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Building a school mental health research partnership: the national WISDOM research network

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Abstract

Background:

School health research networks provide an opportunity to build and sustain essential partnerships between academic health researchers and education providers. We set-out to co-create a network that brings together academic mental health researchers and diverse schools across England to facilitate high-quality and efficient child and adolescent mental health research. This paper describes how we used a collaborative development process and provides an overview of the WISDOM research network in its initial period of activity.

Methods:

The network development process was guided by co-production principles and included: consultations with existing school networks; a survey and audio-recorded interviews with individuals working in and with schools; and drafting and refining processes and materials in discussion with key stakeholders. Initial consultations informed survey and interview questions. Survey (N=46) and interview participants (N=14) represented primary schools, secondary schools and other school settings (special schools and alternative provision). Interview transcripts were analysed using a template analysis approach, and key insights across survey responses and interviews were organised into themes.

Results:

A network was established that considers the whole school community, supports staff development and has systems to efficiently communicate with schools. In its initial period of activity, the WISDOM research network (https://wisdom.mhid.org.uk/) has 85 school members and supported 28 research partner activities, including recruitment to a range of studies and patient and public involvement and engagement activities.

Conclusion:

Collaborative development has guided the WISDOM academic-school partnership. Ongoing monitoring of school member characteristics, engagement in partner research activities, and member experiences will help ensure the WISDOM research network supports research initiatives, meets school needs and is sustained longer-term.

Keywords

Schools, mental health, network, co-production

Background

School-based mental health provision and research have both surged in recent decades, yet the structures that connect schools and researchers have not kept pace with this shift. At the same time, rising rates of mental health difficulties among children and adolescents (1,2) and the well-established links between mental health and academic outcomes (3) underline the value of generating high-quality evidence in school contexts. Schools are central to young people's daily lives and provide a natural context in which researchers and educators can work together to understand the determinants and prevalence of mental health difficulties. Growing recognition of schools' role in promoting wellbeing and delivering universal and targeted interventions (4) means that schools and researchers have shared interests in developing and testing approaches that are feasible, acceptable and effective in everyday practice. By collaborating in school environments, partners can examine how multiple interacting influences shape young people's mental health (5,6) and can evaluate interventions within the complexity of real-world education systems (7) in ways that inform both practice and policy.

While the complexity of schools brings opportunities for mental health research, it also presents key logistical and practical challenges (8). In England, schools are under considerable resource pressure, be that time pressure in an extensive curriculum, capacity pressure with substantial staff workload, academic pressure to achieve particular outcomes, financial pressure that can limit flexibility and innovation; all alongside high staff turnover (9,10). In this context, finding an opportunity for additional activities can be particularly difficult. Structures and systems vary across schools and recruiting schools as sites for mental health research often requires in-depth insight and understanding into how schools operate. As well as marked differences in how primary and secondary as well as mainstream and non-mainstream settings are organised, there are differences in the structures and priorities across the diverse types of school that exist in England (e.g., schools that are funded and managed by the local authority versus Academy schools that are funded by the national government but with freedom over

their curriculum and managed by trusts that are responsible for either a single or multiple schools). It is therefore perhaps not surprising that developing new school-researcher partnerships is time consuming for both researchers and schools. Researchers that seek to engage a large number of schools can often dedicate substantial time and resources to approaching and building relationships with school staff in the course of a research study, however these relationships may be lost when research projects or funding ends. Schools are often keen to contribute to research, but staff are unsure how to initiate partnerships with researchers and understandably have concerns about adding to their workload, particularly where tangible benefits for their pupils or staff are not clear (11,12).

Sustained academic-practitioner-public partnerships are increasingly called for in mental health research. Implementation drivers for research point to the important role target beneficiaries of research can make in contributing, where appropriate, throughout the research process (13) to enhance the research questions, study methods and implementation of any positive findings. The importance of involving school staff and students in all aspects of school mental health research have also received growing recognition, to ensure that research and developed interventions meet the needs of different school environments and populations (12) and address common implementation barriers (14). Implementation science highlights the need for academic-practitioner-end user partnerships to 'translate' research knowledge into routine practice, and co-creation and co-production approaches go further by seeking to bring researchers together with the public and other key stakeholders to 'generate' new knowledge collaboratively (15). Networks offer a valuable approach to bring together researchers, practitioners and the public to foster and sustain these types of partnerships and research collaborations. In the UK, primary care research networks are a long-standing example of this, designed to foster a positive research culture in primary care settings and increase and diversify involvement in primary care research (16,17). This type of network has the potential to provide the infrastructure that can facilitate and enable research activity by providing opportunities for collaboration across the whole

research cycle (from setting research priorities to implementing findings) (16,18,19), and removing the need for each research team or project to build new partnerships. In this way, a network that brings together academic researchers with diverse school communities across England to foster long term collaborative partnerships could help address some of the key recruitment, retention and implementation challenges for school-based mental health research in England.

