this [video from the UK Trauma Council](#) on childhood trauma and the brain.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop following traumatic events. In the literature, two types of PTSD are identified. Type I is considered to be traumatic stress that emerges following the experience of a catastrophe or threat to life - such as a physical or sexual assault, car accident, natural disaster or the death of a loved one. With this type of PTSD, the difficulties relate to reliving the traumatic event, or trying to avoid reminders of the traumatic event, which prompt anxiety and emotional arousal. Symptoms common to PTSD generally occur across four domains - cognition, affect, behaviour and interpersonal - and can include symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, flashbacks, intense distress in response to reminders, hypervigilance, emotional numbing, avoidance of reminders, sleep difficulties, relationship problems and isolation. Such difficulties are considered to be normal in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic experience. For a diagnosis of PTSD however, the symptoms need to persist in the longer-term (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In terms of treatment, PTSD (Type I) tends to respond well to CBT tailored towards trauma and developmental stage (NES, 2015).

The second type of traumatic stress response, or Type II, is known as complex (or developmental) trauma. This reflects the difficulties which are thought to be associated with experience of multiple and chronic traumatic events or processes over the course of development, often in the relational context. This type of presentation has been summarised by the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) as having symptoms across the following domains: interpersonal (e.g. problems with boundaries, distrust and suspiciousness); affect (e.g. difficulty with emotional self-regulation, difficulty knowing and describing internal states); cognition (e.g. problems processing novel information, difficulty planning and anticipating); learning (e.g. problems with language development, problems with orientation in time and space); behaviour (e.g. self-destructive behaviour, oppositional behaviour); physical (e.g. hypersensitivity to physical contact, somatic complaints); dissociation (e.g. amnesia, depersonalisation and derealisation); and identity (e.g. disturbances of body image, shame and guilt) (Cook et al., 2017).

CAMHS referral criteria have traditionally tended to be informed by, and respond to, Type I PTSD. This is possibly as a result of the lack of an adequate classification category in DSM or ICD in relation to complex trauma. There is however growing support for and understanding of complex trauma as a valid conceptualisation of the difficulties that result from maltreatment of children. Children and young people who are in conflict with the law often have significant histories of maltreatment. It is therefore suggested that complex trauma cannot be disregarded. Reflecting this, the new ICD-11 contains both PTSD and [Complex PTSD](#).

Traditionally, maltreated children can present with difficulties which attract diagnoses of ADHD, ASD, CD (or ODD), anxiety, depression or self-harm. The features of many of these diagnoses overlap with complex trauma characteristics in some form, and there is a complicated differential diagnostic task for clinicians when considering a child or young person with multiple presenting concerns and a history of abuse and/or neglect. Multiple experts in the field support a phase-based set of often multi-modal interventions, which target complex sets of difficulties associated with complex trauma, first outlined by Herman

(1992) in her seminal work. Briere and Lanktree (2013) have put forward a treatment guide specific to adolescents.

Enhancing self-regulatory capacities and safety is often a priority. Promoting attachment, providing advocacy, building skills and competencies are other likely methods of intervention. The response to trauma in children and young people will likely not involve an in-depth narrative of the significant traumatic events at the beginning of treatment, which will probably be a longer-term therapeutic task. Indeed, many individuals will not address traumatic events directly in this way until adulthood, if at all; however, there are still a range of important interventions as highlighted above which are relevant.

The experience of childhood trauma may influence risk of violence in numerous ways - for example, the modelling of violence, by denying safety and the development of self-regulation capacities, or by engendering the belief that the world is unsafe, and one must be vigilant and protect oneself. The idiosyncratic nature of the impact of trauma should be considered on a case-by-case basis.

CAMHS referral thresholds in terms of traumatic stress may vary, and where there are concerns, it is recommended that practitioners contact their local CAMHS service to discuss whether a referral is appropriate.

More in-depth information can be found in the [Matrix Stress and Trauma section](#) which includes a section on Complex PTSD, and the [NICE PTSD guideline](#). As noted above, NHS Education for Scotland (NES) has developed a National Trauma Training [Programme](#). The UK Trauma Council have recently launched the [Connect Community of Practice](#) which is a free interactive space to bring professionals together who support children and young people affected by trauma in complex situations. It contains lots of resources and learning events to provide access to evidence informed approaches as well as a discussion forum.

5.5 Schizophrenia/psychotic disorders

Psychosis refers to the group of psychotic disorders, including schizophrenia. It is when thoughts and emotions are disturbed to the point people lose contact with reality. It has three main symptoms:

- Hallucinations: Seeing, hearing or even tasting or smelling things that don't exist outside their mind but feel very real, like hearing voices.
- Delusions: Strong belief in something that isn't true or views that are not shared, like believing someone is conspiring to harm them.
- Disordered thinking and speaking: Thoughts and ideas come very quickly which can make speech fast and confusing (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2022).

