

The case beyond Covid

Evidence for the role of Youth Information Advice and Counselling Services in responding to young people's needs in the pandemic and beyond

May 2021

This is the second of three briefings developed by Youth Access to support our members, the wider youth sector, commissioners and policymakers to anticipate and respond to the scale of socio-economic and mental health need among younger generations over the coming year and beyond. It summarises the evidence behind an integrated, youth-focused approach to supporting

young people, in the model of Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) that make up our membership. In doing so, it makes the case for a key role for local voluntary sector services such as YIACS and 'early support hubs' in tackling the 'whole life' challenges facing young people in light of the pandemic.

Introduction

As the first briefing in this series showed, young people have borne the brunt of the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic which, in turn, is having a serious and worrying effect on their mental health and wellbeing. This is of particular concern for young people who faced multiple disadvantages before Covid-19. The same young people who already experienced the worst mental health prior to the crisis – including young women, people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and young people living in poverty – have also been hardest hit by the pandemic.

Briefing one showed:

- **A digital divide** - hundreds of thousands of children and young people still go without the devices¹ or internet² needed to access education and essential services remotely – and that this, along with school closures and reduced teaching hours, has exacerbated existing educational inequalities.
- **Poverty and disadvantage on the rise** - levels of destitution in the UK are predicted to double³ due to the pandemic, millions more people are resorting to debt, and nearly double the number of 18-25-year-olds report they are frequently running out of money than before Covid-19.⁴
- **Impact on employment and earnings** - 16-25-year-olds' employment and earnings⁵ have been disproportionately impacted, especially those from BAME and disabled communities,⁶ women, the self-employed and those who grew up in a poor family.⁷
- **Increased housing insecurity** – the past year has made an already precarious housing market worse, and has trapped young people in abusive, unsafe homes.⁸

Responding to these challenges will require a joined-up approach that takes effective, targeted and sustainable measures to support young people across every area of their

lives. Failure to do so risks carving up young people's issues and providing disjointed care which focuses on symptoms, rather than outcomes; preventing young people from overcoming challenges which cut across different areas of their lives.

Youth Access represents approximately 160 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. This approach, and the Youth Access network, was recognised in Future in Mind as a key mechanism for improving young adults' access to early help with their mental health.⁹

It is past time to realise the recommendations outlined in Future in Mind, to invest in the existing network of YIACS to improve young people's access to early help. Young people can wait no more for investment in the services that will support them with the impact of the pandemic and the challenges thrown up on the journey into adulthood. With their wealth of expertise and deep roots in the communities they support, YIACS – and 'open access' services in general – must be at the heart of concerted efforts to support young people out of the present crisis.

“ *[One-stop-shops] should be a key part of any universal local offer, building on the existing network of YIACS (Youth Information, Advice, and Counselling Services). Building up such a network would be an excellent use of any identified early additional investment.* ”

Future in Mind, 2015¹⁰



What are YIACS and how do they support young people?

Youth Access' members offer young people free, holistic, integrated support outside of clinical and school settings for a wide range of issues relating to their emotional, health, social and practical needs, and often in combination - whether that be housing, employment, mental health or welfare. They are open to a wide age range of young people, typically 11-25, and are designed around the specific needs of the age groups they serve. This age-appropriate approach leads to better outcomes for young people¹¹ and is a core principle of the human right to health. It also enables YIACS to bridge the 'cliff edge' that many young people face as they approach the age of transition from children's to adult's services.

YIACS can be found on high streets and in town centres up and down the UK, and can be accessed in a range of ways, including self-referral, drop-in or referral by a professional or guardian. They are sometimes referred to as 'open-access' or 'early support hubs',¹² with the focus being on a flexible approach to young people setting their own thresholds, rather than being told by professionals when they are 'sick enough' to access support.

Youth Access members, in general, have grown in their communities from the bottom up – that is, without central direction from government or statutory bodies. They therefore vary hugely from organisation to organisation, in the type and scope of the services they offer, how they look and feel, and the needs of the young people they cater to – an independent approach which is critical to their ability to respond to specific local needs.

