



Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you

PREVENTING CRISES

Effective interventions to support
children and young people's
mental health and wellbeing

MAY 2024



EVERYONE

should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.



Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you

YMCA believes in fairness and opportunity.

There are essential building blocks for a full and rewarding life: a safe home; acceptance; guidance; friendship; physical and mental health; academic support; employment skills; and access to real opportunities. Many young people have never known these things; other people have lost one or more as they grew up, but we all need them. All of us. At YMCA, we provide these critical foundations for a fresh, strong start for young people and a better quality of life in the community.

YMCA supports 4,302 people through mental health education and advice work and delivers counselling to 7,958 people each year. We welcome 63,205 people through our doors every year to participate in healthy living activities such as sports, fitness classes, swimming, and more. We also provide high quality youth services to 34,698 young people every year.

**YMCA SUPPORTS
4,302 PEOPLE
THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH EDUCATION
AND ADVICE WORK AND DELIVERS
COUNSELLING TO 7,958
PEOPLE EACH YEAR.
WE WELCOME 63,205
PEOPLE THROUGH OUR DOORS EVERY YEAR
TO PARTICIPATE IN HEALTHY LIVING
ACTIVITIES SUCH AS SPORTS,
FITNESS CLASSES, SWIMMING, AND MORE.
WE ALSO PROVIDE HIGH QUALITY
YOUTH SERVICES TO
34,698 YOUNG PEOPLE
EVERY YEAR.**

INTRO- DUCTION

YMCA works in educational settings and in communities to support the mental health and overall wellbeing of thousands of young people and adults every year. Our counselling and other mental health services provide a safe environment for people to share the challenges they're facing with a trusted adult, to develop solutions and coping mechanisms with the support of trained professionals.

Our youth clubs help fight loneliness and create fun spaces for children and young people to belong. They help young people to deal with school and societal pressures, supporting their mental health and allowing them to make friends in a safe space. They also help young people to stay away from crime and anti-social behaviour.

We know that easily available mental health services in the local area, as well as open access youth services, can be the key to better mental health for young people; and that sports and wider physical activity can be a fundamental element of good overall wellbeing. In our YMCA General Election Manifesto, we recommended:

01

Increased investment in NHS mental health services to bring down waiting times for people who are in crisis, and to ensure that young people can access timely, appropriate mental health services whenever they need them.

02

A national network of early support hubs, so that every young person can access early support for their mental health in their community and place of learning.

03

Investment in community sport facilities and universal access youth services, so that all young people have access to youth services with trained professionals such as youth workers and sports coaches, who can help them to build resilience and manage their emotions.

In this report we present case studies of the amazing work being done by local YMCAs around England and Wales to support young people and communities to have better mental health and wellbeing.

This includes delivering counselling in schools, open access youth services, supported accommodation, targeted youth groups, and more. These are organised around five key themes to highlight solutions to some of the major challenges for children and young people's mental health. The next Government should consider these examples of good practice and effective interventions when planning a strategy for improving mental health across England and Wales.

LOWER-LEVEL MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES AND EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE

In 2023, around one in five children and young people (aged between 8 and 25 years old) had a probable mental disorder.¹ The effects of the pandemic have been significant for multiple generations of young people, making it more difficult for them to socialise and participate in education or work at a formative age, which has knock-on effects on their mental health. The cost of living crisis continues to have serious negative effects on young people's mental health, increasing people's stress and worries about how they will afford the basic necessities.²

YOUNG
PEOPLE
NEED
EXTRA
SUPPORT

Young people who are struggling with their mental health face extra barriers to participating in normal life, such as developing important life skills, succeeding in education, socialising with peers, building healthy relationships, and getting into work. Some young people need extra support to help them develop healthy emotional skills and the ability to cope with mental health challenges, as well building up their resilience to the everyday challenges that life brings them.

It's vital that our society has the services, healthcare, and other infrastructure needed to ensure every young person is able to succeed in these areas. Many local YMCAs around England and Wales have spent decades working with their communities, developing programmes and services which are tailored to meet the needs of local people. Some of these programmes and services could, if they received government investment and were scaled up, help to ensure much better mental health and wellbeing for young people across England and Wales.

¹ NHS Digital, 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey' (November 2023)

² YMCA England & Wales, 'Trapped in the Cost of Living Crisis' (April 2024)

Y'S GIRLS

Y's Girls is a mentoring programme sponsored by the Benefact Trust and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, delivered by YMCAs across England and Wales. The programme matches trained volunteer mentors with young women aged 9-14 to support them to be their best. Over a year, mentors and young people meet for two-hour sessions and work together to identify achievable goals that will empower the mentee and build their resilience, enabling them to lead fulfilling lives and improve their short and long-term mental health and wellbeing. The sessions offer an informal environment with the opportunity to discuss anything that might worry them, from family and personal relationships to lifestyle and education.

