



**AN EVALUATION OF SCHOOLS' AND  
ORGANISATIONS' EXPERIENCE  
IMPLEMENTING THE AMBER FLAG  
INITIATIVE  
2021 – 2022**

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# Contents

<b>List of Figures and Tables</b> .....	iv
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	1
1.1 Amber Flag Process .....	1
1.2 Purpose of Current Report .....	2
<b>2. Method</b> .....	3
<b>2.1 Study Design</b> .....	3
<b>2.2 Demographics</b> .....	3
2.2.1 Participants.....	3
2.2.2 Location.....	3
2.2.3 Application Type.....	4
2.2.4 Type of Applicant .....	5
<b>2.3 Survey Design</b> .....	5
<b>2.4 Procedure</b> .....	6
<b>2.5 Analysis</b> .....	7
2.5.1 Quantitative Analysis .....	7
2.5.2 Qualitative Analysis.....	7
<b>3. Results</b> .....	8
<b>3.1 Quantitative Analysis</b> .....	8
3.1.1 Motivations .....	8
3.1.2 Perceived Benefits .....	9
3.1.3 Challenges .....	10
<b>3.2 Qualitative Analysis</b> .....	11
<b>3.2.1 Motivations</b> .....	11
3.2.1.1 Theme 1: Complements School Curriculum and Ethos .....	11
3.2.1.2 Theme 2: Promote Positive Mental Health .....	14
3.2.1.3 Theme 3: Response to Covid-19 .....	16
3.2.1.4 Theme 4: Creating a Positive Organisational Culture .....	17
<b>3.2.2 Benefits</b> .....	18
3.2.2.1 Theme 1: Development of Interpersonal Skills.....	18
3.2.2.2 Theme 2: Raising Awareness of Mental Health .....	20
3.2.2.3 Theme 3: Levels of Impact .....	22
<b>3.2.3 Challenges</b> .....	23
3.2.3.1 Theme 1: Engagement.....	23

3.2.3.2 Theme 2: Time .....	25
3.2.3.3 Theme 3: Planning and Organising .....	27
<b>3.2.4 Improvement</b> .....	<b>29</b>
3.2.4.1 Theme 1: Resources .....	29
3.2.4.2 Theme 2: Promoting Amber Flag .....	32
3.2.4.3 Theme 3: Additional Pieta Supports .....	34
<b>4. Discussion</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>4.1 Key Findings</b> .....	<b>37</b>
4.1.1 Motivation .....	37
4.1.2 Benefits .....	37
4.1.3 Challenges .....	38
4.1.4 Improvement.....	38
<b>4.2 Recommended Actions</b> .....	<b>39</b>
<b>4.3 Limitations</b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>42</b>

## List of Figures and Tables

<b>Figure 1:</b> Number of Respondents by County .....	4
<b>Figure 2:</b> Application Type .....	4
<b>Figure 3:</b> Type of Applicant .....	5
<b>Table 1:</b> Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for Motivation .....	8
<b>Table 2:</b> Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Score for Perceived Benefits ....	9
<b>Table 3:</b> Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for Challenges .....	10
<b>Figure 4:</b> Key Themes and Subthemes of Motivations .....	11
<b>Figure 5:</b> Key Themes and Subthemes of Benefits.....	18
<b>Figure 6:</b> Key Themes and Subthemes of Challenges.....	23
<b>Figure 7:</b> Key Themes and Subthemes of Improvements .....	29

## 1. Introduction

The Amber Flag initiative was initially launched by Suicide Aware in 2014 in partnership with the Institute of Guidance Counsellors and Union of Students Ireland. It was inspired by the 'Green Schools' model which is Ireland's leading environmental management and award programme, working with primary and secondary schools nationally. Pieta took over the Amber Flag initiative in 2016 when Suicide Aware ceased operations, and since then has awarded over 1000 flags to date.

Pieta's Amber Flag is an initiative that recognises individual efforts of primary and secondary schools, youth-reach, third level institutions, community groups and clubs to create healthy, inclusive environments that support mental well-being. It aims to unify these groups in their efforts to work together towards a happier, healthier Ireland and to eliminate stigma related to mental health issues. The Amber Flag vision is to promote positive mental health and well-being in communities through shared contribution, knowledge, and empowerment. Four objectives guide the Amber Flag vision. These include promoting positive mental health, enhancing inclusivity through teamwork and support, reducing risk factors through increased awareness and education, and improving quality of life for those with mental health difficulties.

### 1.1 Amber Flag Process

To achieve an Amber Flag, participants are required to register at the beginning of the academic year. They must then form an Amber Flag committee that includes representatives from students/ service users/ club members and staff/ volunteers. Participants must conduct an audit to establish current levels of mental health promotion and identify areas for improvement. They must then complete a minimum of three mental health awareness goals with a focus on a mental health awareness day/week and a fundraiser for Pieta and another charity/organisation if they desire. Applications are then submitted by the end of the academic year with evidence of the goals they achieved. Pieta's Amber Flag team then review the completed application form and accompanying evidence. Once the Pieta Amber Flag Team are satisfied that the requirements are met, the school/organisation is awarded a physical flag and certificate.

## 1.2 Purpose of Current Report

The aim of this project was to evaluate the experiences of schools and organisations that have participated in the Amber flag initiative. Specifically, this project aimed to (i) identify factors that motivate engagement, (ii) identify perceived benefits of participating in the Amber Flag initiative, (iii) identify challenges experienced by schools and organisations throughout the process and (iv) develop recommendations to improve the Amber Flag initiative.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Study Design

A mixed method cross sectional survey was developed to collect feedback from schools and organisations that participated in the Amber Flag initiative in 2021-2022.

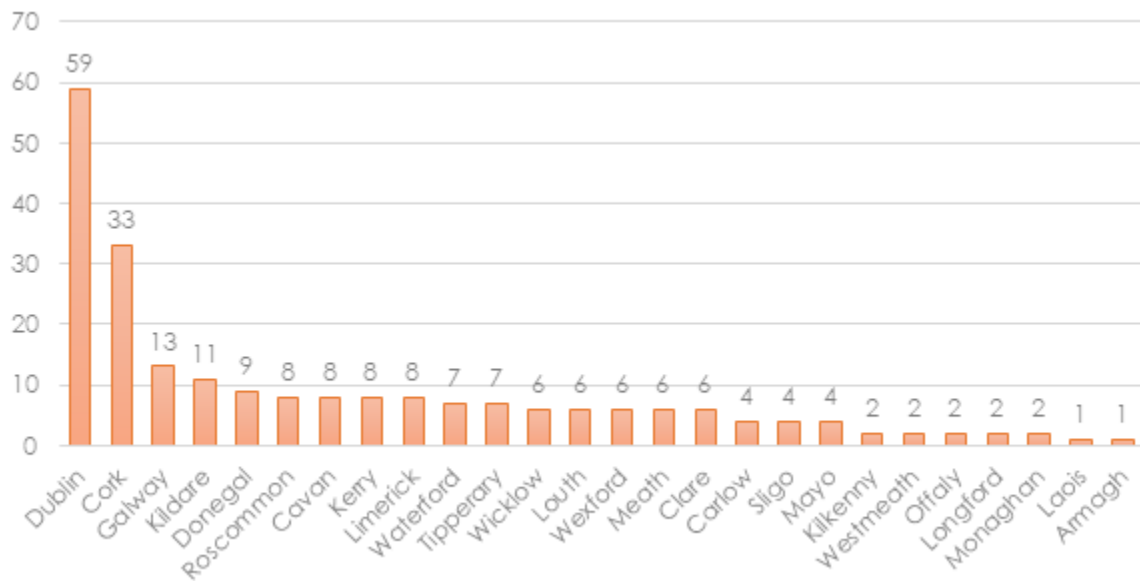
### 2.2 Demographics

#### 2.2.1 Participants

226 schools and organisations across Ireland took part in the study. One respondent did not consent to take part and withdrew from the survey. Of the 225 who proceeded, 62% were primary schools, 34% were secondary schools, with the remaining 4% consisting of other education institutions, sports club, Youthreach centres and community organisations. Surveys were mostly completed by the organisation's Amber Flag Coordinator (58%,  $n=130$ ) with others completed by either the Amber Flag Committee (22%,  $n=49$ ), or both the Coordinator and the Committee (19%,  $n=42$ ). 4 of the 225 feedback forms were completed by either a Principal, Student Council member or Wellness Prefect.