Experience of symptoms is referred to as a psychotic episode. The first episode usually occurs in the late teens or early adulthood. Onset is usually preceded by a prodromal phase characterised by sub-threshold psychological symptoms, like mood swings, confusion, anxiety, depression, social isolation, reckless or disinhibited behaviour, and loss of concentration, and potentially low frequency or intense delusional beliefs or hallucinations (Somerset NHS Foundation Trust, 2023). Many of these symptoms are not atypical in

teenagers and could also be representative of other issues/disorders. If behaviours become more pronounced or concerning, then medical advice should be sought. Early interventions such as talking therapies and stress management can prevent psychotic episodes. Psychosis can be triggered by a traumatic experience, substance use, head injuries, childbirth (post-partum psychosis), or following a serious mental illness, like severe depression or Bi-Polar Disorder. Psychosis does not always signal a development of a psychotic disorder, with some people only ever experiencing one psychotic episode in their lifetime (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2022).

Early identification and intervention in response to the first episode of psychosis has a significant and positive impact on longer-term outcomes. Urgent referral to mental health services is recommended. CBT and family interventions often accompany antipsychotic medication. It is rare for children and adolescents to be diagnosed with psychotic disorders, with the prevalence of psychotic-like experiences higher than diagnosis both in adults and adolescents (Musci et al., 2023). Most children will recover from psychotic episodes with medical and therapeutic interventions.

The section of the [Matrix on Psychosis and Schizophrenia](#) is due to have content added to it in 2026. [NICE have produced guidance](#) with regard to psychosis in children and young people, which can be consulted for more in-depth consideration. Early identification and intervention in response to the first episode of psychosis has a significant and positive impact on longer-term outcomes. Where there are concerns of this nature prompt referral to mental health services is recommended, and such cases will be prioritised by CAMHS. In terms of evidence-based interventions, CBT for psychosis or related mood difficulties, and family interventions, are indicated. Regarding violence risk and psychotic presentations, command hallucinations (perceptions of being told to do something) or delusional beliefs (e.g. that they are being targeted or persecuted) may be relevant and critical in terms of violent conduct.

5.6 Non-suicidal self injury

Whilst not classified as a 'mental disorder' non-suicidal self-injury is classed as a condition that may be a focus of clinical attention in the DSM-5-TR and is classed as intentional self-harm within the ICD-11. Self-harm is considered to be any act where injury is purposely inflicted on the self, in the absence of suicidal ideation or intention (suicidal ideation will be considered at section 5.7). It is common for self-harm to occur in the context of other mental health difficulties and/or adverse life experiences. Adolescents who engage in self-harming behaviour often have difficulties with regulating their emotions, solving problems, and engaging with supports. When there is no suicidal function associated with self-harming behaviour, other functions need to be considered so that interventions can be put in place. Common functions, observed clinically, include:

Punishment: Self-harm is driven by a sense of deserving punishment or guilty feelings. This is often associated with a severely negative self-view.

Distraction: When emotional pain is unbearable, self-harming behaviour may serve as a distraction and may be viewed as a positive alternative to emotional distress.

Relief: Individuals who report self-harming often cite a sense of relief or release associated with the act.

Control: Self-harm may give children and young people a sense of power or control over themselves when things around them are overwhelming or seem out-with their ability to change.

Communication: Self-harming may serve as a vehicle to communicate great distress.

These functions are not mutually exclusive, and for the same individual differing functions may apply to different instances of harm over time.

[NICE have produced guidance](#) on the management of self-harm. The evidence base in terms of intervention with children and young people is limited. In terms of CAMHS input, CBT adapted for self-harm and group interventions show some promise. It is likely that eclectic interventions geared towards improving self-regulation capacities and promoting engagement in positive relationships will have some success. [Young Minds](#) have a comprehensive section for [professionals responding to self-harm in children](#) and Childline have online advice for children on how to build their own [Mental Health First Aid Kit](#) to help themselves when life begins to feel more challenging – which involves choosing who to speak to at these times.

5.7 Suicidal behaviour

Whilst not classified as a 'mental disorder' suicidal behaviour is classed as a condition that may be a focus of clinical attention in the DSM-5-TR and is also contained in the ICD-11. Suicide attempts can be thought of as self-harming behaviours with intent to die. Suicide is a significant health concern, with a 2022 report highlighting that probable suicides were the leading cause of death among 5-24 year olds in Scotland between 2011 and 2020 (Public Health Scotland, 2022). Following the tragic deaths by suicide of a number of children and young people in custody in Scotland, an [expert review of mental health services at Her Majesty's Prison and Young Offender Institute \(HMP YOI\) Polmont](#) was undertaken which made a number of recommendations for improvements. In response to this public health concern, the Scottish Government launched their most recent [Suicide Prevention Strategy 2022-2032](#) and initial three year [suicide prevention action plan - Creating Hope Together](#).

