

Youth Access' response to the Youth Select Committee inquiry Cost of living: impact on young people's health and wellbeing

September 2023

About Youth Access

Youth Access exists to ensure that every young person has access to the support they need, when and where they need it, to thrive on their journey into adulthood. Alongside our member network of 123 youth advice and counselling services, we champion young people's right to access high-quality services providing a range of support, from mental health and wellbeing to housing and employment, all under one roof, in their local community.

Our policy and campaigns work is led by the evidence of what works and is grounded in the experiences of our member services and young people they work alongside. We advocate for the Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) model, which offers free, easily accessible and age appropriate 'whole life' support to young people aged 11-25 and delivers the best outcomes for young people and society as a whole.

Summary

Young people have been on the sharp end of the rise in the cost of living, which has caused or exacerbated increasing levels of mental ill health experienced by under 25's.

- Community-based Youth, information, Advice and Counselling (YIACS) services,¹ also known as early support hubs, have provided a lifeline for many young people throughout the pandemic and the rises in the cost of living. **It is vital that these services have sustainable funding to continue delivering this support and establish new hubs in every community so young people can access support wherever they are, and whenever they need it.**²
- The rise in the cost of living has further compounded systemic inequalities in health, wellbeing, education and employment and our member services report that an increasing number of young people do not have enough money to meet their basic needs. **An urgent and coordinated response is required to dismantle inequalities and ensure healthier policy measures in areas such as housing and benefits to ensure young people can stay afloat and safely ride the waves on the journey to adulthood.**
- Addressing the root causes of the mental health challenges we face requires strategic focus and cross-departmental collaboration. It was therefore concerning that the Government shelved the awaited 10-year Mental Health and Wellbeing Plan at the beginning of 2023. **As we await the Major Conditions Strategy, of which mental health is one of five pillars, it is clear there must be renewed focus to take a joined-up approach to prioritise mental health and address the social and economic factors impacting on young people's lives and wellbeing.**

How young people have been affected by the rise in the cost of living

¹ Youth Access (2018) [Another way: Defining the functions and characteristics of YIACS](#)

² Youth Access (2023) [Fund the Hubs](#)

Young people are facing several ‘once in a generation’ crises at the same time. Historic increases in the costs of housing and basic goods, the aftermath of a global pandemic and a decade of under-investment in support services have created a perfect storm for many young people as they navigate their journey into adulthood.

The repercussive effects of these crises have repeatedly demonstrated that mental health does not exist in a vacuum. Our mental health is inextricably linked to - and affected by - experiences of insecure housing, struggles with debt, precarious or low paid employment or having to make choices between heating or eating.

The rise in the cost of living, which has seen the annual rate of inflation reaching a 40-year record of 11.1% in October 2022, has disproportionately impacted under-25s who are most affected by rising costs of fuel, food and shelter and are experiencing the worst impacts on their mental health.³

- NHS Digital identified a twofold increase in the proportion of young people aged 17-22 with a probable mental health disorder who said that they could not afford to buy food or had used food banks between 2017-2022.⁴
- A survey by YoungMinds found that over half (56%) of young people report that the cost of living is a ‘major worry’, and that 80% of young people aged 20-25 were always or often worried about earning enough.⁵
- A report by Leaders Unlocked found that nearly half of young people said cost of living was having a ‘large’ or ‘catastrophic’ impact on their mental health.⁶

Whilst many young people experience mental ill health, the risks are much higher for young people already living at the sharp end of an unequal society and who face structural and intersectional discrimination based on their race, sexuality, gender identity, immigration status, class and/or disability. The rise in the cost of living has further exacerbated systemic inequalities in health, wellbeing, employment, education, income for the same people that were hardest hit by the pandemic – including young women, Black and racially minoritised young people, LGBTQ+ young people and young people in poverty.

Research has shown that experiencing mental ill health in childhood or adolescence has longer-term impacts across the life course, affecting quality of life, educational outcomes, earnings, employment, health and relationships. The annual cost of mental health problems in England is estimated to be £119 billion, measured in terms of spending on health and costs of economic inactivity.⁷ It is vitally important that all young people can have access to free support to address the economic, social and cultural experiences that affect our wellbeing, at an early stage, to set them up to thrive, which in turn benefits society as a whole.

Support and advice for young people

Youth Access represents 123 member organisations, rooted in local communities around the country, many of which offer Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS). The ‘one-stop-shop’ YIACS model seeks to support young people with the diverse challenges faced on the journey into adulthood by providing a range of ‘open access’ or drop-in services under one roof.

³ Demos (2021) [Bouncing Back: booking young people’s financial wellbeing after the pandemic](#)

⁴ NHS Digital (2022) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2022 follow up](#)

⁵ Young Minds (2022) [Beano Brain survey](#)

⁶ Leaders Unlocked (2023) [Cost of Living National Report](#)

⁷ Mental Health Foundation (2022) [The economic case for investing in the prevention of mental health conditions in the UK](#)

Taking a young person-centred and age-appropriate approach for 11-25 year-olds, YIACS are driven by the rights and needs of young people and target support at those who would otherwise fall through the gaps between children and adult's mental health services.