#### 2.2.2 Location

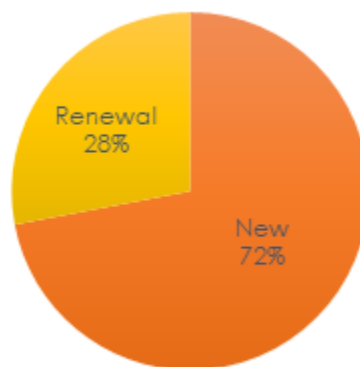
Feedback forms were submitted by participants from 26 counties across the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland as outlined in Figure 1 below. 51% ( $n=115$ ) of respondents described their location as rural, while 49% ( $n=110$ ) were urban based.



**Figure 1: Number of Respondents by County**

### 2.2.3 Application Type

Most respondents were new applicants (72%,  $n=162$ ), meaning that it was their organisation's first time applying for an Amber Flag, or that they had not been awarded an Amber Flag in the previous two academic years. 28% ( $n=63$ ) of respondents were renewal applicants, meaning that they had been awarded an Amber Flag within the previous two academic years.



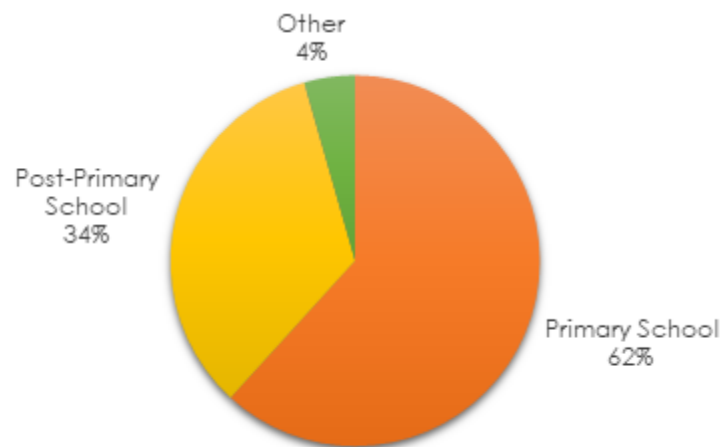
**Figure 2: Application Type**



### 2.2.4 Type of Applicant

Most respondents (62%,  $n=139$ ) were Primary Schools, while the next largest group was Secondary Schools (34%,  $n=76$ ). The remaining respondents (designated 'Other' in the pie chart below) described themselves as:

- Sports Club (Soccer)
- Special School
- Youthreach (Post Primary)
- College of Further Education and Training
- Third Level Institution
- Early School Leavers Programme
- Community Organisation



**Figure 3: Type of Applicant**

### 2.3 Survey Design

The survey questions were developed by drawing upon the Amber Flag initiative vision and objectives. The survey contained five sections related to: (1) Demographic information, (2) Motivation for Amber Flag participation, (3) Benefits of Amber Flag participation, (4) Challenges to Amber Flag participation, (5) Suggestions for Improvement. These sections were drawn from a previous study evaluating the Active Schools Flag, a physical activity promotion programme in Irish schools (Belton S, Britton Ú, Murtagh E, Meegan S, Duff C, McGann J., 2017). The survey included closed ended questions where participants responded on a series of five-point Likert rating scales.

The survey also contained four open ended questions related to key concepts: motivation, benefits, challenges, and suggestions for improving the Amber Flag initiative.

The survey was developed by Pieta's Education and Training Manager with guidance from Pieta's Research Department. The survey was piloted by six members of Pieta's Education and Training team. Minor changes were made to the survey as a result of guidance from the Research Department and pilot feedback.

## 2.4 Procedure

In 2022, 556 schools and organisations across Ireland were awarded an Amber Flag. Schools and organisations that achieved the flag, were invited to complete an anonymous online feedback survey using Microsoft Forms. A link to the feedback survey was emailed to the Amber Flag Co-ordinator. The survey was open from April 2022 to August 2022. The survey was run online using Microsoft Forms, which allowed researchers to create a variety of different response types and layouts with ease including a mix of opened ended questions, closed ended questions and rating scales. At the beginning of the survey, an introduction was given explaining the purpose of the survey. Participants were informed that their responses would be used to continue improving and supporting the Amber Flag initiative, and that their comments and suggestions would help Pieta's Education and Training Team to plan future Amber Flag resources and to better meet the needs of those participating in the initiative.

Participants were also informed that the survey was anonymous and would be used for the purpose of service improvement and monitoring. Participants were asked for consent before proceeding. If a participant chose not to consent, they were automatically brought to a thank you page.

Microsoft Forms generated a report of all completed responses into Microsoft Excel for analysis.

## 2.5 Analysis

### 2.5.1 Quantitative Analysis

The raw data collected from Microsoft Forms was produced into a Microsoft Excel file, in which the data was cleaned, organised, and coded in preparation for a descriptive statistical analysis obtaining percentages and mean scores of key variables.

### 2.5.2 Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was obtained from four open-ended survey questions and extracted into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework which included the following phases: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing a report. A team of three researchers reviewed the responses and identified potential codes using an inductive coding approach. Codes were based on the semantic content of the responses rather than underlying constructs using a theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The team met regularly to define codes, discuss emerging themes, define, and name themes. Having a team of three coders facilitated the inclusion of multiple perspectives and the opportunities to discuss coding disagreements and refine the coding system. Data was manually coded using Microsoft Excel.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative Analysis

##### 3.1.1 Motivations

Respondents were asked to rate the statements listed in Table 1 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 indicating 'Strongly Agree'. Mean and standard deviation (SD) scores are presented in the table below, with higher mean scores indicating agreement with the statement. The percentage of respondents selecting either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' in response to each statement is also presented.

**Table 1: Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for Motivation**

Statement	Percentage 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'	Mean Score	SD
We wanted to strengthen awareness of mental health	97%	4.80	0.70
We wanted to promote well-being	97%	4.82	0.69
We are motivated by working towards awards	70%	3.89	0.98
We heard positive things about the Amber Flag from others	83%	4.33	0.93

Most respondents selected either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' in response to the above statements, as evidenced in the table. While 70% ( $n=157$ ) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'We are motivated by working towards awards', 8% ( $n=17$ ) either strongly disagreed or disagreed with this. While most respondents (83%,  $n=187$ ) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'We heard positive things about the Amber Flag from others', 13% ( $n=30$ ) selected 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', while 4% ( $n=8$ ) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

### 3.1.2 Perceived Benefits

Respondents were asked to rate the statements listed in Table 2 on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating 'Strongly Disagree' and 5 indicating 'Strongly Agree'. Mean and standard deviation (SD) scores are presented in the table below, with higher mean scores indicating agreement with the statement. The percentage of respondents selecting either 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' in response to each statement is also presented.