The assessment of suicidal behaviour or intent is complex and involves the consideration of many factors across numerous domains. These include suicidal ideation/intent, available methods and the lethality of these, precipitating factors, motivation, individual/psychological factors, mental health, historical factors, and family factors.

Research has identified some key empirically derived risk factors associated with suicide which mental health services will consider (Logan, 2013), e.g.: mental health difficulties, especially mood disorders; prior suicide attempts; substance misuse; prior self-harm; physical illness; and unemployment.

The [Mental Health Improvement and Suicide Prevention Framework](#), produced by NHS Education for Scotland and NHS Health Scotland in 2019, supports individuals to positively impact their own and others' mental health and wellbeing. Aiming to build capacity to prevent suicide, it details the essential knowledge and skills required by individuals across the four identified levels (informed, skilled, enhanced and specialist). All staff working in health and social care should as a minimum have the knowledge and skills at the informed level,

although those likely to have direct and/or substantial contact with individuals who may be at risk of mental ill health, self-harm or suicide are likely to require knowledge and skills at the skilled level. The required knowledge and skills are detailed across six domains, as follows:

- Promote good mental health and wellbeing,
- Tackle mental health inequalities, stigma, and discrimination,
- Support people in distress or crisis,
- Promote resilience and recovery,
- Prevent self-harm or suicide, and
- Improve the quality and length of life for people living with mental ill-health.

Where there are clear threats of actions in terms of suicide, a child or young person should be referred urgently to mental health services and kept safe in the interim, and their access to lethal means restricted. Where concerns are thought to be imminent, i.e., that the child or young person has suicidal intent and means, they should be brought directly to emergency services, given the potentially life-threatening nature of the situation. Support can be offered through the [Samaritans](#), [ChildLine](#), and [Breathing Space](#).

When concerned, asking about suicide is important and may lead to the individual feeling less isolated, better understood and cared for. It is important to include parents or carers, hold a non-judgemental stance, remain calm, and ask open-ended questions. [Public Health Scotland Suicide Prevention Learning Resources](#) highlights established training courses available to practitioners who wish to develop their skills in terms of responding to initial concerns about suicide. More in-depth information can be found in the NICE guidance [Preventing suicide in community and custodial settings \(2018\)](#), which covers ways to reduce suicide and help people bereaved or affected by suicides. The Matrix has a section on the [Prevention of Suicide](#) which is under development with content expected to be added in 2026.

6. Support for mental health

Practitioners are often left wondering how they can best respond to a child or young person's mental health needs. Where presentations are complex there may be a need for high intensity individualised medical or psychological interventions specifically tailored to the unique perpetuating factors relevant to that child or young person. Referrals may therefore need to be made to specialist services such as CAMHS. In some cases, there may also be a need for a child or young person to be detained under mental health legislation. The following section provides an overview of what is helpful to consider when referring a child or young person for specialised mental health support, as well as the type of support provided through mental health legislation. First though, the section outlines what we can all do within our role to support children and young people, regardless of the intensity of additional specialist support required.

6.1 Universal support

Generally, whether or not the level of mental health difficulties experienced by children warrant a referral to CAMHS, or even detention under mental health legislation, there are often commonalities with regard to the vulnerabilities underpinning mental health difficulties and certain considerations in terms of response may be of value:

- **Ensure safety:**
Work to ensure that the child or young person exists in a safe environment (physically and psychologically) cannot be underestimated. Ongoing threat, in the form of bullying, physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, or harassment will likely perpetuate significant distress, and impact on other social or psychological interventions.
- **Listen:**
Often practitioners feel the need to 'do' something about an individual's distress, even when there is no clear course of action or solution. The anxiety associated with this helpless position may at times cause the listener to disengage or divert attention elsewhere. Listening with curiosity and empathy is in itself an important intervention - sometimes a person may just need to be heard and have the complexity of their situation acknowledged.
- **Ask questions:**
There can be a perception that asking questions may be re-traumatising or may promote risky behaviours such as suicide or self-harm. It is suggested that this is more often not the case and that non-judgemental questions, or showing curiosity in response to what the child or young person is sharing, can foster a sense of being understood, noticed, and perhaps even cared for.
- **Normalise:**
Adolescents, especially those with histories of maltreatment or low self-esteem, may feel that mental health difficulties set them apart from others, or are something to be ashamed of. Feeling different may perpetuate the difficulties they are experiencing and it is important to remind them that experiencing strong emotions or distress is normal, especially in difficult contexts.
- **Build relationships:**
Often children and young people in conflict with the law have had significant adversity in their interpersonal relationships from an early age. This may translate into difficulties with trusting others and feeling safe in relationships, which in turn perpetuates mental health difficulties and they may not have the skills to build trusting relationships. Day-to-day interactions have the potential to act as interventions, in that anything that models how to be open, trusting, reliable, playful, consistent, or responsible in relationships is of great benefit over time. This may involve reflecting aloud with the child or young person about your thinking, expectations, or intentions.

