

22 February 2021

Dear Principal

Introduction of a Text-A-Nurse service for post primary pupils in NI

In response to the reported mental health and wellbeing issues facing children and young people, and those working with them, the Department of Education has been working collaboratively with other Government departments and agencies to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education.

The local School Nursing Services are introducing a new pilot week beginning 22 February 2021 called "Text-a-Nurse" across NI. This service uses a secure web based platform which allows a quick and easy way for school aged children to get help, advice and support from a school nurse confidentially.

The Text-a-Nurse Service is one of a range of services and programmes that has been proposed to support implementation of the DE Framework. It aims to provide a secure and confidential text messaging service for young people aged 11-19, which will allow them to easily and anonymously get in touch with a school nurse for advice and support about their physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. Text messages from the young people will be managed by the local school nurse team using the ChatHealth web platform. This text messaging advice service will initially be available to all post primary pupils across Northern Ireland, with the intention of rolling this out to school staff and parents/carers if they have concerns and wish to seek advice about a young person.

The service is available 9am to 5pm during the week in both term time and school holidays (excluding bank holidays).

As this is a new service in NI it is planned to introduce it as a pilot programme, but providing full coverage across all post primary settings. The pilot will be subject to review at least 6 months in advance of the expiration of the pilot in March 2023, in order to evaluate performance and determine future plans for the programme.

The Text-a-Nurse service is set in the context that digital technologies have transformed our lives, more so in recent times during the Covid-19 pandemic and the social restrictions placed upon all of us, including our young people. The School Nursing Service aims to capitalise on this by exploring new ways of engaging pupils and reaching out to offer health related advice and support.

This service will provide advice about sensitive health issues where young people might want to avoid a face to face appointment, and school nurses can provide help, advice and support with a variety of issues including:

- Emotional health and wellbeing
- Stress and anxiety
- Self-harm
- Alcohol and drugs
- Body Image
- Smoking
- Bullying
- Sexual health
- General health issues

We will be providing ongoing awareness raising about the service through the PHA and Department of Education utilising a variety of methods including social media, posters etc.

We would request your support by using your local arrangements in school to increase young people and their parents' awareness and advertise the posters and Text number widely to all of your pupils.

Finally we hope that you and your staff, as well as the children and families you support, benefit from this important partnership between the Department of Education and the Department of Health.

Yours faithfully



Peter Weir
Education Minister



Director of Nursing, Midwifery and AHP
Public Health Agency