**Table 2: Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Score for Perceived Benefits**

Statement	Percentage 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree'	Mean Score	SD
Increases opportunities for social support	90%	4.37	0.80
Contributes to a more inclusive environment for marginalised individuals/groups	91%	4.44	0.79
Develops mental health and well-being strategies for participants	96%	4.65	0.70
Decreases mental health related stigma	92%	4.48	0.80
Improves quality of life for those with mental health challenges	88%	4.29	0.82
Supports our well-being policy/curriculum	99%	4.70	0.61

As demonstrated in the table above, most respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the above statements. However, 3% ( $n=6$ ) of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'Increases opportunities for social support'. 2% ( $n=5$ ) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the Amber Flag 'Contributes to a more inclusive environment for marginalised individuals/groups'. 4 of the 225 respondents (2%) strongly disagreed with the statement 'Develops mental health and well-being strategies for participants'. 2% ( $n=5$ ) strongly disagreed that Amber Flag 'Decreases mental health related stigma'. 6 respondents (3%) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'Improves quality of life for those with mental health challenges'.

### 3.1.3 Challenges

Respondents were asked to rate the statements listed in Table 3 on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 indicated 'Extremely Challenging' and 5 indicated 'Not at all Challenging'. Mean and standard deviation (SD) scores are presented in the table below, with higher mean scores indicating that respondents found this aspect less challenging. The percentage of respondents selecting either 'Slightly Challenging' or 'Not at all Challenging' in response to each statement is also presented.

**Table 3: Percentage, Mean and Standard Deviation Scores for Challenges**

Statement	Percentage 'Slightly Challenging' or 'Not at all Challenging'	Mean Score	SD
The paperwork associated with the Amber Flag	85%	4.43	0.75
The amount of time required by the Amber Flag	67%	3.97	0.85
The fundraising requirement of the Amber Flag	76%	4.13	0.84
Getting students involved	88%	4.60	0.77
Getting other staff involved	86%	4.44	0.80

As demonstrated in the table above, most respondents rated the above aspects of the Amber Flag process either 'Slightly Challenging' or 'Not at all Challenging'. However, some respondents did report finding some aspects more challenging. While 67% ( $n=150$ ) of respondents rated 'The amount of time required by the Amber Flag' as 'Slightly Challenging' or 'Not at all Challenging', 32% ( $n=71$ ) rated this aspect as 'Moderately Challenging', while 4 respondents (2%) found this aspect 'Very Challenging'. 21% ( $n=48$ ) of respondents rated 'The fundraising requirement of the Amber Flag' as 'Moderately Challenging'. 11% of respondents ( $n=24$ ) found getting students involved 'Moderately Challenging', while a small percentage of respondents (2%,  $n=4$ ) found this either 'Extremely Challenging' or 'Very Challenging'. With respect to getting staff involved, 11% ( $n=25$ ) found this 'Moderately Challenging', while a small number (3%,  $n=6$ ) found this aspect to be 'Very Challenging'.

## 3.2 Qualitative Analysis

The four open ended survey questions related to motivation, benefits, challenges, and suggested improvements were analysed using a thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Findings are outlined below.

### 3.2.1 Motivations

“Please share other reasons for your participation in the Amber Flag initiative.”

Feedback relating to the above statement is presented below and illustrated by quotations from survey responses. Key themes and subthemes arising from the responses are discussed. An outline of key themes and subthemes are presented in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4: Key Themes and Subthemes of Motivations**

#### 3.2.1.1 Theme 1: Complements School Curriculum and Ethos

The first theme described how participation in the initiative benefited schools by offering the opportunity to complement aspects of the existing curriculum and school ethos. As indicated in Figure 4, a number of subthemes were identified.

### Fit with Curriculum and Wellbeing Guidelines

The fact that the Amber Flag initiative has clear links to the SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) curriculum at primary level, and a dedicated wellbeing curriculum at secondary level was cited by respondents as a reason for participating.

*“We feel that the wellbeing of our school staff and pupils is of huge importance and this initiative fits in well with work we are already doing in school as part of our SPHE lessons...”*

*“Strongly linked to action-based targets which are linked to the NCCA's [National Council for Curriculum and Assessment] Indicators of Wellbeing”.*

### School Plan and Ethos

Respondents described how the Amber Flag initiative offered them the opportunity to communicate the importance placed on wellbeing and positive mental health in their school community.

*“To show the community that our school is fully committed to the well-being of all children”.*

*“It links into our healthy body, healthy mind approach to learning”.*

In a more formal sense, the Amber Flag initiative complemented schools' focus on wellbeing as part of their school improvement plans and school self-evaluation (SSE). Respondents mentioned the increased focus on wellbeing as part of the SSE process.

*“Our focus for this year for our action plan was on wellbeing. Mental Health and wellbeing is also the main focus for our own school self-evaluation”.*

*“Wellbeing is an element of our SSE process”.*

*“We are focusing on wellbeing in our school improvement plan...”*



## Symbolism of the Flag

The symbolism and tangible nature of the flag itself was mentioned by respondents. The flag was seen as an expression of the values and ethos of the school, and as a clear visual representation of the school's prioritisation of the promotion of positive mental health. Respondents also described the flag as "a visual reminder about positive mental health" for students.

*"To highlight in a public way that feeling down is ok, that you're not alone and that the flag flying on top of our school building represents the fact that we see you. We know you're hurting, and we will help".*

*"We wanted a physical symbol to fly at our school to help promote positive mental health and to visualise our collective approach to promoting positive mental health".*

## Highlights Schools' Existing Commitment to Mental Health

Many schools were already undertaking wellbeing initiatives and promoting mental health in their communities. Respondents described how the Amber Flag initiative offered a more formal opportunity to recognise the work already being done in schools.

*"We have already [done] so much to promote mental health and well-being in our school, that we felt the flag was something we should have for our school".*

*"Felt that as a school we do a lot of work around well-being and wanted to award students for their work and acknowledge their efforts".*

*"Our school does a lot in the area of wellbeing and mental health, and we thought that the efforts of staff and students should be recognised."*

*“We pride ourselves on creating a nurturing and supportive environment for everyone and I think the Amber Flag will be a great achievement to celebrate that.”*

### 3.2.1.2 Theme 2: Promote Positive Mental Health

The second theme describes the aspects of positive mental health promotion underpinning respondents' desire to undertake the Amber Flag initiative.

#### **Importance of Promoting Positive Mental Health**

Many respondents cited an intention to promote positive mental health in their organisations and schools as a key reason for participating in the Amber Flag initiative. There was a clear desire to place importance on the topic of mental health. Through the initiatives organised by Amber Flag committees, participation in the initiative was seen as providing a framework for wellbeing promotion and mental health awareness.

*“I see the increase in anxiety and mental health issue in students over the last 10 years and it is really shocking and frightening. I wish to do what I can to help my school community breed positive mental health and ideas or share ways in which we can achieve this and stop this acceleration of mental health issues amongst our young population. Mental health in teachers is also prolific and if they gain from some of these activities / initiatives all the better.”*

*“We wanted to promote positive mental health through the school through a variety of appropriate and fun activities”.*

Respondents placed importance on prioritising the mental health of both students and staff, a “focus on whole school community wellbeing.”