- **Promote attachment:**
Safe and secure relationships are protective in terms of mental health and systemic efforts to facilitate positive relationships will promote resilience and wellbeing. This may involve strengthening family relationships or promoting social interaction and inclusion.
- **Build competency:**
Mental health difficulties are often underpinned by low self-esteem or self-efficacy. Supporting and encouraging a child or young person to build competence in an area of occupational or recreational interest to them can promote wellbeing.
- **Regulate:**
Often a child or young person's problems stem from a difficulty with regulating behaviour and/or emotions and they may be overwhelmed by emotions or exhibit challenging or worrying behaviour. Regulation difficulties may be secondary to a neurodevelopmental concern (e.g. ASD, ADHD), attachment difficulties, or trauma, or some combination of all three. What the child or young person will need is supported to regulate themselves, which at first or at times of crisis may require intense support.

Acting as an external regulator involves multiple tasks and is usually contingent on having a positive relationship:

- **Recognition:** Children and young people often have difficulties knowing what it is they are feeling, knowing when difficult emotions are coming, what they are, why they happen when they do, and what to do about them. This leaves them in a vulnerable, powerless, and overwhelmed position. Practitioners can facilitate recognition by reflecting about the child or young person's perspective and experience - for example, "I can see by the expression on your face that you're angry right now", "I'm wondering if you're feeling worried?", "I think lots of people in your position would be feeling sad right now" and so on. This process will help them to label and recognise their emotions, which is a first step in regulation.
- **Modulation:** Helping the child or young person to understand what triggers strong emotions and how they can cope with them is important in terms of making these emotions less overwhelming and therefore promoting self-regulation. This can be done without relating to past experiences or other situations and dealing with the present. For example, "I noticed when you lost that game, your mood seemed to change, and then you called your friend a name. I wonder if you were trying to let us know how angry you felt. Maybe next time, if you lose, you try something different..." Such interactions serve to contain emotions, model empathy, curiosity, caring and help the child or young person to recognise the relationship between events, their feelings and behaviour.

Research indicates that having 'One Good Adult' is highly related to a range of factors that protect against poor mental health, such as perceived support from family and friends, life satisfaction, self-esteem, seeking social support for problems, optimism and using planning strategies to cope with problems (Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012). The [Distress Brief Intervention](#)

[\(DBI\) programme](#), which supports people presenting to frontline services in distress, is now also available nationally to those above the age of 16.

Assessment of Needs:

Assessment of mental or neuro-developmental health needs for children will form part of any multi-agency wellbeing assessment under the [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\)](#) policy, applicable to all children in Scotland requiring an assessment of needs. Alternatively, some children, and young people over the age of 18 who are less likely to be subject to a multi-agency plan, may have their needs picked up as part of a single agency assessment. Many children and young people's presentations can be managed by adhering to the above guidance and by understanding their individual needs and how best to meet these, informed by knowledge of varying mental health and neuro-cognitive conditions, such as those covered earlier. Guidance may also be sought from specialist mental health and neuro-developmental services, although when it is apparent that the following of general support principles and specialist guidance by those in the individual's life are not sufficient, referral to a specialist mental health service may be required.

Services for those under and over 18 differ, with 16- and 17-year-olds potentially supported under either process, depending on local arrangements, culture, and wider contexts, and will be discussed in the next section.

As with any assessment additional procedures must be involved when there are concerns that a child or young person is at risk of harm and requires additional protections and safeguarding, potentially on account of features of mental health or neuro-divergent conditions. For children, the [National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland 2021 - updated 2023](#) should be followed, where necessary. It supports practitioners to respond appropriately to concerns, covering a range of specific needs and concerns which could necessitate a child protection response, including mental health issues, noting that "Child protection procedures are initiated when police, social work or health determine that a child may have been significantly harmed or may be at risk of significant harm." (p.91).