They have also been at the forefront of innovations in supporting young people throughout the pandemic. From digital and phone therapy and 'walk and talks', to food parcels, live peer support groups and wellbeing toolkits, Youth Access members have adapted with impressive speed to the challenges of remote provision in the past year.¹³ And all this in the face of rising need: No5, one of our member organisations based in Reading, saw a 121% increase in referrals of 11-17-year-olds to their services between August 2020 and February 2021 – rising to 239% for 18-25-year-olds.

What's the evidence?

“ *Improving NHS specialist services is only part of the answer. We also need a broader system response to children's mental health, incorporating schools and the voluntary sector.*”¹⁴

Children's Commissioner for England

A range of studies demonstrate not only the effectiveness of youth-focused services provided by YIACS, but the impact of providing support for multiple needs in one place, according to each young person's needs.

Counselling and mental health support

Community-based counselling, within easy reach of young people's homes, in a youth-friendly, de-stigmatised environment is key to improving access to support – especially for who find it harder to access CAMHS and school-based support - and an important element of the YIACS model.

Youth Access, Roehampton University and the British Association of Counsellors and Psychotherapists (BACP)¹⁵ carried out a systematic evaluation of youth counselling offered by YIACS in England, and compared this to similar data from young people accessing support from statutory Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and school-based counselling services:

Clinical outcomes

It demonstrated comparable clinical outcomes to statutory and school-based services among young people being supported by YIACS. Fifty-two per cent of young people showed a reliable improvement after they had accessed counselling support from YIACS, and 29% showed a clinically significant change or 'recovery'. This indicates similar outcomes to those found among young people accessing CAMHS, however the young people being supported by Youth Access members were experiencing higher levels of psychological distress (score of around 21 on both CORE-10 and YPCORE or 'moderately severe') and complex life challenges.

High satisfaction

Young people's experiences of being supported by YIACS were overwhelmingly positive, and they provided an average score of 17.3 out of a maximum 18 on the study's Experience of Service Questionnaire.¹⁶ They also reported higher levels of satisfaction than young people accessing support from CAMHS, with 97% saying it was 'certainly true' that they 'were listened to', compared to 85% in CAMHS.



Most (74%) young people in the study said there was nothing that they didn't like about the support they received. They reported that:

- they valued the accessibility and flexibility of YIACS
- YIACS were welcoming, friendly and supportive
- they felt listened to, understood and accepted
- it was the first time they had ever experienced being genuinely heard, respected and valued
- counsellors in these settings were knowledgeable, trustworthy, creative in their approach and easy to talk to
- the counselling they received led to long lasting and meaningful change in their lives.¹⁷

Bridge across transition age

Youth Access members were shown to cater to older young people – the average age of young people participating in the study was 20 years old, compared to CAMHS and school-based counselling catering to a mean age of 12 and 14 years old respectively. This demonstrated the key role that YIACS play in bridging the important transition between child and adult services, and supporting local systems to reach targets for improving young adults' access to support.

Tackling inequalities

- Women - The Youth Access members participating in the study were also found to be supporting higher proportions of young women – 65%, compared to 52% in CAMHS.
- People of colour – Young people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities are traditionally under-represented in talking therapies and have faced particular challenges over the course of the pandemic. Youth Access members in this study served a significantly higher proportion of young people from BAME communities (31%), compared to 18% in CAMHS and just 3% of young people receiving school-based counselling.

Lowering barriers to access

- YIACS were found to be more accessible than CAMHS: 82% and 81% of young people in the study said it was 'certainly true' that their appointments were at convenient times and locations, compared to 62% and 66% of young people accessing CAMHS.

Different presenting issues

- The most common mental health challenges young people were seeking help for from YIACS were anxiety (68%) and depression / low mood (61%). This was much higher than the proportion of young people presenting with these issues to CAMHS (49% and 50%) and school-based counselling (9% and 10%).
- As mentioned above, young people in the study presented with higher levels of psychological distress than those accessing CAMHS and school-based support.