In the UK, there are established national and regional school health research networks that bring together schools and the systems surrounding schools with academic researchers. This includes SHRN and SHINE - providing national network infrastructure in Wales and Scotland respectively, and more recently the SW-SHRN in the south-west region of England (20–22). These networks seek to foster relationships that can enable schools and researchers to work collaboratively to generate and use evidence on health improvement in school settings, particularly via regular co-produced pupil and/or staff surveys managed by the networks. Alongside administering regular health and wellbeing surveys, the SHRN in Wales and SHINE in Scotland also support other high-quality health research in schools by advertising other selected studies to schools in their networks. In England, there are examples of large-scale mental health and wellbeing surveys that are facilitated through cross-sector collaborations in multiple geographic regions (e.g., the BeeWell programme (23) and the OxWell Student survey (24)), but to our knowledge there are no networks that operate nationally across England that seek to connect schools with mental health research programmes to facilitate varied types of mental health research.

Current Project

We set-out to co-create a dynamic network to bring together schools from across England with academic researchers to facilitate a range of high-quality child and adolescent mental health research – from small qualitative studies to large-scale epidemiological surveys, measurement development and evaluation, and trials to test interventions. The network was set up to be a national network for schools in England with pupils aged 4 to 18 years. The aim was to include a large number of primary schools

(ages 4-11), secondary schools (ages 11-16), sixth form and further education colleges (ages 16 – 18) from different geographic regions in England and for the membership to broadly reflect the national school pupil sociodemographic characteristics. The intention was to create infrastructure that facilitates school-academic mental health research partnerships which in the future could also be expanded to support routine surveys or research activities of its own. In order to establish the network, we collaborated with school staff and other key school stakeholders to develop the overall design and scope of the network activities and co-produce key processes and materials for the network. In this paper, we 1) report on the process to develop a new school mental health research network 'WISDOM' (Working In Schools to Deliver On Mental health); 2) share how insights from the collaborative development process informed plans, procedures and materials; and 3) provide an overview of the design of the WISDOM research network and the initial period of activity.

Method

Overview of approach

We used a co-development process that was guided by the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR)'s principles of co-production (25) (power sharing; including all perspectives; respecting and valuing others; reciprocity; building relationships; see Table 1). To design the network and produce the relevant materials, we used the following activities: i) consultations with representatives facilitating existing school research networks; ii) a survey and individual interviews with professionals working in and with schools in England; and iii) refining processes and materials in consultation with school staff, pupils, researchers and other community stakeholders. The process was designed to be formative and responsive to adaptation as necessary. Figure 1 provides an overview of the network development process.

An officer from the University of Oxford Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee reviewed the processes and advised the activities described were not classified as research

(instead classified as PPIE: patient and public involvement and engagement) and therefore did not require ethical review (Reference: 86612/RE001).

[Insert Table 1] [Insert Figure 1. Stages of network development]

Description of network development activities

Stage i: Consultations with existing networks

We consulted with individuals with roles overseeing and facilitating national and regional school research and school mental health networks in the UK. Our aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the approaches used to set-up and run school research networks, and to seek their advice and guidance. In these meetings, we explored what worked well, common challenges, and how a new national school mental health research network could complement existing school networks with different remits and geographic coverage.

A summary of key learnings from consultations with representatives facilitating existing networks is provided in Additional file 1. These discussions highlighted 1) potential strategies for building and sustaining partnerships with schools, and 2) ideas on what the network could offer its member schools. These were integrated in the survey and interview questions (Stage ii). Through these discussions we also learned about ways to partner with researchers and advertise research opportunities to member schools which we drew on later to develop our network processes.

Stage ii: Survey and interviews

Recruitment

We recruited professionals working in or with primary and secondary schools in England to take part in an online survey and/or an individual interview to explore barriers and facilitators to schools joining a research network, and to investigate schools' needs and wants from such a research network.

Guided by the principles of including diverse perspectives and valuing different forms of knowledge (25), our aim was to capture views and perspectives from professionals working in a range of

geographic regions and schools with varied levels of deprivation. We also sought to include participants working in or with primary and secondary schools in a range of roles from across the school system, including: school staff (e.g., teachers, support staff, staff with roles related to pupil mental health); school leaders; representatives of external organisations that work in schools (e.g., charities, mental health providers); senior leaders in Academy Trusts, and local authorities with oversight of multiple schools.

To recruit participants, we distributed adverts and information sheets via email and follow-up phone calls to a range of relevant organisations (e.g., schools, Academy Trusts, local authorities) from different geographic regions in England and through existing contacts, social media, and at in-person education conferences and events. We used publicly available information on pupil population characteristics published by the Department for Education and local authorities to select individuals and organisations to approach and monitored participant characteristics as recruitment progressed. All participants provided written informed consent to participate via a secure online platform. Individuals who consented to participate in the online survey could opt to respond anonymously or choose to provide their contact details (for future activities) and place of work. Those who expressed an interest in participating in an interview consented to provide their contact details and background information (job role, school type, years in role, age, gender, ethnicity) and prior to the interview completed a consent form, including explicit consent to audio-recording and use of de-identified quotes.

Data collection procedure

Both the survey and interviews were designed to capture participants' views on what would make a network useful and feasible for them, and to give them space to propose features and ways of working.