Adults can be supported under the [Adult Support and Protection \(Scotland\) Act 2007](#), which contains measures to identify, protect and support individuals who are at risk of being harmed by themselves or others. The accompanying [Adult Support and Protection \(Scotland\) Act 2007: Code of Practice \(2022\)](#) provides information to practitioners as to the practical application of the legislation. Under s.3(1), the Act defines 'adults at risk' as anyone over 16 who meets the following three-point criteria:

- They are unable to safeguard their own well-being, property, rights, or other interests,
- They are at risk of harm, and
- Because they are affected by disability, mental disorder, illness or physical or mental infirmity they are more vulnerable to being harmed than adults who are not so affected.

Children between the ages of 16 and 18 who require support and protection can currently be supported under child or adult protection procedures, and services will need to consider which legal framework best fits each person's needs and circumstances (Scottish Government, 2023c, p. 9). The Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services

(Iriss) has recently published a guide to [Understanding age in Child Protection guidance and Adult Support and Protection legislation \(2024\)](#) and accompanying guidance and legislation table which provide insight into the variations of the two systems, informed by input from professionals who navigate them, with the table designed as a practical tool for practitioners to help establish which procedures to use in which circumstances. This may also be informed by available service provisions.

6.2 Referrals to specialist mental health services

CAMHS is available to all children, i.e. under 18's, with clear symptoms of mental ill-health which place them or others at risk and/or have a significant and persistent impact on day-to-day functioning. Most children will only require access to CAMHS when an intervention within primary care, education, or a community-based service has not been sufficient to improve outcomes. Given the recent research highlighting the high level of referrals to CAMHS and difficulties accessing CAMHS, reference should be made to the [national referral proforma \(Annex 1\)](#) when considering a referral. In addition, this section provides an overview of what to consider, including in referrals.

Details of symptoms

Providing descriptions of the symptoms observed/described, their onset, frequency, and intensity, will be helpful for informing initial decisions about how to progress the referral. Information on the settings or contexts within which these occur should also be provided where possible.

Impact on daily functioning

As well as describing the symptoms observed it is helpful to describe how these are impacting on the child's day-to-day functioning, as well as on those around them. This will help to inform decisions about whether the referral meets the threshold for CAMHS, and if not, where the most appropriate route to access advice/guidance/intervention is.

Previous intervention/support and outcome

Details of any support or interventions previously provided and the outcomes of these will also assist decisions as to whether the referral is appropriate for CAMHS and meets their threshold. Any barriers or difficulties encountered in achieving positive outcomes should also be included, so that as full a picture as possible is provided.

Current assessment and formulation

Wherever possible a summary of your current assessment and formulation should be provided, highlighting your rationale for CAMHS involvement at this point in time, and the outcomes that you would hope to achieve as a result. It will also be helpful to outline intentions about your ongoing involvement and role, should a CAMHS referral be accepted.

The above considerations should also be made when referring young people to adult mental health services which are available to those aged 16 and over. National service provision under CAMHS has been discussed earlier in this guidance. Adult mental health service set up varies slightly across the 14 Scottish Health Boards, even in terms of language used. Most have Community Mental Health Teams (CMHT), perhaps called resource centres, for assessing and treating those with moderate to severe mental health difficulties, or complex

long-term needs which may be managed under a multidisciplinary approach, with CMHTs generally comprising workers from a range of disciplines such as nurses, doctors, occupational therapists, psychologists, and social workers.

Practitioners should familiarise themselves with service provision and referral criteria for adult mental health services in their local area, particularly when working with 16- to 18-year-olds, when a decision will need to be made as to whether to refer to the CMHT or CAMHS.

6.3 Detention under mental health legislation

At times, when children are alleged to have committed an offence and have come into contact with the justice system there may be concerns that they have some form of 'mental disorder'. Mental disorder is the term used within the relevant mental health legislation - the [Mental Health \(Care and Treatment\) \(Scotland\) Act 2003](#) - and is defined as those with 'mental illness, learning disability and personality disorder'. The 2003 Act, which came into force in 2005, increased the rights and protection of people with mental disorders, including children, and provides options to allow for the appropriate assessment and treatment at various stages of the legal process. The principles on which the Mental Health Act is founded are derived from the work of the [Millan Committee](#) (known as the Millan Principles). The Millan Principles are:

- **Non-discrimination** - People with mental disorders should, whenever possible, retain the same rights and entitlements as those with other health needs.
- **Equality** - All powers under the Act should be exercised without any direct or indirect discrimination on the grounds of physical disability, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, colour, language, religion or national or ethnic or social origin.
- **Respect for diversity** - Patients should receive care, treatment and support in a manner that accords respect for their individual qualities, abilities and diverse backgrounds and properly takes into account their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic group and social, cultural and religious background.
- **Reciprocity** - Where society imposes an obligation on an individual to comply with a programme of treatment and care, it should impose a parallel obligation on the health and social care authorities to provide appropriate services, including ongoing care, following discharge from compulsion.
- **Informal care** - Wherever possible care, treatment and support should be provided to people with mental disorder without recourse to compulsion.
- **Participation** - Patients should be fully involved, to the extent permitted by their individual capacity, in all aspects of their assessment, care, treatment and support. Account should be taken of their past and present wishes, so far as they can be ascertained. Patients should be provided with all the information necessary to enable them to participate fully. All such information should be provided in a way which renders it most likely to be understood.
- **Respect for carers** - Those who provide care to patients on an informal basis should receive respect for their role and experience, receive appropriate information and advice, and have their views and needs taken into account.
- **Least restrictive alternative** - Patients should be provided with any necessary care, treatment, and support both in the least invasive manner and in the least restrictive

manner and environment compatible with the delivery of safe and effective care, taking account, where appropriate, of the safety of others.

- **Benefit** - Any intervention under the Act should be likely to produce for the patient a benefit which cannot reasonably be achieved other than by the intervention.
- **Child welfare** - The welfare of a child with mental disorder should be paramount in any interventions imposed on the child under the Act (Scottish Executive, 2001).

The Scottish Mental Health Law Review (SMHLR) has reviewed the 2003 Act, with the aim of further improving the rights and protections of individuals with a mental disorder and removing barriers to those caring for them. As well as reviewing the 2003 Act, it also considered the need for convergence of incapacity, mental health and adult support and protection legislation. The third SMHLR Report, published in July 2021, included a section on the findings so far from the Children and Young People Advisory Group, which recognised the need to effectively join up the legal and policy frameworks that affect children and young people who require support with their mental health. The report also indicated that the SMHLR would take account of the recommendations made in 2019 by the [Independent Review of Learning Disability and Autism in the Mental Health Act \(Rome Review\)](#). One of the fundamental recommendations from this review is that learning disability and autism be removed from the definition of mental disorder; another is that Scotland works towards a law that removes discrimination in detention and compulsory treatment on the basis of disability - in line with the [United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) (UNCRPD).

The [SMHLR final report](#) was published in September 2022. To take forward the recommendations they have been broken down into short, medium, and long term and there is a recognition that it will take time for them to be fully implemented.

In relation to children, recommendations cover:

- principles of respecting the rights of the child;
- rights to support; crisis services;
- emergency detention safeguards;
- 16- and 17-year-olds in CAMHS;
- interaction between child and adult legal provision; independent advocacy;
- accountability;
- autism, intellectual disability and other neurodevelopmental differences;
- safeguards for treatment;
- perinatal mental illness;
- relationships between parents and children; and
- exploring integration of child law and mental health law.

The review aspires for all mental health and capacity legislation and practice to comply with current human rights standards.

The Scottish Government issued their [Response to the SMHLR](#) in 2023, stating:

“Our vision is that our mental health system upholds human rights and enables people to live well, with choice and control over their own lives, as well as any care, treatment, or wider assistance they might need.”

There is emphasis on embedding a human rights culture across legislation, policy, and practice for those with mental illness / lacking capacity, allowing for more autonomy in decision making about their care, focus on the least restrictive practices possible, and improving safeguards and accountability mechanisms. Acknowledging the level of change proposed will take time, the review proposes establishment of a Mental Health and Capacity Reform Programme to co-ordinate and drive change over time. Seven ‘high-level priorities’ for inclusion in the Reform Programme are stated, including Human Rights Enablement (incorporating early work with the workforce to understand and apply rights-based approaches in practice) and Mental Health Law Reform (this will involve exploration of definition of ‘mental disorder’ and who this should cover in future legislation, working alongside the development of legislation to enhance and protect the rights of those with a learning disability or neurodivergent condition). For further information see Section 18 on Neurodevelopment.

At present, the 2003 Act makes specific provisions to safeguard the welfare of children (a child is defined as any person under the age of 18 years). Section 2 makes provisions to safeguard the welfare of any child, emphasising that decisions should be taken that “best secures the welfare of the patient”. Police have a duty to ensure that vulnerable people and those in custody who, owing to mental disorder, appear to be unable to understand sufficiently what is happening or communicate effectively can access appropriate adult support. This support is designed to help vulnerable people (aged 16 or over) understand what is happening, and to facilitate communication between them and the police; it is detailed in the [Appropriate Adults Standard Operating Procedure](#). Guidance has also been produced for local authorities about their [statutory duties in relation to the provision of appropriate adult services](#).