Our member services have been on the frontline providing tailored support to young people to respond to and navigate the challenges they are experiencing in their lives as a result of the rises in the cost of living. The message from services is consistent: that the rise in the cost of living has left increasing numbers of young people struggling with the basics and experiencing deteriorating mental health as a result.

“The cost-of-living crisis is probably the biggest cause of distress that young people are facing at the moment in our services. Giving out food on almost a day-to-day basis has become the norm – it didn't used to be”

Dan Mobbs, Mancroft Advice Project (MAP), Youth Access member in Norfolk

Member services have reported the following:

- More young people are accessing their services with a greater level of urgency and need for support.
- A higher proportion of young people are grappling with multiple, interconnected challenges in their lives that require more dedicated time, skill and resource to effectively respond to.
- An increase in the number of young people who are street-homeless, with nowhere to call home.
- Loneliness and social isolation are a growing concern as young people prioritise basic costs and cut back on other costs such as travel and going out and seeing friends.
- Young people are experiencing heightened concern for their parents and/or carers as they observe them struggling to keep afloat financially and an increasing number of young people are taking up work to supplement their family income.
- Uncertainty of precarious employment such as zero or low hours contracts and/or unsafe and poor working practices is contributing to stress and mental ill health.
- Increase in young people's anxiety due to constantly being surrounded by the term 'crisis' at home, in the media and in public discourse.
- The cumulative impact of the above experiences in contributing to young people's concern about what their future looks like and increased feelings of shame and hopelessness.

Why youth advice and counselling services? What young people want

Young people have told us about the transformational change they want to see for a mental health system that meets their rights.⁸ This includes having experts who understand the unique issues facing young people, services that are made for and with young people and that are tailored to meet their diverse needs and experiences and an approach that supports all areas of their life, from mental health and wellbeing to education, housing, relationships, money and benefits.

YIACS services provide specialist, youth-specific information, advice and guidance in areas such as housing, homelessness, debt, employment, relationships, sexual health, drug and alcohol support and mental health, including counselling and therapeutic interventions and other wellbeing services. YIACS are designed and developed with young people's needs and rights in mind, providing a

⁸ Our Minds Our Future (2019) [Our Manifesto](#)

holistic, person-first approach. We know that young people have complex and intersecting needs. The wraparound support they receive from our members is not only vital, it's what young people tell us they need. YIACS service are:

- **Effective:** A key strength of the YIACS model is the combination of support for mental health with advice on areas such as housing, debt and employment. This 'whole life approach', that treats mental health as an issue interwoven with every element of their life, has been shown to be highly effective at addressing the range of challenges faced by young people and improving young people's mental health,⁹ and had comparable clinical outcomes to CAHMS and school-based counselling.
- **Open access:** Young people have told us they want early support that is easy to access rather than facing long waiting lists or thresholds which mean they're 'not sick enough' for specialist services. Young people want workers they can trust and who understand the issues they face as young adults, and can help them to take appropriate steps before their issues reach crisis point.
- **Wider reaching:** Community based services such as YIACS also have been shown to have a better reach to young people from least-heard and worst-served backgrounds who may otherwise slip through the cracks of statutory services and school settings. Research identified that YIACS were serving higher proportions of LGBTQ+ young people, Black and racially minoritised young people and young people with experience of contact with the youth justice system.¹⁰
- **A bridge, not a cliff edge:** For young people around age 18 who face major upheaval such as leaving education, leaving home or the care system, joining the workforce and gaining financial independence, this also comes hand-in-hand with losing access to vital support from various children's agencies. YIACS services typically work alongside young people up to the age of 25, bridging the all-important transition into adulthood.

Impact of the rising cost of living on youth advice and counselling services

The rising cost of living is also impacting the organisations delivering this essential support to young people. Member YIACS services are reporting an increased demand for support by young people, combined with an increased complexity of need and increased costs of delivering services as they face increases in heating, food, travel and wages.

Members are reporting that waiting lists for therapeutic services are at record levels. They are also stretching to meet the increased needs of young people coming to their services. Some services have started to distribute food vouchers for the first time as food banks have run out of donations, whilst others have reported purchasing school uniforms for young people whose families are unable to cover the costs. The bottom line is that an ever increasing number of young people simply do not have enough money to live off.

The last few years have had a significant impact on the YIACS workforce who have been in 'disaster response' mode for a prolonged period of time. Staff continue to respond to increased severity of need by young people whilst workloads and demand for their vital skills has never been higher. Member services share their concern about the impact this has had on their staff, both in their personal and professional lives, and the need for increased support and attention to their wellbeing.