An external evaluation conducted by the Centre for Youth Impact found that Y's Girls is an effective early intervention that positively impacts six social and emotional learning skills that are indicative of better short and long-term mental health. The evaluation also found that the programme is young person-centred and inclusive.



ONE FORMER MENTOR EXPLAINED WHY SHE CHOSE TO GET INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT:

“ I struggled with mental health and wellbeing as a young girl and reflecting back I think I would have massively benefitted from a mentor for guidance through life's challenges. I want to give back to those young people who are struggling to show life does get better and challenges become easier. ”

Cat
YMCA Barry

CASE STUDY:

Y'S GIRLS, YMCA CARDIFF

Alice* is a 14-year-old girl who was referred to Y's Girls by her Young Carers Case Worker due to concerns about her mental health, self-harming behaviours, and school avoidance. Alice had been struggling with depression and anxiety for several years and would self-harm and run away from home to cope with her overwhelming emotions. She had also stopped attending school and was in a very unhealthy relationship. She had a history of trauma and a difficult home life and relationship with her mum which exacerbated her mental health struggles. She felt like she didn't belong anywhere and struggled to see a way out of her situation.

For the first few months of their mentoring journey, Alice and her mentor focused on building a trusting and supportive relationship. They met regularly to talk about her feelings, coping strategies, her relationship, and her goals for the future. The mentor helped Alice develop healthy coping mechanisms for her emotions, such as journaling, mindfulness exercises, and self-care routines. They also worked on building Alice's self-esteem and confidence through positive affirmations and goal-setting activities. Y's Girls also signposted the family to services to support them.

Alice began to feel more hopeful about her future and was able to develop a sense of purpose and direction in her life. With support from Y's Girls, Alice now attends a specialised school for anxious non-attenders, which was a huge step for her. She has since been made prefect for her year group, which is an amazing achievement. She brings along her achievement cards written by her teachers at school to show her mentor. Her family is now also being supported by external organisations.

Alice's journey to overcoming self-harm and school avoidance is a testament to the power of one-to-one mentoring support for young people struggling with mental health issues. Through the guidance and encouragement of her mentor, Alice has been able to make positive changes in her life and build a brighter future for herself. Her story is a reminder that with the right support and resources, anyone can find hope and healing amid their struggles.

** Name changed for anonymity*



After several months of working with her mentor, Alice no longer self-harms regularly, and for a period of four months, she did not self-harm at all. The frequency in which she would run away from home has also reduced.

CASE STUDY:

YMCA ST HELENS' LISTENING PROJECT

YMCA St Helens' Listening Service launched in February 2022, aimed at 12-to-18-year-olds seeking help for mental health concerns. It provides a mix of one-to-one preventative listening support, post-crisis support (to young people who have experienced a mental health crisis), and group-based activities. These enable young people to develop tools, motivation, and skills to meet their own needs around mental health, empowering them to live healthy balanced lives.

It also works to establish positive and meaningful relationships, role models and support-networks, reducing feelings of isolation or loneliness. The Listening Service aims to empower young people to make a positive impact in their lives and in their local community, increasing their decision making, leadership, and self-care skills, and understanding the effect these choices have on mental health.

IN 12 MONTHS, YMCA ST HELENS RECEIVED **257 REFERRALS**

YMCA St Helens was able to support 143 young people via one-to-one preventative listening support sessions, 30 young people via post-crisis support and 23 young people via group activities. Young people reported a 91% average improvement in how they would rate their mental wellbeing before and after receiving this support, with parents/guardians reporting a 121% average improvement in their child's mental wellbeing.

Furthermore, 100% of young people reported an improvement in their self-confidence/ self-esteem and an increase in their ability to know how to ease their anxiety. 96% reported an increase in knowing what to do to lift their mood when feeling low, and an increase in their ability to cope when things go wrong for them. 89% reported a decrease in the negative impact anxiety has on their life, as well as an increase in their knowledge of who and where to ask for help with their mental health and wellbeing.

FINALLY, 86% REPORTED AN INCREASED UNDERSTANDING OF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING IN GENERAL.

CASE STUDY: CHAPLAINCY WORK

YMCA Chaplains work in a number of YMCAs across England and Wales, offering holistic support and spiritual care to young people in their communities. YMCA Chaplains have time to listen for as long as young people need, as often as they need. Their time is offered alongside counselling and other forms of support. Building relationships of trust simply by being present is foundational to quality spiritual care.

A key element of this care is understanding that young people want to be understood and valued, and to feel that their lives have meaning. Young people who have become residents of YMCA supported housing as a result of experiencing homelessness have often had a string of difficult or broken relationships with family, friends and partners, which impacts on their sense of self, their purpose, and their mental health and wellbeing.

Each YMCA Chaplaincy service responds to the needs and desires of the young people they serve. At One YMCA, the Chaplaincy Team have developed 'The Journey', an eight-week small group course, giving space for participants to dream for their future, understand their present, and find a place for their past experiences. Participants bring their values, beliefs, and faith together in discussion and mutual support. This culminates in a three-day retreat by the sea, where there is physical, emotional and spiritual space to help decide what their next steps might be.