Survey responses were collected via a Qualtrics online survey. Questions asked for participants' views about different aspects of a school mental health research network (e.g., how best to advertise

and recruit schools to the network; what being part of the network should involve for schools; factors that might encourage or deter schools joining or staying involved). The survey consisted of 18 items, with a mix of response formats (multiple-choice, rating scales [0 to 10], free text) (see Additional file 2 for a copy of the survey questions).

Interviews (~ 30 – 60 minutes long) were conducted online via a Microsoft Teams video or audio call or in person. Interviews explored participants' views of a school mental health research network, potential barriers and facilitators to schools joining, and desirable key features of a network (see Additional file 1 for the topic guide). Interviews were audio-recorded using an external audio recorder and transcribed verbatim by the interviewer or another member of the team, with identifiers removed or replaced in transcriptions; detailed notes were taken for one interview where a technical problem prevented recording. Interview participants were offered a £20 voucher.

Data analysis

Survey responses: We summarised closed survey responses using descriptive statistics calculated in R using the dplyr package (26). In parallel, free-text survey responses were coded according to the explicit content of responses. One analyst (ZR) developed and applied an initial set of codes. Initial codes were then refined following review by a second analyst (CS) and wider team discussion, and frequencies were calculated for finalised codes.

Interview transcripts: We used a template analysis approach (27) and developed preliminary template structure that included broad categories based on the project aims and discussion topics included in the interview guides. This preliminary structure was then further developed through initial coding of five transcripts, using a 'bottom-up' approach to generate and group codes. The revised template was then applied to all transcripts, using an iterative process that allowed for new codes to be generated and integrated, or existing codes to be refined. Coding was led by one analysist (CS), with a

second analyst supporting initial coding (CE), and regular discussion with the wider team. NVivo version 12 was used to facilitate the coding process.

Themes and sub-themes were developed by identifying and exploring patterns across the coded interview dataset. This involved carefully considering the links and distinction between key ideas and concepts. This was an iterative process where initial themes and sub-themes were developed by one analyst (CS), and refined through a series of team discussions.

Synthesising survey and interview data: Codes assigned to the survey responses, both text and closed-question topics, were mapped onto the interview theme/subtheme structure to identify similarities and differences. These were then gradually integrated so that insights from each data source were captured in a single thematic structure.

Stage iii: Co-produce network processes and materials

Following Stage ii, we established an independent advisory group to provide input and advice on decisions related to the overall design and core components and processes of the network. We selected a small group of advisors with expertise in school leadership and school partnerships (including leaders in an Academy Trust, a national child mental health charity and a national school mental health research network), with a view that the group may expand and evolve in the future. We shared key learnings from Stage i and insights from Stage ii with the advisory group and sought their views and advice on ways to use and respond to these findings in the network design and processes. We then drafted and refined the key network processes and materials through an iterative co-production process, seeking advice and feedback from the advisory group and other relevant experts throughout (e.g., we consulted with the University information compliance team to develop data management procedures and develop privacy notices, school staff and researchers reviewed draft materials (see Additional file 3)). The responsibility for final decision making and approval of the launched processes

and materials was shared across the team (all authors), with decisions discussed and agreed through regular team meetings.

To develop the brand identity and website, we worked with school students and a graphic designer to co-create a visual identity that young people felt represented mental health, research and networks in school contexts. Initially, the graphic designer had a one-off consultation session with an external Youth Advisory Group (YAG) to gain insight into young peoples' understanding of the concepts of 'mental health', 'research', and 'network'. We then planned and conducted an interactive lesson with students from one primary school class (30 year 6 students), two secondary school classes (16 Year 7 students, 7 Year 12 students), and an additional small group of secondary students (1 Year 8 student, 4 Year 10 students), to generate ideas for the logo design. The interactive lesson (see Additional file 4) was tailored for students' age to encourage discussion around the core ideas ('mental health', 'network', 'research', 'graphic design') and then students were asked to work independently to create logo designs (based on what they believed visually represented the key words). This process generated logo designs from students across multiple year groups (Year 5, aged 9-10; Year 7, aged 11-12; Year 12, aged 16-17). The graphic designer then worked with select colours and shapes and developed the overall look and feel of the network's logo and branding (see Figure 2). This process aimed to give young people a visible and shared ownership of the network's identity.

In parallel, we worked collaboratively with the web designer to develop and refine the overall design of the website, and to develop the website content, layout and functionality, and worked with a partner video production company to develop a short video introducing the network.

[Insert Figure 2. Branding development flowchart]

Results

Survey and interview participants

Survey (N=46) and interview (N=14) participant characteristics are provided in Additional file 5. Most survey participants (85%) described themselves as female; they held varied roles including school leaders (33%), other school staff (e.g., teachers, pastoral leads, support staff) (39%), representatives of external organisations that work in schools (22%) and senior leaders in Academy Trusts and local authorities with oversight across multiple schools (7%). Survey participants worked across different types of schools, including primary (48%), secondary (22%) and special schools or alternate provisions (2%), with over a quarter (28%) working across multiple school types. School staff survey participants who opted to report their school name (n=28), worked in schools with 3% to 73% pupils eligible for free schools meals (an indicator of deprivation) and almost 30% (8 out of 28 school staff participants) worked in schools with high levels of deprivation (above 2023-2024 national average proportion of 24.6% pupils eligible for free school meals) (28).

