



The Soar Foundation  
Mark McDonnell  
Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> June

On behalf of The Soar Foundation, and all the teenagers we represent, I would like to express my gratitude to the Chairperson and the Committee for the opportunity to speak with you on such an important topic.

For the benefit of the members, The Soar Foundation is an independent organisation founded in 2012 to seek an alternative solution to the distress we were witnessing amongst our teenagers. Our approach was inspired by the Jim Stynes founded Reach Foundation in Melbourne, and has always focused on a preventative approach to wellbeing where all Teenagers are developing the skills and character necessary to navigate everyday life. The purpose has always been a pro-active approach to prevent significant mental health issues arising as teenagers approach early adulthood, and reduce the need for curative or acute services further down the line.

Soar is a peer-to-peer model where we train young facilitators to deliver programs primarily through the school system. To date we have delivered our character building programs to approx. 45,000 teenagers in 215 schools across 28 counties.

We are currently living through an environmental crisis, political in-stability internationally, social volatility, and technological advancements changing the world in a way that we can't even assimilate. It's an anxious time and teenagers feel that deeply.

Soar has been providing on-the-ground solutions for the previous 9 years, but we knew we would need to continue to evolve and be agile in meeting their needs as a result of Covid-19. What we are witnessing from our engagement over the last 15 months is teenagers struggling with three key issues.

Isolation.

A heightened sense of worry.

Their confidence and self-belief on the floor.

We did three things initially. Firstly, we listened to their concerns and gave them a platform to have their voices heard and normalise their experiences. This

#GroundedForGreatness series covered topics such as Awareness, Courage, and Resilience, and received approx. 25,000 views and engagement across our media platforms.

Secondly, we created a new on-line program called 'Hustle' where teenagers could explore the above topics together over a 4 week period from bedrooms, kitchens and sitting rooms all over the country.

And thirdly, we adapted our existing school based programs to an on-line platform and provided sessions through Zoom in schools.

We did everything we could to serve the needs of teenagers on-line until we had the opportunity to re-engage in-person. Despite the logistical challenges, and with the support of some incredible schools and teachers, we have managed to serve approx. 4,500 teenagers face-to-face since March 2020.

We have been struck by the outpouring of emotion from teenagers all over the country in our workshops. This pent-up emotion needs a release where teenagers can express their experiences in safe environments.

Initial findings from our research partners, The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway are indicating the positive impact of these essential environments, with increases in teenagers emotional management, sense of belonging, empathy and maturity, social support and inner confidence growing as a result of our programs.

At this point I would like to heighten the awareness of the committee to the situation we are facing. We are witnessing teenagers emerging post lockdown with significant unprocessed distress. It will be essential to continue to provide safe, non-judgemental environments where teenagers can connect together as a group. These environments will help reduce that sense of being alone, validate their experiences, gain perspective together, grow compassion and empathy, and allow them to support each other. All with the intention of reducing the possibility of longer term issues like acute anxiety and depression presenting in the longer term. We feel it is essential at this stage to invest in preventative solutions so as to take increasing pressure of our already stretched acute services.

We feel it is also important to acknowledge the fatigue that may be present for teenagers post pandemic. Many have come through what is likely to be the most challenging period of their young lives. It would be a mistake to expect, or demand, that they immediately re-engage into high-functioning activity. It is important after any trauma or distress to recover.

As we look to the longer term future, it would be wrong to solely blame the pandemic for the struggles we are witnessing amongst our teenagers. As 'The My World Survey 2' study published by Jigsaw and UCD in 2019 indicated, increases in anxiety, depression and self-harm was already rising significantly over the previous

10 years. The pandemic is the petrol being poured on what was an already burning fire.

We believe these patterns will persist as long as we continue to prepare our teenagers for a previous 20<sup>th</sup> Century reality. We now inhabit a more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, and as a result we need to be creating a model where teenagers develop the mental and emotional agility to thrive, and navigate challenges.

We welcome the progressive 'Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice 2018 – 2023'. We too recognise the interdependency of education and mental health. We recognise the underdevelopment of fundamental skills to cope with everyday life. We recognise the importance of developing a teenager's inner character beyond their social media profile. We recognise the need for teenagers to become familiar with all of their emotions, and how your mastery of these emotions can either block you, or catapult you towards what you are truly capable of. We recognise the unique strengths within every teenager, and often all they need to know is that they are not broken, they are not alone, and that they have the capacity within them to chart their own future.

To conclude, we would ask that the Government continue to invest in Preventative interventions that focus on reducing risk factors associated with mental illness. Engaging early to prepare young people mentally and emotionally means they can approach life with optimism and a sense of opportunity, while reducing the potential of everyday difficulties and challenges manifesting into more serious problems.

While the wellbeing of our people is priority enough, we are also fully cognisant of the economic and social impact it will have on the prosperity of our country. Young people avoiding mental ill-health through preventative measures are far more likely to complete their education, secure meaningful employment, contribute to their communities, live healthier lives, and reduce the strain on health services later in life.

Increasing peoples overall sense of wellbeing and contributing to a socially and economically prosperous country is achievable. We just need to engage earlier and not wait for problems to arise. Soars contribution to this national effort is evidenced in our 5 Year Mission to reach every Transition Year Student in Ireland with a Preventative Character Building Program by 2025. Thank You.