#### **Raising Awareness and Reducing Stigma**

Respondents placed importance on reducing stigma as part of their participation in the initiative. There was a sense that taking part in the Amber Flag initiative offered a platform to normalise discussing mental health issues without shame or stigma.

Respondents mentioned the need to bring awareness to mental health difficulties in their communities.

*"I want to make a difference and to really teach people that Amber Flag is more than just a team, we are a family and no matter how smiley a human is no one knows what's going on behind closed doors".*

*"To help educate students in our school about mental health and to get rid of the stigma and taboo around it".*

*"We want to show students and staff alike in school the importance of mental health and talking to someone if you need help and not to be ashamed as it is a perfectly normal thing to need help with mental struggles".*

### **Developing Skills and Tools to Support Mental Health**

Respondents mentioned the importance of providing tools and building skills around developing positive mental health. Participation in the Amber Flag initiative was seen as providing a framework within which to do this. Respondents discussed raising awareness of the supports available to people when they were struggling with their mental health and encouraging help-seeking behaviour as part of their Amber Flag activities.

*"We want to give the students the tools necessary to take care of their mental health and wellbeing".*

*"It was great to have the whole school working together, from Early Start to 6th Class, to plant the seeds of self-care and wellbeing from such a young age. It's so important to equip children with awareness and coping skills from a young age."*

*"We are very aware of the importance of developing Wellbeing tools for our students to help them to cope with the ups and downs of life and to make them aware that they are not alone and there is help out there."*

Respondents also mentioned the opportunity to build skills such as resilience and communication in their communities.

*“Teaching students how to be resilient and cope when things go wrong is huge”.*

*“We think that mental health is crucial to the whole development of each child. It is so important to us that each child feels ok and if they don't that they can talk or be aware of means that can help”.*

*“I want to make sure, that children can be aware that there is help and support available!”*

### 3.2.1.3 Theme 3: Response to Covid-19

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mental health was frequently cited by respondents as a motivating factor in their participation in the Amber Flag initiative. Many respondents noted an increase in mental health difficulties among students or members during the pandemic. They felt that the Amber Flag initiative provided them with a framework to focus on promoting positive mental health in their communities after a challenging period.

*“After Covid and the lockdown we have seen a lot of anxiety in the children in our care and this looked like a positive way to build a mental health awareness in the school community”.*

*“After Covid-19 we wanted to prioritise wellbeing throughout our school. We hoped to find new ways to strengthen our Wellbeing initiatives and ensure we could include all members of the school community. We really wanted a way to ensure the pupils were involved too. The Amber Flag seemed like the perfect opportunity.”*

There was also a sense that the activities and initiatives engaged in as part of the Amber Flag process offered a positive focus and opportunity for reconnection following pandemic-related lockdowns and restrictions.

*"We wanted to spread joy and happiness in our school after what has been a tough year apart!"*

*"We felt very disconnected as a school community after Covid. We wanted to bring back the magic of fun and laughter in post covid times. We wanted to show it is ok to gather together safely again".*

*"...we had seen how the pandemic had had such a negative impact on the school community and especially on our children which we saw through emotional behaviours, low self-esteem etc. We wanted to promote positive mental health through the school through a variety of appropriate and fun activities."*

#### 3.2.1.4 Theme 4: Creating a Positive Organisational Culture

Respondents described how they wanted to participate in the Amber Flag initiative as part of their efforts to create a more positive organisational culture. Respondents mentioned creating a feeling of safety and acceptance around mental health issues, but also nurturing a positive and "happy" environment.

*"We wanted to make [our school] a safe and nurturing environment for all who enter and work here".*

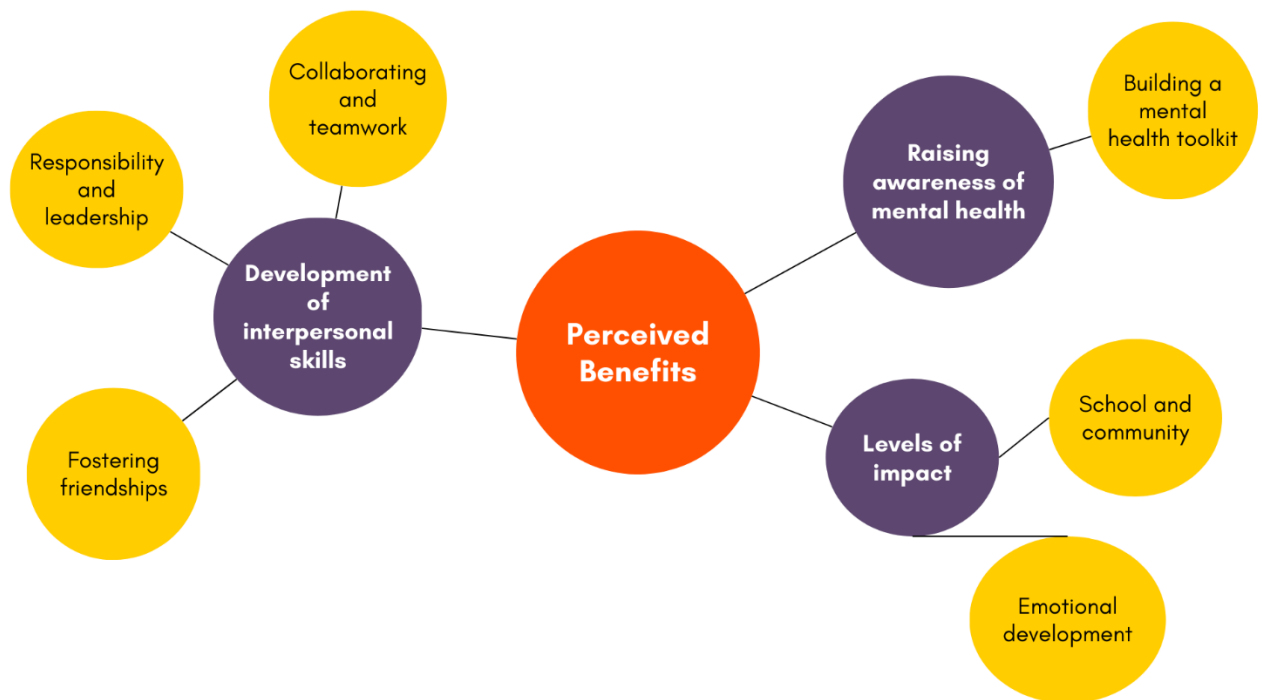
*"Being involved in the Amber Flag meant that we were promoting a positive, accepting environment in the school. We wanted to show all students that their mental health is important and that there are ways to incorporate wellbeing into everyday life."*

*"Due to the number of suicides locally and the stress adults (both staff and learners) find themselves since the economic downturn, we felt the centre could be a safe secure friendly place where learners and staff can feel a good positive atmosphere to learn or work in. People love being part of the team and enjoy the events."*

### 3.2.2 Benefits

“Please share other benefits of participating in the Amber Flag initiative.”

Feedback relating to the above statement is presented below and illustrated by quotations from survey responses. Key themes and subthemes arising from the responses are discussed. Key themes and subthemes are outlined in Figure 5 below.