When a child is held in custody before a court appearance and relevant professionals become aware of signs of possible mental disorder, then a mental health assessment is normally requested. This assessment is generally carried out by a forensic medical practitioner who can ask for an urgent psychiatric assessment and, if required, an assessment by a Mental Health Officer. The outcome of the mental health assessment should be communicated to the police and should be included in the police report to the prosecutor. The guidelines identify that the main issues likely to be considered in these circumstances are:

- Does the person appear to be suffering from a mental disorder?
- Does he/she currently pose a risk to him/herself or other people?
- Do they require assessment or treatment in hospital?
- If so, how urgently is this required?
- Is the person fit to be interviewed and if so, do they require an appropriate adult?
- Is the person fit to plead were they to appear in court?
- May the person require community mental health services?

Depending on the outcome of the assessment the following options are available: informal admission or contact with psychiatric services; application for a compulsory treatment order;

immediate admission under Emergency Detention Certificate or a Short Term Detention Certificate; recommendation for an assessment or treatment order; or no recommendation at present, but suggestion that non-urgent psychiatric assessment is sought while the person is on remand. An application for an assessment or treatment order is generally the most appropriate option when the alleged offence is serious and/or the person appears to pose a significant risk to others.

Concerns about possible mental disorders that require assessment may also arise during the court process. Section 130 of the 2003 Act provides detail about two types of pre-sentence orders - assessment and treatment orders. These can be used pre-conviction and post-conviction before sentencing and are used to make sure that people who appear to have a mental disorder are assessed, and if required, treated, prior to the final disposal of the case by court. An assessment order can authorise detention in a specified hospital for up to 28 days and, in certain circumstances, the giving of medical treatment. A treatment order can authorise detention in a specified hospital for the whole of the pre-trial or pre-sentence stage and, in certain circumstances, the giving of medical treatment.

The prosecutor may apply for an assessment or treatment order when a person has been charged with an offence, a relevant disposal has not been made in the proceedings in respect of the offence, and it appears to the prosecutor that the person has a mental disorder. Scottish Ministers may apply for an assessment or treatment order when the person has been charged with an offence, has not been sentenced, is in custody and it appears to the Scottish Ministers that the person has a mental disorder.

The court may make an assessment order when there are reasonable grounds for believing that (based on the evidence of a medical practitioner):

- The person has a mental disorder,
- It is necessary to detain the person in hospital to assess whether medical treatment is available, treatment would be likely to prevent the mental disorder worsening or alleviate any of the symptoms or effects of the disorder and if not provided with it there would be a significant risk to the health, safety or welfare of the person or the safety of any other person (Section 52D(7)),
- If an assessment order were not made there would be a significant risk to the health, safety or welfare of the person or a significant risk to the safety of any other person,
- The hospital proposed by the medical practitioner is suitable for the purpose of assessing the conditions above,
- If an assessment order was made the person could be admitted to the hospital before the expiry of the period of seven days beginning with the day on which the order is made,
- And that it would not be reasonably practicable to carry out the assessment unless an order was made.

If an assessment order is made, the responsible medical officer must submit a written report to the court within 28 days on the individual's mental condition and whether they meet the conditions of Section 52D(7), described above, so that a decision on how to proceed can be made. On receiving the report, the court will revoke the assessment order and decide on one of the following options: make a treatment order; commit the person to prison or such other institution to which the person might have been committed had the assessment order not

been made or otherwise deal with the person as the court considers appropriate; or extend the assessment order for a period not exceeding seven days on one occasion only.

If a person is on an assessment order pre-trial, the order ends if:

- A treatment order is made,
- They are liberated in due course of law,
- Summary proceedings are deserted,
- Solemn proceedings are deserted,
- They are acquitted,
- They are convicted,
- They are found insane in bar of trial.

If the person is on an assessment order post-conviction but pre-sentence, the order ends if:

- A treatment order is made,
- Sentence is deferred,
- A sentence is imposed,
- One of the following mental health disposals is made - interim compulsion order, compulsion order, guardianship, hospital direction (which under the Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Act 2024, once commenced, will be available for any child who meets the legal criteria and is over the age of criminal responsibility and under 18), any disposal under section 57, probation order with a requirement of treatment.

The court may make a treatment order if it is satisfied, based on the evidence of two medical practitioners (one must be an Approved Medical Practitioner), that:

- The person has a mental disorder,
- It is necessary to detain the person in hospital to assess whether medical treatment is available, it would be likely to prevent the mental disorder worsening or alleviate any of the symptoms or effects of the disorder and if not provided with it there would be a significant risk to the health, safety or welfare of the person or the safety of any other person (Section 52D(7)),
- The hospital proposed by the approved medical practitioner and the medical practitioner is suitable for the purpose of giving medical treatment to the person,
- And that if a treatment order were made, such person could be admitted to such hospital before the expiry of the period of seven days beginning with the day on which the order is made,
- And that having regard to all the circumstances and any alternative means of dealing with the person, it is appropriate.