Interview participants were from white British (79%), white Irish (14%) or other white backgrounds (7%), with variation in self-reported gender (64% female, 35% male). They represented a range of roles (school leaders, 21%; other school staff, 14%; representatives of external organisations, 43%; senior leaders with oversight across multiple schools, 21%), and worked in primary schools (14%), secondary schools (14%), or across multiple schools (71%).

Survey and interview samples included participants from different geographic regions in England, although the south-east was the most well represented (54% of survey participants; 50% of interview participants).

Survey responses: Frequency of views related to a schools' mental health research network

Direct emails to schools and sharing information at conferences or events were the most frequently endorsed effective recruitment strategies (87% and 76% of respondents respectively). Relatedly, respondents consistently felt it was very important that staff learned about the network from school headteachers and senior leaders (median importance rating 10 out of 10), with slightly lower

median importance ratings for learning about the network from local authorities/Academy Trusts and school governors/trustees (median importance rating of 8 and 7 out of 10, respectively). Notably, respondents consistently felt it was important that the network is open to all schools (median importance rating 10 out of 10), and assigning a staff member as a school representative for the network was the most frequently endorsed suitable criteria for membership (87% of respondents). Offering ongoing staff development opportunities and seminars/webinars on current topics in youth mental health were the most frequently endorsed ways to encourage schools to join and stay engaged in the network (80% and 60% of respondents respectively). It is also noteworthy that other proposed features of the network were also mostly rated positively by respondents, for example using a formal agreement process, offering schools accreditation for network membership and offering regular youth mental health surveys with feedback for schools were each considered important (median importance ratings of 8 to 9 out of 10 for each). The most frequent free-text comments referred to the importance of access to training resources and the fact that schools are busy (mentioned by 24% and 20% of survey respondents, respectively). A summary of responses to closed and free-text survey questions are provided in Additional files 6 and 7.

Interview and survey data synthesis

Key insights from across the interviews and survey responses were organised into four main themes: 1) Establish a strong network identity, 2) Consider the whole school community, 3) Supporting staff development and 4) Communicating with schools. We provide a summary of the key insights below, with illustrative quotations from interviews and Table 2 details how we have responded or intend to respond to each key insight in the design of the network.

Establish a strong network identity

Participants across both survey responses and interviews expressed the importance of the network having a **distinct identity**, where key network staff and plans for expansion are established

from the outset, membership is open to all schools, and members are recognised for their contributions to research (*"Their contribution to the research their contribution to, you know, their evidenced commitment, would be, I think would be brill... You know I think having that bronze, silver, gold"* [ID 10]).

It was clear that creating a **supportive community** was also considered particularly important. Participants emphasised that the network should offer opportunities for school staff to connect and share best practice *("Consider how the network can become a space to share practice. Schools really like case studies where they can champion their own work"* [ID 4]*),* although this needs to be balanced with concerns about comparing schools. Relatedly, they suggested that the network should be **collaborative and credible**, where member schools are active partners, and the network plans are guided by a range of expertise and aligned with other trusted organisations ("*Somebody who understands the vision of what you want to achieve and also has the power to influence moving it forward*" [ID 13]).

Consider the whole school community

The need to **consider all members of the school community** was evident across both survey and interview data. This includes building relationships with varying levels of leadership within and across schools, as well as with staff, pupils, their families, and organisations that work with and alongside schools. Participants frequently recommended identifying multiple points of contact in schools ("*Whether it's a kind of dual membership, where you have someone who has the operational responsibility, plus the senior leader"* [ID 14]). Participants wanted to ensure that **research addresses schools' needs** and priorities**,** and focuses on building strengths, not only addressing problems, although challenges created by different and evolving needs and priorities between schools and local areas were also acknowledged. Possibly the most important and salient insight relates to how **busy and dynamic** the **school environment** is and the need for this to be a key consideration for all network activities, particularly because it can create tensions with or overshadow other considerations and preferences

(*"It's going to just come down to time and resource*" [ID 12]). Critically engaging with the network must be easy and flexible, and any time commitments need to be clear.

Supporting staff development

School staff were keen both to be taught about **research and data** and receive training and guidance on **supporting young people's mental health** ("*thinking about other training opportunities for staff, whether that's specifically around mental health, or around research - how to I suppose conduct and implement research in the classroom or into the school*" [ID 1]).

Communicating with schools

Participants highlighted the importance of good **communication** with schools. In particular, language, clarity, timing and medium of communication all need to be considered carefully. Participants also emphasised the importance of **what to communicate**. Schools want to know how joining the network, and taking part in research, will benefit them and exactly what is expected of them (*"that feedback loop will keep them involved - so, what learning is happening, what new things are available"* [ID 14]).