**Figure 5: Key Themes and Subthemes of Perceived Benefits**

#### 3.2.2.1 Theme 1: Development of Interpersonal Skills

A prominent theme reported by respondents as a benefit of participating in the Amber Flag initiative is the opportunity to develop key interpersonal skills.

*“I think confidence increased within the group as meetings progressed, teamwork was evident, and it offers students who are not into sports in school to harness their energy in a positive way and be part of another proactive group. Student led means the students need to take responsibility when goals are set so many life skills are enhanced.”.*

*“Children learn new strategies, supports available, they learn how a committee works, taking responsibility and cooperation with others, which helps in the development of their interpersonal communication skills.”*

*“Students working together, social groups developed for students, students voice strengthened in school community.”*

Respondents described students gaining teamwork skills, the ability to collaborate with their peers and share ideas, demonstrate leadership and responsibility, enhancing the student voice within the school, and developing new friendships through the initiative. Participating in the Amber Flag initiative benefited students by developing and enhancing a number of interpersonal skills.

### **Teamwork and Collaboration**

Respondents highlighted the initiative as an opportunity to enhance teamwork skills and work collaboratively. It allowed both students and teachers from different classes to work together and share ideas.

*“Our committee worked as part of a team and grew in their ability to share ideas and come up with creative solutions to meet our Amber Flag goals.”*

*“Brings different groups together that otherwise would not meet, allows creativity to flourish as anything is possible as a positive support. Sharing key tips for budgeting, minding your mental health, and knowing where to go for help is key.”*

The Amber Flag initiative enabled participants to mix with people beyond their peer group, which helped to facilitate sharing ideas and being creative and collaborative.

### **Responsibility and Leadership**

Responses noted that committee members demonstrated leadership skills amongst their peers and took ownership and responsibility over the initiative, in the planning and execution of wellbeing activities.

*“It really helped us to promote a student led forum and empower them with responsibilities so that they felt in control, useful and contributors to our whole school ambition to continuously promote positive mental health rather than being taught about it. Also, our children had brilliant ideas probably much more relevant than things we would have been suggesting”.*

*“Children were so engaged and took real ownership for being part of the Amber Flag team.”*

Respondents emphasised Amber flag as a 'student led' initiative. By giving students responsibilities and active leadership roles, it empowered them and kept them engaged in promoting positive mental health.

### **Fostering Friendships**

Respondents described the Amber Flag initiative as an initiative that is inclusive to all participants. The whole school/organisation approach allowed opportunities to mix with different social groups and form new friendships.

*“Students from all year groups coming together to work on the committee, forming new friendships.”*

*“The Amber Flag initiative has fostered a real sense of community in our school...”*

*“Friendship and sense of community and of belonging.”*

### **3.2.2.2 Theme 2: Raising Awareness of Mental Health**

Raising awareness of mental health was a prominent theme described by respondents as a benefit of participating in the Amber flag initiative.

*“I think a big thing is removing the stigma surrounding mental health. The children were wonderful at identifying times and reasons when they might feel sad and down and they loved coming up with things to do to help their state of mind feel*



*better. There was a great acceptance of it's okay not to feel okay but here are things that might help."*

*"It ensures that the conversation around mental health is open and ongoing throughout the school."*

Respondents highlighted the importance of raising awareness of mental health issues experienced by participants, through opening, and facilitating a conversation around mental health with the aim to reduce the stigma of mental health difficulties.

### **Building a Mental Health Toolkit**

'Building a mental health toolkit' was identified as an additional benefit through raising awareness of mental health. By raising awareness of mental health difficulties, it emphasised the importance of positive mental health. Respondents described trying new activities and exercises to build tools and strategies to improve participants' well-being and raising awareness of mental health supports and services available to people.

*"We have definitely noticed a huge awareness in children with regards to positive mental health and well-being practices such as mindful activities, kindness to others and the importance of breathing and calming techniques."*

*"Because Wellbeing is such a huge part of the school curriculum, students are benefiting everyday through the activities they are completing."*

Respondents described an awareness in participants of the importance of looking after your mental health and using wellbeing tools to facilitate this. Part of building a toolkit to protect your mental health, was raising awareness of services that could support students with mental health difficulties.

*"Students and staff - the whole school community are made aware of the services available to them and to their families by learning about the Amber School Initiative and Mental Health awareness."*

### 3.2.2.3 Theme 3: Levels of Impact

Another key theme identified as a benefit of participating in the Amber Flag initiative was the level of impact that the initiative had – not just on the participants development as individuals, but also on the wider organisation and community.

#### Schools and Communities

Respondents described the positive atmosphere the initiative created in the school, in bringing the school community together.

*“It creates a sense of community. It is something that students, staff, and the wider community benefit from. It creates an opportunity for people to chat about mental health in a positive, safe environment.”*

Respondents noted that promoting and raising awareness of mental health within the school environment has created a safe and inclusive space where students and staff can openly discuss mental health. The promotion of the Amber Flag initiative and visibility of the flag outside the school has also impacted the wider community through raising awareness and opening conversations around mental health beyond the school gates.

*“We were able to spread the word about this initiative which enabled a community wide approach to supporting mental health and hopefully allowed for conversations at home to be had and maybe helped those not in our school also.”*

#### Emotional Development

In addition, the impact on participants' emotional development was a prominent subtheme. Respondents described the individual developmental benefits from participating in the Amber Flag initiative. Respondents described developmental benefits such as developing emotional literacy, promoting emotional regulation, fostering empathy and building resilience.

*“Younger children have developed a great vocabulary around wellbeing and emotions.”*

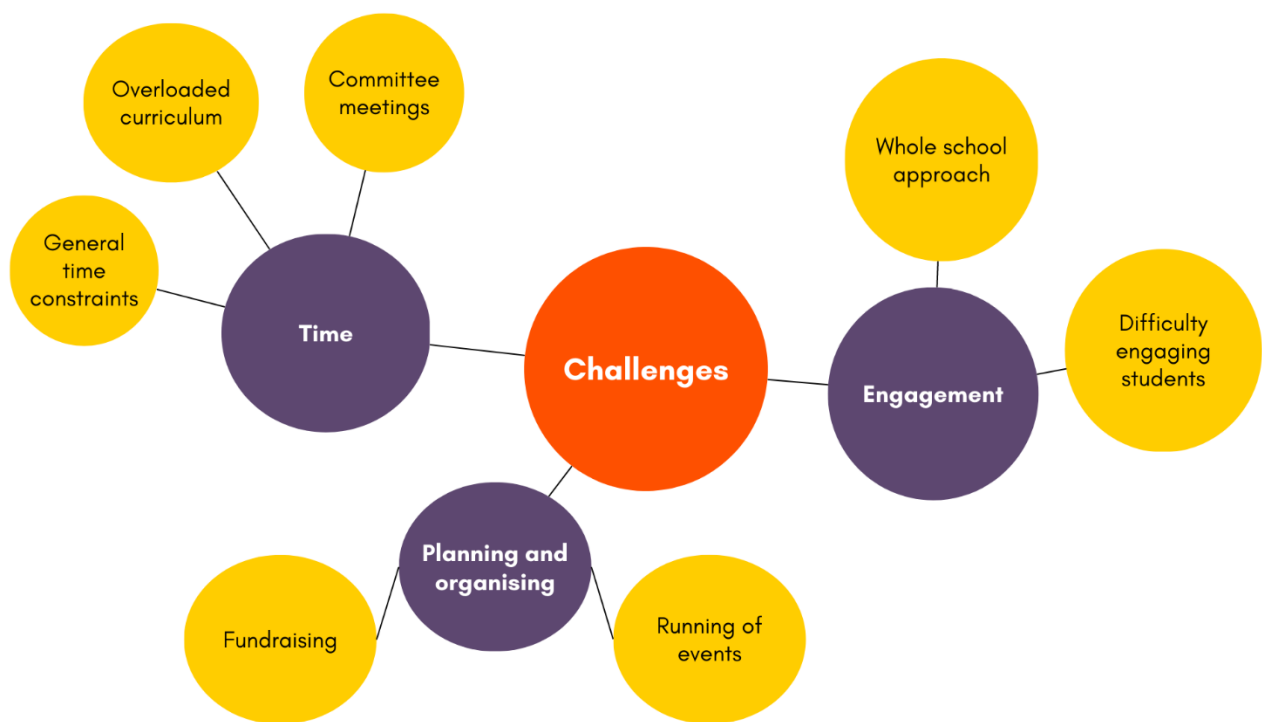
*“Teaches empathy and awareness of well-being, self-awareness and relaxation.”*