The wider life issues young people accessing YIACS needed help with included:

- difficulties in family relationships (52%), at home (46% - compared to 59% in CAMHS) and with peers (50%)
- school, work, or training (53%)
- parental health (23%)
- experience of abuse/neglect (11%)
- contact with the Youth Justice System (10% - compared to 2% in CAMHS)
- financial difficulty (9%)
- attendance difficulties in education, employment, and training (23% - compared to 31% in CAMHS).

The evidence demonstrates the vital role of accredited counsellors within community-based voluntary sector services in catering to the needs of young people who often fall through the gaps in other parts of the system.

The accessibility and high satisfaction reported in YIACS has been attributed to their flexible 'young person-centred' approach, whereby care is led by individual needs and preferences - rather than system-led criteria such as thresholds and set numbers of sessions - and mental health interventions can be offered hand-in-hand with information and advice on a wide range of issues facing that young person.

While many Youth Access members hold CAMHS contracts, this can present barriers in delivering against these vital points of difference with statutory services, such as delivering up to age 25 or offering more than a set number of sessions. This forces organisations to create a patchwork of funding to fulfill their service model, or choose between essential funding and core values.

“The mental health challenges that young people face are frequently closely related to their circumstances.

Sitting with a young person in distress as a counsellor and finding out, for example, that they are about to become homeless and how much this is contributing to their difficulties, it is such a joy to be able to say, 'I'll just step out for a minute and put you on the list to see an adviser after we finish our session' as opposed to signposting or referring them on to somewhere else.

In a way, as a team, we become the community with diverse and consistent sources of sustenance and assistance that the young people we see lack. It is in this kind of environment that young people can start to figure out ways forward and, ultimately, flourish. They have incredible resources within themselves and once a supportive space is held for them and high quality interventions offered within it, they can often make rapid progress."

Tonia Mihill, Chair of the Youth Access National Youth Counselling Working Group

In young people's own words...

“Through my counselling at No5 I learnt that [the domestic violence I'd witnessed] was not my fault and it gave me a space where I was allowed to feel angry, scared and not like I had to be strong for everyone else.

I was recognised as an individual with my own story because even from the point of referral, they wanted to hear from me, not my parent or teacher.

I had 20 weeks of counselling at No5 and this is unusual amongst mental health services...The longevity of my counselling really helped me to develop the trust and relationship with my counsellor and connect with my deeper thoughts and emotions.

Being able to access a service that was separate from my school, and that I didn't have to go to my GP for meant that I felt safe and that what I was saying was truly confidential. It also meant I could access help much more quickly.

No5 not only gave me my life back, but also gave me my voice and a safe platform to use it to help other young people."

“Berwick Youth Project have been amazing. I'm 23 now and for 10 years they've been my lifeline. From helping me deal with the death of my Dad to making sure I had a laptop to start Uni, they consistently go above and beyond for me. After my own experiences, I couldn't imagine building that sort of trust anywhere else."

“The sessions I've had have been tailored to suit my particular needs. A lot of attention was given to what did/didn't work for me, which was really helpful."

Advice as a mental health intervention

Mental health does not exist in a vacuum and the route to a successful adulthood throws up a host of psychosocial, economic, cultural and identity issues that have a massive impact on young people's wellbeing. Young adults are particularly vulnerable to experiencing social welfare problems, especially relating to housing and money, and these often come hand-in-hand with mental health issues.¹⁸

“**There is robust and consistent evidence that unresolved social welfare problems have an adverse impact on many aspects of young people's lives, including their health and well-being.**”¹⁹

Good advice on social welfare issues such as money, debt housing, benefits, education and immigration, is proven to lead to multiple improvements in young people's wellbeing. A 2012 study²⁰ of youth advice services, carried out by Youth Access, found:

High mental health needs

The young people accessing advice through Youth Access members – relating to housing, homelessness, welfare benefits, money/debt, employment rights, education, consumer rights or immigration – scored exceptionally highly on measures of mental health problems, with 17% scoring 11 or 12, indicating severe mental health needs (compared to 2.6% of the general population). Compared to other studies, the levels of poor mental health among this group were higher than among rough sleepers and were comparable only to people experiencing stressful legal proceedings or who had recently lost a partner.