[Insert Table 2]

Overview of the WISDOM research network

The WISDOM research network is open to all school settings in England with students aged 4 to 18 years old (https://wisdom.mhid.org.uk/). The network has a tiered membership system where member schools can progress to higher tiers for participation in research activities. We are using a multi-pronged and phased recruitment approach to allow close monitoring of member geographic and pupil population characteristics. We are directly approaching schools in geographic clusters, and because of the importance of building strong relationships across the system we are also targeting other key actors working across schools (e.g., Academy Trust leaders, Mental Health Support Teams that partner with schools, school nurses), as well as advertising more widely (e.g., via social media, relevant conferences

and events). We share the short video about the network, together with links to our website where more detailed written information is available. In response to insights related to communication, all network materials use consistent branding, language and terminology, and requirements and expectations for network membership are clearly specified in all materials. Promotional materials invite schools to register their interest by completing a short expression of interest form. The following sign-up process is designed to be as straight forward as possible and formal approval from senior leadership and at least one designated named contact is required for membership (see Additional file 8 for the Memorandum of Understanding). Member schools receive regular communication, via emails and termly newsletters, including research opportunities and evidence-informed resources about common mental health concerns written by mental health professionals and academic researchers. The time commitment and expectations are clearly specified for all research activities advertised through the network. Member schools have regular and ongoing opportunities to provide feedback through annual surveys and the advisory group continues to consult on all aspects of the network design and future plans. Figure 3 provides an overview of sign-up process and membership offer for schools and procedures are detailed in full in Additional file 9.

[Figure 3. WISDOM School membership process]

After the first 12 months of activity, almost half of the schools that expressed an interest in the WISDOM Research Network have become full members (85 out of 177; with a mean of 35.3 days between expression of interest to full membership). Members are mostly state-funded education settings (38 [44.7%] primary schools; 24 [28.2%] secondary schools; 3 [3.5%] combined primary and secondary schools; 4 [4.7%] post-16 colleges; 5 [5.9%] special schools; 3 [3.5%] alternative provision), with a further 8 (9.4%) independent schools. Schools are in regions across England, with greatest representation from the Southeast (46 schools). There is also some variation in pupil population characteristics among member schools: 32 schools have an above the 2023-24 national average of

24.6% of pupils eligible for free school meals and 22 schools have an above the 2023-24 national average of 37.0% of pupils from minority ethnic backgrounds (see Additional file 10 for member school characteristics).

The WISDOM research network has partnered with researchers recruiting for mental health and wellbeing research activities in schools in England. Partnership is open to relevant research studies, patient and public involvement and engagement (PPIE) activities and practice evaluations that aim to recruit school staff, pupils and/or their parents and carers. There is no restriction on host organisation for partner research activities. Research partners are required to confirm appropriate approvals are in place and all research partnership applications are reviewed by the network team. As the research activities expand, we plan to maximise opportunities for member schools to gain experience in contributing to varied types of data collection activities as well as access and use some of their own data. To ensure research addresses schools' needs, the regular feedback collected from school members will be used to guide decisions about research activities to prioritise. In Figure 4, we provide an overview of the research partnership process (see Additional file 8 for further details).

[Figure 4. WISDOM Research partnership process]

In the first 12 months, 28 research partner activities have been advertised through the WISDOM research network. Partnered research activities have varied in design, including surveys, qualitative research, intervention evaluations, and PPIE activities. Most activities (93%) have focused on secondary schools, with a smaller number (21%) including recruitment in primary schools. Based on reported engagement to date, at least 17 WISDOM member schools have engaged with at least one advertised activity and at least 10 advertised activities have engaged with WISDOM schools.

Discussion

Through a collaborative process we have co-created the WISDOM research network to bring together schools and researchers to facilitate high-quality child and adolescent mental health research

in England. To our knowledge, WISDOM is the only school mental health research network that operates nationally in England. WISDOM is not only helping schools to improve their knowledge of young people's mental health, it is giving schools and students access to cutting edge, vetted research from around the country and the opportunity to gain experience of active research processes. In this way, WISDOM provides infrastructure to support academic-school partnerships that are increasingly called for to advance and sustain youth mental health research (6,11,12).

Key insights from the development process have shaped WISDOM's design, materials, and future plans. After 12 months, WISDOM has 85 school members and has advertised 28 research activities. Our learnings from the development process and the initial period of activity will be relevant for others seeking to build similar networks that foster long-term collaborative partnerships between schools and academic researchers.

Building partnerships with schools

Our findings emphasise the importance of considering the busy and dynamic nature of schools in all communications and planned activities. The considerable resource pressure in schools (9,10) and challenges this brings for conducting research (8) were echoed in our discussions about setting up and running a research network for schools. Indeed, we have found it important to keep this in mind on an ongoing basis and to be ready to make adjustments to reduce demands on school staff. For example, we plan all communication with schools around the school calendar (e.g., we avoid the end of term and busy exam periods) and we made changes to simplify the partnership agreement process (e.g., initially we asked schools to provide two named WISDOM research network leads but reduced this to just one when it became clear this presented a barrier for schools). Similarly, we continue to prioritise ensuring expectations and tangible benefits for schools are clearly described in all communication.

Our consultations with existing networks and interview and survey findings echoed the need to identify and build relationships with key actors across the school system reported elsewhere (20,22).

We are approaching schools directly and building relationships with key individuals within schools, but we have found that it is also important to build relationships with organisations that work with groups of schools and have trusted relationships with school staff. In England over 10,000 education settings have a linked Mental Health Support Team (4) that provide mental health support in schools, and the government has committed to expand these teams to all schools by 2029/30 (29). As a result, building links with these teams is particularly important for the WISDOM research network.