*“...Encourages boys to talk about their feelings and name them...”*

### 3.2.3 Challenges

“Please share other challenges experienced when participating in the Amber Flag initiative.”

Feedback relating to the above statement is presented below and illustrated by quotations from survey responses. Key themes and subthemes arising from the responses are discussed. Key themes and subthemes are outlined in Figure 6 below.



**Figure 6: Key Themes and Subthemes of Challenges**

#### 3.2.3.1 Theme 1: Engagement

The first theme describes aspects of staff and student engagement that some respondents reported to be challenging during their Amber Flag process.

## Difficulty Engaging Students

Several respondents reported a reluctance to participate in learning about positive mental health and Amber Flag related wellbeing activities.

*"Initially the older children were slightly self-conscious of taking part in the yoga/meditation/dance activities but as we progressed, they began to more easily enjoy themselves and feel the benefits".*

*"Some people didn't engage well in learning about their mental health".*

*"There's plenty of student support within the Amber Flag committee but I think people outside of the committee don't want to be involved. School activities aren't "cool" to a lot of people".*

Respondents from post-primary schools reported less engagement from older students, in particular exam year students who needed to prioritise study.

*"For Leaving Certificate students, it can be difficult to give your time to any such initiative, even if you are passionate about the cause. Many sixth-year students were eager to get involved but could not give the time up to be completely involved in the process".*

*"None of the current 6th year students decided to be part of the committee.*

*Some people are too busy for the Amber Flag initiative".*

Some responses highlighted the pressure on coordinators to maintain participants continued engagement with the initiative over the course of the academic year.

*"Trying to maintain the awareness within the school and keeping people involved".*

*“Some students were reluctant to get involved at first and needed lots of reminding to complete tasks on time, e.g., finish artwork”.*

Absenteeism was also reported as a challenge relating to engagement.

*“The attendance has been quite poor, as the young people are struggling with their mental health”.*

*“The issue of regular attendance from students post covid”.*

### **Whole School Approach**

The Amber Flag process encourages participants to take a whole school approach. Committees are required to be comprised of both staff and student/service user/member participants. There were some difficulties in this area.

*“As a special school, having students involved in the process [is a challenge]”.*

*“We had a wonderful student committee, and their organisational skills were excellent. Next year we will need to get more staff onboard and that may be a challenge”.*

Respondents from larger schools reported difficulties providing activities and events that catered to all age groups.

*“Getting everyone involved, coming up with age-appropriate ideas e.g., infants”.*

*“Older classes were harder to get involved”.*

### **3.2.3.2 Theme 2: Time**

The second theme describes various time constraints that negatively impacted upon the Amber Flag process.

## Committee Meetings

Respondents spoke of problems finding time for committee meetings with conflicting staff and student schedules reported as the main barrier.

*"As our committee has students from different year groups it was difficult to get time to meet them".*

*"Time constraints is always an issue! Getting people to meet and people being absent etc".*

*"Due to being a small school it was hard to fit in a meeting with the Amber Flag team throughout the week. There is a lot of chopping and changing in a small school, so it was hard to find a time that suited everyone".*

*"Most of our meetings took place at breaktimes".*

## Overloaded Curriculum

Many respondents reported feeling restricted by an already overloaded curriculum which prevented them from implementing some events and activities.

*"The only challenge we experienced was trying to cut down the amount of activities/initiatives which we were going to include as the committee and the school community had so many fantastic ideas which they felt would be worthwhile".*

*"Time. With so many ideas we wanted to do more!!"*

Some respondents reported concerns of putting pressure on their teacher's workload. In some cases, the addition of Amber Flag related projects resulted in changes to timetables which could be conflicting for teachers.

*"Our overloaded curriculum was hard for teachers as they felt 'valuable' working time could have been lost".*

*"Dedicating a timetabled class to work towards Amber Flag".*

Respondents from smaller schools reported issues with limited staff availability.

*“Getting other staff involved in a small school is difficult as everyone is already very busy”.*

*“Time - only due to the fact we are a small, two teacher school”.*

### **General Time Constraints**

There were general time constraints that impacted upon the respondents Amber Flag application process.

*“We had junior and senior breaks and lunches. Hard to coordinate it all”.*

*“Compiling the evidence took a good bit of time”.*

*“We joined the initiative quite late, so we had less time to complete the requirements”.*

### **3.2.3.3 Theme 3: Planning and Organising**

The third theme describes challenges that arose for participants in planning and organising essential activities and events as part of their Amber Flag initiative.

#### **Running of Events**

Covid-19 restrictions were a major challenge for respondents in terms of planning and organising for their Amber Flag initiative. School closures caused disruption, while social distancing had a significant effect on the ability to provide a safe and sufficient space for Amber Flag meetings and events.

*“Covid has made it difficult to meet up with the committee as a whole”.*

*“We would have applied before only for the lockdowns and the Covid restrictions made initiatives more difficult”.*

*“Restrictions during the pandemic made it more difficult e.g., guest speakers not permitted. Big groups couldn't take part in certain events at the same time”.*

Some respondents reflected on how the essential requirement of running a wellbeing week had caused some scheduling difficulties with their timetables.

*“In our school we can take part in a lot of initiatives so finding the correct time to do our wellbeing week was a struggle”.*

*“Trying to fit in a wellbeing week as our school is busy like many others”.*

*“Had to push Wellness Week out to May so completing application was a bit challenging”.*

The weather also caused some challenges by disrupting plans to run outdoor events.

*“Wellbeing week was affected by poor weather as we do not have a PE hall”.*

*“Sometimes the weather was a challenge for activities we had arranged”.*

## **Fundraising**

For new applicants, organising a fundraiser on behalf of Pieta is one of the mandatory goals to obtain an Amber Flag. Some respondents reported concerns of putting too much financial strain on parents and the community and therefore were conflicted around the timing of their Amber Flag fundraising event.

*“The only challenge we had was that our school is a DEIS 1 school and parents had been very generous earlier in the year raising money for Ukraine, therefore we had to postpone our fundraiser so parents could afford to make a donation”.*

*“We also need to fundraise a lot for school equipment so wanted to ensure our fundraiser for Pieta House was at a time*



where we weren't asking parents for money for school trips, raffles or bake sales."