Complex presenting needs

The majority of young people in the study sought information, advice and practical assistance with housing and/or benefits, and this was often sought in conjunction with support for emotional, mental and physical health and employment.

Outcomes

- Young people who received advice from youth advice agencies were significantly more likely than the general population (based on responses to the Civil and Social Justice Survey) to report that their stress and health had improved, even when differences in their baseline mental health were taken into consideration
- 64% reported that their support led to improvements in stress levels and 34% said their health in general had improved
- 42% reported improvements in their housing situation
- 13.3% saw an improvement in their relationship with their parents
- 12.8% experienced improvements in their education
- 9% reported improvements in their employment situation
- 8.5% said their relationship with a partner had improved

Cost effectiveness

For the young people who reported improvements in their stress or health thanks to advice support, the study estimated GP savings alone to reach £108 per young person. This highlights the potential savings across public health, criminal justice and other areas due to early intervention in social welfare issues faced by young people.

These findings have been mirrored by a more recent evaluation of three projects within one Citizen's Advice service in the North East of England in 2018, which provided support intensively, for between two months and two years, individuals who were experiencing multiple and

complex issues.²¹ The projects supported “people with severe and enduring mental health issues”, people referred by their GP and young people aged 16-25 and demonstrated improved wellbeing and decrease in stress.

Evidence shows that young people's advice needs have risen rapidly in the past year.²² This age group finds it harder to resolve these problems without dedicated support, and yet young people are much less likely to receive advice – or good advice – than the general population, leaving issues to escalate and causing knock-on costs in other areas.

Thus, when we talk about ‘early intervention’ in mental ill health, this must encompass accessible advice services, tailored to the needs of young people, alongside quality mental health support and a more joined up system.²³ Likewise, investment in mental health through the NHS must not come at the expense of other essential public health and youth provision which is critical to supporting young people's wellbeing.

Advice in social prescribing

A key opportunity to ensure that advice reaches the young people who need it can be found in the recruitment of social prescribing ‘link workers’ – one of the NHS's six components to Universal Personalised Care. YIACS can - and in any areas already do - play an important role in connecting young people to the social interventions to help them navigate the challenges of young adulthood.

See our briefing, [Social prescribing for young adults, Jan 2021](#)

The call for ‘early support hubs’

In 2015, the children's mental health strategy Future in Mind recommended incorporating accessible, community-based services into every local offer of support for young people; by investing in “one-stop-shops” and capitalising on the existing network of Youth Access member services to cater to a range of emotional and social needs under one roof.²⁴

Since then, there is growing consensus behind a similar model of locally-based ‘open-access’ or ‘early support hubs’ as an important mechanism for improving young people's access to early help.²⁵ Fundamentally, young people want support that is easy to access before issues reach crisis point, rather than facing long waiting lists or thresholds which mean they're ‘not sick enough’ for specialist services. Young people who created the Our Minds Our Future manifesto, detailed overleaf, are calling for a ‘whole life approach’ to mental health, reflecting that mental health intersects with many other issues in their lives - such as money, housing, relationships and identity - and that services should help them to navigate these challenges before they escalate, and as much as possible, under one roof.