Offering opportunities for staff development and connection with other schools were identified as important incentives for schools and this is likely to be relevant for wider school-academic partnerships. WISDOM schools receive evidence-informed information and resources through regular Newsletter articles and the members' area of the website (with information on how resources are chosen publicly available on the website). We also have plans to expand this going forwards (e.g., regularly share resources produced by school members, organise regional and in-person events to bring together representatives from member schools). When planning activities that involve sharing practices across schools, ensuring schools are not directly compared to each other, especially on outcomes, will be vital.

Building partnerships with researchers

Building partnerships with researchers requires similar consideration of the demands placed on academic researchers and researchers' needs and preferences. In particular, we made an effort to ensure the research partner application form and reporting requirements are not overly burdensome by including similar questions to those they will be required to respond to on an ethics application. An in-depth understanding of what is involved in school-based child and adolescent mental health research has been particularly valuable for facilitating these partnerships and determining what information is reasonable to ask research partners to report to the WISDOM team (e.g., the type of information on participant recruitment that would be feasible for research partners to report). Moreover, seeking and

responding to their feedback (both formal termly reporting and informal feedback) has helped foster strong partnerships with researchers (e.g., we integrated 'spot light' emails which highlight specific research activities to targeted schools and are distributed between regular newsletters in response to suggestions from our research partners). Of note, the decision to include PPIE activities (as well as research studies and practice evaluations) has been particularly well received, and 5 out of the first 26 research activities were PPIE activities.

Strengths and limitations

The process we used to create the WISDOM research network has several important strengths. We consulted with a range of key stakeholders using a variety of methods and activities throughout the process. This meant we captured and responded to varied views and perspectives. Integrating mechanisms to collect and respond to feedback from school members and research partners on an ongoing basis is also a strength that can help foster and maintain shared ownership of the network going forwards

It is also important to acknowledge several limitations. Schools with high numbers of disadvantaged pupils and some regions of England were underrepresented among our interview and survey participants. Interview participants were all from White ethnic backgrounds and we did not collect information on ethnicity from survey participants (in an effort to minimise personal and identifiable data) which means insights from these activities may not capture the range of views of individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. We identified individuals working in and across schools as our key stakeholders for the initial network development process because individuals in these roles will be responsible for making and influencing decisions about joining the network and engaging with network activities. Although children and young people contributed to the logo design and research partners are encouraged to involve young people in the development of their research activities, we did not include young people or parents and carers in the initial network design process so it will be particularly

important to integrate this into the WISDOM research network's ongoing development and expansion. This includes plans to create opportunities for young people and parents and carers in member schools to have active roles in i) identifying future research priorities and selecting research activities to promote in their school, and ii) co-developing evidence-informed resources for young people and parents and carers in member schools. It is encouraging that initial school membership includes several geographic regions in England and some diversity in pupil population characteristics and ensuring broad geographic and sociodemographic reach is a key priority as the network expands. We are however conscious that member schools may be well-resourced or have a particular interest in research or mental health and therefore may not be representative of all schools, and this needs to be considered in future school recruitment strategies. This paper reports on the initial period of activity and it will be essential to closely monitor school membership, engagement in partner research activities and member experiences as the WISDOM research network grows.

Conclusion

We used a collaborative process guided by co-production principles to create infrastructure that can enable long-term school-researcher partnerships. Working with schools and other key stakeholders to design the core operational procedures and materials has ensured the network is designed to be mutually beneficial for school and research communities, with mechanisms in place to collect and respond to feedback on an ongoing basis. This research network facilitates improved school-based research and provides a useful model for developing academic-community partnerships.

List of abbreviations

MHST: Mental Health Support Team

NIHR: National Institute for Health and Care Research

PPIE: Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement

SHINE: Schools Health and Wellbeing Improvement Research Network

SHRN: The School Health Research Network

SW-SHRN: South West School Health Research Network

UK: United Kingdom

WISDOM: Working in Schools to Deliver On Mental Health

YAG: Youth Advisory Group

Additional files

Additional file 1.	Key learnings from consultations with existing networks
Additional file 2	Survey questions and interview topic guide
Additional file 3.	Guidance for school staff and researcher review of network materials
Additional file 4.	Lesson plans for logo design
Additional file 5.	Survey and interview participant characteristics
Additional file 6.	Summary of summary responses: closed-questions
Additional file 7.	Summary of free-text survey responses
Additional file 8.	WISDOM Research Network School Agreement
Additional file 9.	Framework for setting up school mental health research networks
Additional file 10.	Characteristics of WISDOM member schools

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

An officer from the University of Oxford Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee confirmed that this project was not classified as research so it did not require ethical review (Reference:

86612/RE001). The project was conducted in accordance with the UK Standards for Public Involvement in Research and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets generated and analysed during this project are not publicly available due to privacy restrictions. Some data are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

Competing interest

The authors declare they have no competing interests

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Authors' contributions

JB, LB, MF, TR contributed to the original conceptualisation of the project. All authors contributed to the design of the work and interpretation of data. CS and CE contributed to acquisition of data. ZR, CS, and CE contributed to analysis of data. ZR, CS and TR prepared the original draft and all authors substantively revised it.