### 3.2.4 Improvement

"Please share your suggestions for improving the Amber Flag Initiative".

Feedback relating to the above statement is presented below and illustrated by quotations from survey responses. Key themes and subthemes arising from the responses are discussed. Key themes and subthemes are outlined in Figure 7 below.



**Figure 7: Key Themes and Subthemes of Improvements**

#### 3.2.4.1 Theme 1: Resources

Theme 1 describes suggestions for additional resources that respondents felt would enhance and/or simplify their experience of the Amber Flag Initiative.

##### Welcome Pack

It was recommended that the Amber Flag team create physical resources and supply them to registered participants as part of a welcome pack.

*"Perhaps a welcome pack from Pieta House with age-appropriate literature/information"*

In addition, having a list of goal ideas from previous applicants was strongly recommended by respondents, where new and renewing applicants could select targets for their own application based upon goals reached successfully by past applicants.

*"a section in the information leaflet with examples of what other schools have done..."*

*"Suggestions of themes or starting points each year might bring awareness to issues that are relevant at that time".*

*"More samples of completed targets".*

Similarly, respondents also suggested a compiled list of ideas for activities and events that would complement their targeted goals.

*"If the Amber Flag had more suggestions on what schools could do or new activities".*

*"Maybe gallery of previous Amber Flag activities available"*

*"Include more activities and details about each necessary activity".*

Additional useful resources were suggested that could be included as part of a welcome pack.

*"List of local guest speakers"*

*"Maybe sharing some resources e.g., posters/videos that could be used to promote mental health in school".*

*"Posters asking students to join and include benefits of being in the Amber Team encourage students they can make a difference".*

## Online Resources

Respondents expressed a desire for connection with other participating schools. Respondents felt they would feel more prepared and supported if they had a space to discuss options and ask questions of other teachers.

*"Perhaps a forum created to share ideas as that was a challenge what ideas we had, were they current/ interesting enough and did they meet requirements. At least if there was somewhere to have discussions and bounce ideas off, I feel best practice would be more freely shared"*

*"Allow Amber Flag schools to connect with one another to share ideas (maybe by county or region)"*

*"A forum for teachers where they could share ideas, ask questions etc".*

Some respondents suggested using social media as a platform to discuss and share Amber Flag ideas with other participants.

*"Perhaps a greater social media presence so schools can tag their events and ideas with a specific hashtag. That way, we can share ideas".*

*"An Amber Flag Instagram page or zoom meetings for teachers at the start of the year where schools can share ideas etc".*

*"Perhaps a social media / online forum for schools to share ideas on how to participate".*

Several responses suggested including some online interactive resources for students and teachers.

*"A Teams call across all the classrooms with the live Quiz, where each class answered the questions on Kahoot worked really well. So much teamwork and so much fun and it was in each classroom, so they were able to talk and have lots of fun. Unlike*

*a pub-quiz style one where everyone would be whispering. It worked so well, even better than we imagined”.*

*“Perhaps some workbooks or interactive content”*

*“Provide videos for children”.*

### **Psychoeducational Material**

Some respondents suggested the addition of psychoeducational materials would further support the message behind the Amber Flag initiative.

*“Bring in more education about different types of mental illnesses, so that people will be able to look for signs and get the appropriate help”.*

*“To have more resources available for mental health and well-being”.*

*“A booklet, similar to kindness activity pack from British Red Cross could be produced”.*

#### **3.2.4.2 Theme 2: Promoting Amber Flag**

Theme 2 describes suggested ideas to improve awareness of the Amber Flag initiative and encourage participation through social media campaigns, publications, additional promotional materials and annual Amber Flag events.

### **Advertising and Marketing**

Respondents suggested using media publications and social media campaigns to enhance awareness and participation. Many felt that schools and organisations would want to take part in the Amber Flag if they knew about it.

*“Podcasts or social media hashtags, any media related promo i.e., at higher options or radio promos to raise the status nationally”.*

*"Twitter account/social media accounts for the Amber Flag initiative".*

*"I would suggest you ask a teacher to write/co-write an article for the INTO magazine (teacher Union magazine) which comes out every two months to all primary schools in the north and republic, this would definitely help promote the uptake as I'd say there are some schools still who do not know about it. Ideas etc. on the article would help encourage teacher/school participation".*

*"More emphasis on promoting the initiative".*

*"I think making sure more schools know about it!"*

### **Promotional Materials**

Some respondents reported a desire for additional merchandise and promotional materials from Pieta to raise awareness and give an extra incentive to committee members.

*"Some merchandise such as posters, badges, wrist bands, pens etc. for the team members as a motivator".*

*"If you could have badges for wellbeing committee members, this would give the members (students) a sense of pride and others would know exactly who is on the wellbeing committee".*

*"Although we were sent lovely t shirts it would be nice to get more promotional material".*

### **Amber Flag Events**

Respondents suggested running Amber Flag competitions and events to celebrate participants achievements and to provide an opportunity for committee members to showcase their work.

*"A few years ago, there was a day held in the 3 Arena for mental health promotion. It was ran by another organisation (possibly*

*cycle against suicide but I'm not too sure). It was brilliant - they had inspirational speakers and live music and stalls promoting different organisations, etc. If Amber Flag were able to run some kind of day like that for the Amber Flag committees from different schools to go to it would be amazing for the students. They could receive their flags on that day!"*

*"Students or Amber Flag committee members would also benefit from showcasing work on a national wellbeing day or something similar".*

*"Nationwide competition for schools to produce a short video promoting mental health awareness and what schools are doing in this area. The winners' video could be made into an ad on TV or could be shown at big sports events".*

#### 3.2.4.3 Theme 3: Additional Pieta Supports

Theme 3 describes suggestions for additional supports that respondents felt Pieta could provide to enhance their overall experience of the Initiative.

##### **Amber Flag Training/Visit**

Respondents suggested an Amber Flag introductory training session be delivered to participants at the beginning of the initiative. Some felt training should be provided to prepare co-ordinators for signposting appropriate services and dealing with mental health related concerns that arise during the process.

*"Possibly an information session at the start of the school year, either face to face or online".*

*"I think a general video of explanation on what the flag is about and how to achieve it would be good to lay out at the start of the year as there was a lot of teacher work, more than children's work".*

*"I made a PowerPoint explaining the Amber Flag, it would be good if there was an official one with appropriate terminology".*

Many respondents felt the presence of a Pieta/Amber Flag representative would give meaning to the initiative as well as providing them with an opportunity to take photographs for their website and highlight their efforts to address mental health culture within their schools.

*"If we could have someone come from Pieta House to help us raise our Amber Flag and perhaps speak to our students"*

*"The Amber Flag initiative is fantastic. We found it hard for a Pieta House representative in our area to come to the school, so we missed the photo opportunity with the committee. The cheque was left into their headquarters"*

*"Official visits once in the school year to meet those involved which would make the whole journey more meaningful to the whole school community"*

### **Mental Health Related Talks/Workshops**

Many respondents recommended the addition of mental health specific workshops and talks to provide support to co-ordinators implementing the initiative.

*"It would have been amazing to have someone qualified in mindfulness or mental health to come speak to the children or possibly give some staff training as to how we can better support children"*

*"More teacher training for those involved in the flag to deal with the more complex mental health issues which arose as a result of focusing on mental wellness in our school community and the external supports to which they can be linked to quickly"*

Others expressed a desire to have external professionals, approved by Pieta, attend their school to support staff and students with psychoeducational classes and mindfulness practices.