During the treatment order the Responsible Medical Officer will prepare a report to inform the various statutory options available. Pre-conviction, the options to consider are insanity in bar of trial, insanity at the time of the offence, diminished responsibility and what the appropriate disposal should be. Published guidance on the 2003 Act on [Compulsory powers in relation to mentally disordered offenders](#) provides a detailed overview of these options and defines them as follows:

Insanity in bar of trial - "If a person's mental disorder is such that he/she cannot participate adequately in the court process, (i.e. cannot understand the proceedings or instruct a legal representative as to a defence), then it has long been held that it is unfair for that person to be tried. If this is the case the court may find the person insane in bar of trial (or insane and unfit to plead) and there is no trial, or where the trial has commenced, it will be discharged".

Insanity at time of offence - "If a person was mentally disordered at the time of the offence, then this may affect his/her legal responsibility for his/her actions. In some cases, the court may find that the person's mental condition was such that he/she cannot be held responsible for his/her actions, he/she is then acquitted on account of insanity".

Diminished responsibility (only applicable to charges of murder) - "In murder cases, a person's condition may be such that although he/she cannot be acquitted on account of insanity, he/she may be found to be of diminished responsibility. The latter is a mitigating plea as opposed to a defence and therefore does not result in acquittal, but in conviction for the lesser offence of culpable homicide".

A treatment order can last for the whole pre-trial period. However, where the responsible medical officer is satisfied that the conditions in section 52D(7) of the Act are no longer met or that there has been a change of circumstances since the order was made which makes the continued detention no longer appropriate, they must submit a report in writing to the court. The court may revoke, confirm, or vary the treatment order.

If the person is on a treatment order pre-trial, the order will end if:

- They are liberated in due course of law,
- Proceedings are deserted,
- They are acquitted,
- They are convicted,
- They are found insane in bar of trial.

If the person is on a treatment order post-conviction but pre-sentence, the order will end if:

- Sentence is deferred,
- Sentence is imposed,
- One of the following mental health disposals is made - compulsion order, guardianship order, hospital direction, any disposal under section 57 of 2003 Act, probation order with a requirement of treatment.

The [Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland](#) provides information about good practice including the [Rights in mind booklet \(2017\)](#). The Mental Welfare Commission also have an online guide to [Human Rights and Mental Health](#). It is particularly important to be aware of individuals' rights given that the [Mental Welfare Commission \(2020\)](#) found increased numbers of children being detained under the 2003 Act, without the authorisation of a Mental Health Officer (MHO) – an important safeguard. The issue was raised by the Mental Welfare Commission to the Scottish Mental Health Law Review, where there are recommendations to address this.

The latest [Mental Health Act Monitoring Report 2024-25](#) by the Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland, expresses concern that numbers of those detained on an emergency detention certificate (EDC) without MHO consent continues to remain high with only 38.6% of EDC's having MHO consent in 2024-25. Of great concern is that for those under 25 68% did not have the safeguard of MHO consent as part of the EDC assessment and subsequent detention. Meanwhile the [Children and young people monitoring report 2024-25](#) indicated that in 2024-25 there were 71 admissions, involving 57 children, to non-specialist hospital wards (primarily adult mental health wards) for intervention in relation to their mental health difficulties. Where further information was available to the Commission on children and young people admitted, it indicated that 22% were care experienced and looked after and accommodated by a local authority. Nine (16%) of these children were 15 or younger, with 48 aged 16 or 17. This year's report continues to highlight a number of children had lengthy stays on wards not designed for their needs, with a significant minority of longer stays experienced by those who were care experienced or with a learning disability. The report indicates a continued lack of age-appropriate provisions during their stay, such as recreational activities (43% had none), education (over 80% had none), and advocacy (31% had none; and where they did have access less than 13% had access to advocacy that specialised in the needs of children and young people) - indicating shortfalls in meeting a number of UNCRC articles. The Commission welcomed the work being undertaken to develop specialist mental health services but noted that: "this year marks the 20th anniversary of the Mental Health Act, when health boards were given statutory duties to ensure that children and young people who were admitted to hospital were provided with the accommodation and the services they require. We are still some way away from this being reflected in the experience of children and young people in Scotland, who continue to be admitted to non-specialist wards due to a lack of specialist service provision" (p.28). The need for holistic, child-centred alternatives to hospital that are available and accessible was also noted.

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