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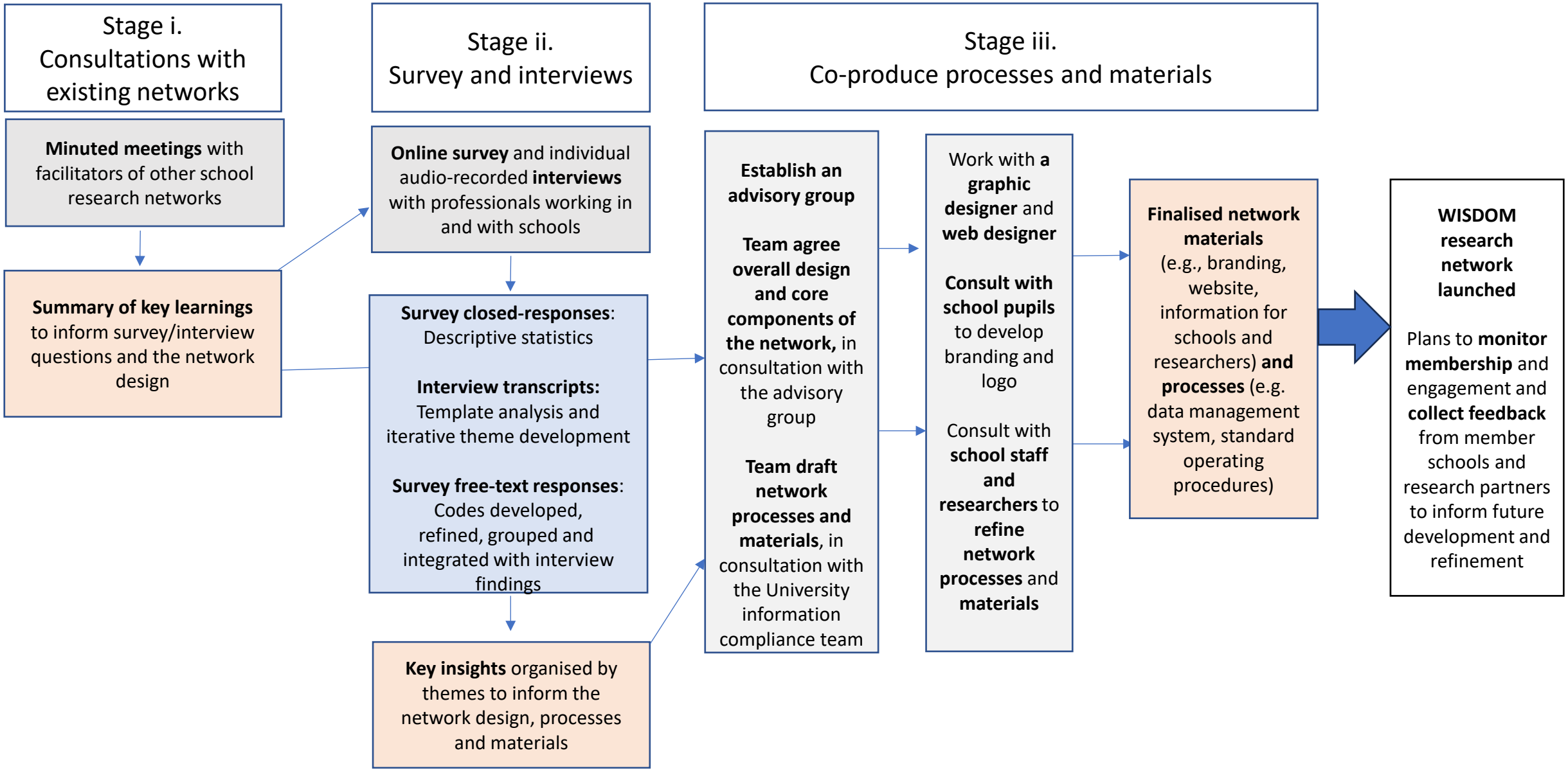
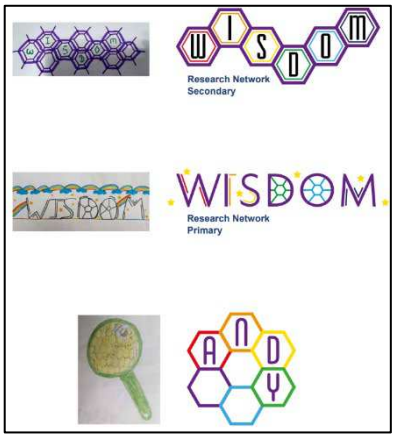

Stage i.
Consultations with existing networks
Minuted meetings with facilitators of other school research networks
Summary of key learnings to inform survey/interview questions and the network design
Stage ii.
Survey and interviews
Online survey and individual audio-recorded interviews with professionals working in and with schools
Survey closed-responses: Descriptive statistics
Interview transcripts: Template analysis and iterative theme development
Survey free-text responses: Codes developed, refined, grouped and integrated with interview findings
Key insights organised by themes to inform the network design, processes and materials
Stage iii.
Co-produce processes and materials
Establish an advisory group
Team agree overall design and core components of the network, in consultation with the advisory group
Team draft network processes and materials, in consultation with the University information compliance team
Work with a graphic designer and web designer
Consult with school pupils to develop branding and logo
Consult with school staff and researchers to refine network processes and materials
Finalised network materials (e.g., branding, website, information for schools and researchers) and processes (e.g. data management system, standard operating procedures)
WISDOM research network launched
Plans to monitor membership and engagement and collect feedback from member schools and research partners to inform future development and refinement

Figure 2. Branding Development flowchart

Font and Shape:

Hexagon shape, tessellation, overlap.