Broader evidence shows that that young people prefer to have these diverse needs met in one place²⁶, and suggests that these services are effective at “attracting traditionally under-served populations” internationally – including young people who are racially minoritised, unemployed or NEET, LGBTQ+ or homeless²⁷. According to a systematic review carried out in 2015, young people who received integrated support had better mental health outcomes than those achieved in standard care provision.²⁸

Great Ormond Street Hospital (GOSH) opened a temporary

(1 week) drop-in centre in 2019, offering mental health and psychological wellbeing support for its young patients, in order “to evaluate the need for such a resource and to characterise the patients seeking support.” An evaluation of the short-term, preliminary results pointed to the key role that open-access support has in reaching diverse populations.²⁹ It found:

Accessibility

The 31 participants in the project, while broadly reflective of patients seen in other areas of the hospital in terms of gender and age, included a much larger proportion of individuals from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds compared to the hospital as a whole. Forty-five participants attending the drop-in were from BAME backgrounds, which “suggests”, according to the authors, “that the drop-in centre may be an effective way to increase access to mental health support amongst BAME populations.”

Mental health needs

The majority of the young people who attended the drop-in scored in the clinical range for common mental health disorders (24 out of 31), however 35% had never previously received support for their mental health. Thirty per cent of those accessing the centre received low-intensity, NICE-compliant support, while 36% were referred to paediatric psychology services within the hospital. This, according to the authors, suggests “significant unmet mental health needs” among patients attending GOSH, “who may be served by a drop-in centre” and “that the drop-in centre might act as a highly visible ‘single-point-of-access’ for mental health care, guiding families to treatment pathways that they were previously unaware of.”

The case for Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services

- ✓ Achieve comparable clinical outcomes
- ✓ Young people report better experiences
- ✓ Reach marginalised groups and address inequalities
- ✓ Bridge the child to adult transition
- ✓ They are what young people tell us they want and need

Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services have long been hailed as a key pillar of young people’s mental health support in the community, and the evidence demonstrates why these services are so well-placed to support young people with the socio-economic impacts of the past year.

Nevertheless, these services have often not received the recognition and government backing warranted by their achievements and expertise. Investment in ‘one-stop-shops’ such as Youth Access YIACS was recommended in Future in Mind 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. Youth Access members are too often forced to piecemeal funding to keep vital services running and open to young people up to age 25. Meanwhile, the lack of representation of young people and voluntary sector organisations in decision-making acts as an additional barrier to these organisations making the case for the support and resources they need to provide quality, ‘whole life’ support to all young people who need it.

To achieve long overdue transformation of the mental health system and, moreover, counter the disproportionate, multifarious impact of the pandemic on the young, there must be a key role for Youth Access members and early support hubs. Supporting these organisations will require, at a minimum, flexible, dedicated funding, and a commitment to giving them, and the young people they care for, a seat at the table in creating a strategy for youth support that can meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

The third and final briefing in this series will set out recommendations for what needs to be in place at a local, regional and national level to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the support that Youth Information Advice and Counselling services offer to young people.

Our Minds Our Future: youth-led manifesto

Young people in England have written a manifesto³¹ for the transformational change they want to see in the mental health system. They have outlined seven core demands for a mental health system that meets their human rights:

1. **Experts who understand** the unique issues facing young people in today’s world.
2. **Services made for us** - online and in-person, in schools, colleges and unis, and informal settings like youth clubs, drop-ins and text-based support.
3. **Services made with us** so we’re part of decisions being made about our own mental health care and the wider system.
4. **Equity, diversity & accessibility**, making sure services cater to everyone, accounting for differences and preferences.
5. **Help when we need it**, avoiding long waiting lists, arbitrary thresholds and cut-offs.
6. **Education & training for all**, so young people and all professionals working with us understand mental health and where to get help
7. **A ‘Whole life approach’** to mental health that extends beyond the counsellors office or clinic, to offer individualised support with the economic, social and cultural issues that affect our wellbeing.

Visit ourmindsourfuture.uk/england

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If you have any questions about the briefing or want to get in touch, contact Kahra Wayland-Larty, Policy and Campaigns Manager at Youth Access - kahra@youthaccess.org.uk.

Youth Access exists to make sure all young people have somewhere local to turn to whenever they need to talk. We work with both young people and our membership of Youth Information Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) to ensure that young people in every community can access great quality support as they move into adulthood.

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