⁹ Youth Access (2012) [The Legal Problems and Mental Health Needs of Youth Advice Service Users: The Case for Advice](#)

¹⁰ Youth Access (2020) [The effectiveness of VSC youth counselling services and their role within the mental health system](#)

Services are also facing increased challenges around staff recruitment and retention as they are unable to cover costs of raising wages in line with inflation.

Case Study: NoLimits

NoLimits is based in Southampton and provides a wide range of support for children and young people, including counselling and a drop-in advice centre, where people can get help with debt, money management, housing and other welfare concerns. Coming out of the pandemic into a cost-of-living crisis has created layer upon layer of challenge for many young people and NoLimits have seen an increase in the complexity of young people's issues. In the year to March 2022, the service saw an 80% increase in emotional wellbeing needs, a 98% increase in experiences of exploitation or neglect and a 134% increase in young people coming to the service with suicidal feelings. The breadth of specialist advice alongside therapeutic interventions continues to be vital for addressing multiple issues in a joined-up way.

The additional challenges experienced by YIACS members as a result of the rise in the cost of living is taking place in a context where services have long faced unstable funding with particular challenges around funding gaps for essential advice work. Unsurprisingly, this piecemeal funding picture means that many local areas are not currently served by YIACS provision, which in turn means many young people are missing out on this effective, whole life support.

Short-term, unstable funding: Too often YIACS are forced to “patchwork” small amounts of short-term funding from multiple sources. The burden of sourcing and reporting on these absorbs precious time, and prevents organisations from being able to plan and grow - and ultimately places vital services for young people at risk of being discontinued year on year. Investment in ‘one-stop-shops’ such as YIACS was recommended in Future in Mind¹¹ back in 2015, but funding remains piecemeal and unsustainable, with no accountability on any agency to ensure the full model of open-access, youth-specific information and advice is provided.

Underfunding of advice work: Advice is an essential piece of the YIACS model and young people's advice needs have risen rapidly in the context of the rise of the cost of living. However, advice work typically receives less funding than mental health, despite the fact that 16-25s are the age group most in need of dedicated support while being much less likely to receive advice or good advice than the general population.

Postcode lottery of services: The unstable funding picture means that some local areas are not currently served by YIACS, meaning that young people's access to free youth advice and counselling support will depend on their postcode.

¹¹ Department of Health and NHS England (2015) [Future in mind: promoting, protecting and improving our children and young people's mental health and wellbeing](#)

Fund the Hubs campaign

Fund the Hubs is a joint campaign with Youth Access, The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, Centre for Mental Health, Mind, The Childrens Society, YoungMinds, Black Thrive and BACP. We are calling for funding for a network of 'early support hubs' for young people across the country, providing easy-to-access early help for mental health and the issues that underpin it. We want to see concerted national and local efforts to support the organisations already providing this vital work, and to harness their expertise to create more hubs, so that young people in every part of the country can have access.

Recommendations

Young people lead complex lives and are navigating specific challenges for the very first time, all of which depend upon, as well as affect, their mental wellbeing. To address these challenges, and stay mentally well, young people need support across all areas of their life, not just their mental health diagnosis. **With the right early action, we can stop young people's problems from escalating, instead of waiting to treat them at crisis point.**

Recommendations to the government to ensure young people can be supported through the rise in the cost of living:

- **Young people have the right to the best possible standard of mental health and to be involved in decisions about what that looks like and how it should be achieved, at both the individual and the system level.** All future planning and decision-making for the mental health system should centre the voices of young people and embed more accessible opportunities for young people who face inequalities and are typically underrepresented to be heard – to ensure that any policy solutions protect the most marginalised.
- In order to improve access, experience and outcomes for people from communities facing inequalities and multiple disadvantages, evidence-based recommendations¹² back up what young people tell us:¹³ **Mental health support should be flexible, offered through local services rooted in the community - rather than clinical or educational settings which can be stigmatised - and should offer a range of support in one place.**
- As part of the Fund the Hubs Campaign, we are calling for government funding of a national roll out of early support hubs to ensure the sustainability and expansion of these vital services and enable all young people to access advice and counselling support that meets young people's needs and respects their rights.
- **Local and national government should introduce broader social policy programmes to mitigate against the worst impacts of the rise in the cost of living and the interconnected harms to young people's mental health by undertaking measures to halt evictions and increase universal credit for under-25s living independently.**¹⁴

For more information contact Sarah Uncles, Policy and Campaigns Manager: SarahU@youthaccess.org.uk

¹² Centre for Mental Health (2020) Mental health for all? [The final report from the Commission for Equality](#)

¹³ Youth Access and the Our Minds Our Future UK partnership (2021) [Our Minds Our Future Manifesto for England](#)
Youth Access (2017) [Altogether Better Charter for YIACS](#)

Youth Access & The Young People's Health Partnership (2017) [Consultations with young people on the green paper Transforming children and young people's mental health provision](#)

¹⁴ Centre Point (2023) [Make universal credit fair for young people living independently](#)