Bold, distinct font.



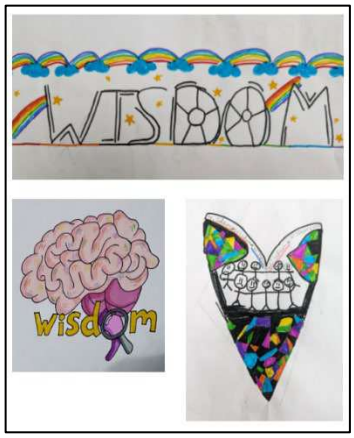


Colour Palette and Key Images:

Bold, bright colours, including purple, orange & yellow.

Rainbow theme.

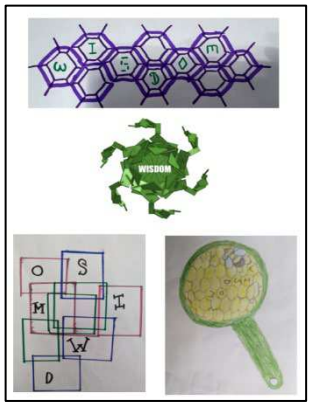
Positive imagery.





Final logo:

Cross-checked and refined the image, to ensure the young people's designs were clearly captured.



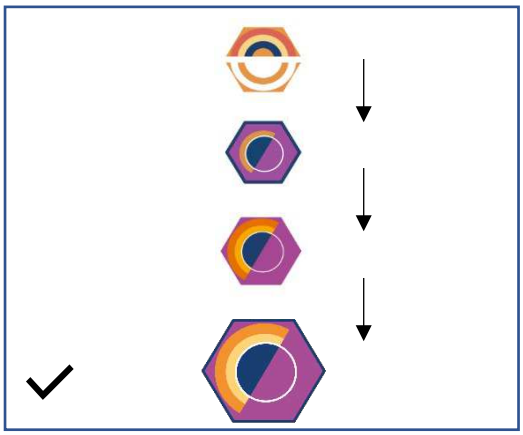


Figure 3: WISDOM School membership process

Expression of interest

- Member of school staff completes a short online expression of interest form or contacts the WISDOM research network team.
- WISDOM team confirm eligibility

Formal agreement

- Headteacher or nominated alternate from Senior Leadership Team completes a digital Memorandum of Understanding
- School nominates at least one Network Lead to act as main point of contact
- Each named contact completes a digital consent form
- WISDOM team reviews and checks agreement forms

Membership benefits

- Membership is free and open to all school/education providers for students from 4 to 18 in England
- A welcome pack (including a membership certificate and membership logos)
- Termly newsletter including research opportunities and articles on common mental health concerns in schools. All research activity adverts clearly detail what is involved and benefits for schools.
- Members' area of website with evidence-informed resources and signposting to trusted organisations
- Tiered accreditation based on involvement in research activities
- Regular emails regarding new research activities or mental health days/weeks
- Opportunities to contribute to WISDOM research network newsletters and public-facing materials
- Regular feedback surveys and opportunities to shape future plans for the WISDOM research network

Research engagement

- Schools choose whether to engage with advertised research and contact researchers directly
- Research partners provide schools either tailored feedback and/or a summary of key findings or implications for practice

Figure 4. WISDOM Research partnership process

Expression of interest

- Researcher contacts WISDOM team to express an interest in partnering their research activity with the WISDOM research network.
- WISDOM team provides information about requirements and a link to the application

Research partner application

- Researcher submits application, providing details about the research activity
- Researcher is asked to confirm required ethical approvals and relevant data protection and safeguarding procedures will be followed. Application is reviewed by the WISDOM team

Research activity advert

- Researcher provides advert text using a standard template
- Researchers must detail what is required of schools and how their research activity will benefit schools/participants. Researchers are encouraged to follow guidance on financial reimbursement for participants.

Partnership agreement

- Where applications are accepted, the research activity lead signs a digital partnership agreement
- WISDOM team provides the researcher with the WISDOM logo to include in school/participant-facing materials
- Agree plans to advertise the research activity to WISDOM research network member schools (e.g. Newsletter, 'spotlight email')

Research partner reporting

- Research partner completes termly and end of research activity and feedback reports, including details on WISDOM research network school member involvement and the opportunity to share feedback on their experience of the partnership and suggest areas for improvement
- Research partner provides participating schools with feedback and/or a summary of findings

Supplementary Files

This is a list of supplementary files associated with this preprint. Click to download.

- Table1ApplyingCoProductionPrinciples.docx
- Table2Themesummarytable3.docx
- Additionalfilesmergedrevision.pdf