*“Access to some guest speakers to come to school to talk about mental health. Someone to come to do Mindfulness, yoga, meditation etc. We were able to call on parents and local people at times”.*

*“I think if the Amber Flag initiative had guest speakers on a webinar that schools could use, it would be really great. Ambassadors for mental health such as Niall Breslin etc on board would really engage to students”.*

Some respondents raised concerns about using appropriate language with under 18s when addressing the topic of mental health and the work of Pieta. Several suggestions of talks/workshops were made specifically to target this concern.

*“Perhaps guidance on how to explain to children the work done by Pieta House e.g., suggested child friendly vocabulary for infants, first/second etc”.*

*“I would have liked maybe a guest speaker to come and speak to the children about mental health awareness in a child friendly way”.*

*“Videos of kids explaining mental health or special words associated with mental health would also be good too, but the initiative is amazing!”*



## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Key Findings

Overall, the feedback gathered was hugely positive. Respondents demonstrated high motivation for working towards the Amber Flag and perceived the initiative as very beneficial to students, staff, and organisation members.

#### 4.1.1 Motivation

Schools and organisations were motivated to promote positive mental health within their communities, to help students or members to develop skills and tools to support their mental health. Further, there was a strong sense of striving to facilitate conversations about mental health difficulties and to combat the stigma faced by those with poor mental health. There was a consensus about the importance of promoting mental health within the school context. This was also recognised as a key benefit of completing the Amber Flag initiative.

Furthermore, receiving a tangible flag to display was perceived as symbolic of a strong commitment to promoting positive mental health. There was a sense that flying the Amber Flag clearly articulated these organisational values to wider community.

Another significant motivation for undertaking the Amber Flag among school-based respondents was the desire to achieve recognition for the work already being done to foster wellbeing in their school community. The Amber Flag initiative was seen to have clear linkages with SPHE curriculum and NCCA Wellbeing Guidelines, as well as supporting school improvement plans and general ethos.

#### 4.1.2 Benefits

Reflecting on completing the initiative, respondents highlighted the benefits to students' and members' emotional development. It was reported that participation in the Amber Flag process promoted emotional regulation and emotional literacy, resilience, and empathy. The development of interpersonal skills was a further key benefit identified by numerous respondents, who felt that teamwork, responsibility and leadership and social skills were built upon during the Amber Flag process.

Overall, participating in the Amber Flag initiative was seen to positively benefit not only school and organisational environment, but also benefitted the wider community by encouraging conversations around mental health and creating safe spaces in which to do so.

#### 4.1.3 Challenges

The Amber Flag initiative was not without challenges. Respondents noted the impact of time constraints on facilitating planning, meetings, and activities as a key challenge. Teachers' workload was seen as barrier to planning and organising events by some respondents. Further, some respondents found it challenging to navigate trying to engage students of different age groups. Nevertheless, respondents did note that the benefits outweigh the challenges and that perceived challenges would not deter them from reapplying.

#### 4.1.4 Improvement

It was clear that while the Amber Flag initiative was very well received overall, a number of improvements could be made to support participants' experience in the future. Respondents suggested that having some kind of welcome pack would be hugely helpful in implementing the programme. In addition, respondents felt that access to psychoeducational material, online resources, and assistance in generating ideas for activities and initiatives would be helpful. Respondents also noted that training or workshops provided by Pieta would be beneficial. The 'Green Schools' initiative mentioned previously, for instance, provides teacher webinars, lesson plans, videos, activity suggestions, quizzes, and surveys to support schools in the process of achieving their Green Flag.

Many respondents expressed a desire for promotional material (such as badges, t-shirts, posters etc.) to increase visibility of the fact that their school or organisation was participating in the initiative. Respondents also noted that the Amber Flag could be promoted more through advertising and marketing, and through running Amber Flag school events to introduce the initiative to prospective participants.

There was a sense that public acknowledgement of their Amber Flag achievement was hugely important to participants. Numerous respondents suggested having an in-person event where schools and organisations were awarded the flag. Many

respondents would have liked the opportunity to present their fundraising cheque to a Pieta representative in person. It was felt that such occasions would encourage the students and members to engage. From the perspective of growing the Amber Flag initiative, such occasions also present a clear opportunity to increase visibility and promote the Amber Flag initiative to other schools and organisations.

## 4.2 Recommended Actions

Recommended actions and corresponding resources for development, based on suggested improvements, are outlined in the table below.

**Table 4: Recommended Actions and Suggested Developments**

Recommended Action	Suggested Resources for Development
Welcome pack	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create physical resources to supply to registered participants as a welcome pack</li> <li>• Develop a list of goal ideas from previous applicants</li> <li>• Compile a list of ideas for activities and events that would complement goals</li> <li>• Design posters and information leaflets as part of a welcome pack</li> </ul>
Online resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an online forum for participants to connect with, discuss options with and ask questions to others</li> <li>• Create an Amber Flag “Best Practice” guidance document</li> <li>• Collaborate with Marketing to improve Amber Flag social media presence</li> <li>• Promote the use of #amberflag and tagging of Pieta on social media</li> <li>• Create videos for participants</li> <li>• Develop interactive online content for participants</li> </ul>
Psychoeducational material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop relevant materials</li> <li>• Create signposting document of other organisations providing these materials</li> </ul>

Advertising and marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an Amber Flag Community Strategy in partnership with Marketing</li> <li>• Increase presence at partner events</li> <li>• Consider competitions for participants to showcase Amber Flag achievements</li> </ul>
Promotional materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop business case for additional merchandise and promotional materials</li> </ul>
Amber Flag events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop business case for an annual Amber Flag showcase and award giving event</li> </ul>
Amber Flag training/visit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop an information workshop for co-ordinators – for delivery online and face to face</li> <li>• Develop an information workshop for committees – for delivery online and face to face</li> <li>• Collaborate with Community Fundraising team to assist with cheque presentation and flag raising events</li> </ul>
Mental health related talks/workshops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create signposting document of other organisations providing mental health related information/ talks/ workshops</li> <li>• Source guidance/resources on talking to young people about mental health in an age friendly way</li> <li>• Develop guidance on talking to young people about the work of Pieta in an age friendly way</li> </ul>

### 4.3 Limitations

This project had certain limitations, which if addressed, would strengthen future similar projects. This was a self-selecting sample subject to non-response bias, wherein those who chose to take part may be different to those who didn't. For example, participants may have been those who were most motivated to contribute and/ or those most engaged with the initiative. Also, it was not possible to control at which point in the process the survey was completed. Completing the survey some time after the initiative was completed in a particular school or organisation, for example, may

have resulted in some unrepresentative responses. Further, as the feedback survey was completed by one individual on behalf of their school/ organisation, their views may not have been entirely representative of the experiences of all involved. In addition, although the survey included open-ended questions, follow-up questions may have been helpful to encourage more detailed responses. The possibility of conducting interviews could be considered in further studies. Finally, the non-experimental approach taken by this project could be strengthened in several ways. Establishing measurable outcomes for the Amber Flag initiative based on the values and aims of the initiative and collecting data before and after a school/ organisation takes part in the initiative could be helpful in establishing the impact of the initiative. A third follow-up round of data collection would also be helpful to ascertain perceived benefits of participation in the Amber Flag initiative over time.

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