One young person said: **"Oh how we prayed, laughed, sang and cried along the way. Sharing our different journeys in a safe environment. Letting go of what once was, with forgiveness. Now being able to face the unknown with a leap of faith. Replacing what was once fear. Being at peace with oneself, moving forward with living life to the full. Not knowing what is ahead. Finally being OK with that."**

Each participant in The Journey is asked to complete a Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing survey at the beginning and the end of the course. In 2023 the median improvement score

was +13, which far surpasses the +3-8 score needed to show 'meaningful improvement' in mental wellbeing.

The positive impact of this support ripples out much wider than a single young person. Over the last year, one volunteer Chaplain donated 131 hours of their time, offering 47 in-person sessions to 32 young people. We estimate the financial value of their time to be £1,934.87, but changing the course of a young person's future is incalculable.

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE AND EXCLUSION

Being suspended or permanently excluded from school can be both a cause and a consequence of poor mental health for children and young people.³ Young people struggling with their mental health may find it more difficult to control their behaviour at school, especially if they are not receiving the support they need. Being isolated from their peers and their normal routine through suspension or exclusion may also worsen their existing mental health problems. Children who have been excluded from school are more likely to be unemployed in the future, and more likely to go to prison.⁴

Government data shows that students who have additional needs but are receiving less

support for their needs are more likely to be suspended or excluded. The rate of suspensions among those pupils who have an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) in the 2022/23 spring term was 6.98 per 10,000 pupils. For pupils who have special educational needs (SEN) but do not have an EHC plan, the rate was 8.04 per 10,000 pupils. This compares to a rate of 2.18 for pupils with no SEN. The rate of permanent exclusions among those pupils who have an EHC plan was 0.07, which is again lower than for those with SEN without an EHC plan, at 0.12. This compares to 0.02 for pupils with no SEN.⁵

Students who are coping with difficult home circumstances, such as living in poverty, are also more likely to be suspended or excluded. The suspension rate for pupils who are eligible for free school meals (which indicates that they are living in some level of poverty) is four times higher than the rate for children who are not eligible for free school meals. The permanent exclusion rate for pupils eligible for free school meals is 0.09, compared to 0.02 for those who are not eligible.⁶

More comprehensive mental health support in school and in communities could help to reduce suspension and exclusion rates in schools and ensure that young people have the support they need to succeed.

³ Aase Villadsen et al, 'Longitudinal association of conduct and emotional problems with school exclusion and truancy: A fixed effect analysis of the UK Millennium Cohort Study' (November 2023)

⁴ Institute for Public Policy Research, 'Making the difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion' (October 2017)

⁵ Gov.uk, 'Explore education statistics: Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England' (April 2024)

⁶ Ibid.



CASE STUDY:

YMCA TRINITY GROUP

As the number of young people in need of mental health support increases, many schools and young people have been forced to find their own way of coping with mental illness due to specialist services being overstretched and young people needing to join a long waiting list.

YMCA Trinity Group has enabled schools to address long waiting lists by offering counselling by qualified therapists direct to children and young people aged 4+, on school sites and within the school day. This enables schools to ensure that young people most in need have timely access to professional support. Research shows that early access to mental health support reduces the potential for the longer-lasting impacts of poor mental health, such as depression, anti-social behaviour, self-harm, and suicidal ideation.

YMCA Trinity Group has also provided training for school staff, bringing together safeguarding leaders from across the Trust to share their views on matters such as how they work, the impact it's having on them, having guided discussions and facilitating them to manage their young people's support

The national average for exclusions in schools is two to three permanent exclusions per school, per year. Thanks to the work that YMCA Trinity Group has done with Cambridgeshire schools, school leaders were pleased to report an increase in attendance and only five permanent exclusions across all 36 secondary schools in Cambridge in 2023.

LONELINESS AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

The frequency of children feeling lonely can easily be underestimated, as children spend much of their time in school, surrounded by other children. However, both children and adults can feel lonely even when surrounded by others, if they feel that they're not connecting with the people around them.

Childline services are contacted on average 15 times a day by children seeking help with feelings of loneliness.⁷ The Office for National Statistics found that in 2018, 11.3% of children said that they were 'often' lonely. This figure increases to 27.5% of children who received free school meals stating that they were 'often' lonely.⁸

Loneliness can worsen existing mental health issues, or sometimes cause them to start. Loneliness can also be a knock-on effect of mental health issues, as children and young people who are struggling with depression or anxiety may find it much more difficult to get out of the house, to socialise with others, and to make new friends. Youth services provide a wealth of opportunities for children and young people to connect with others in safe spaces, to improve their social skills, and build new friendships.

⁷ NSPCC, 'Day in the Lonely campaign encourages children to share their feelings' (February 2023)

⁸ ONS, 'Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018' (December 2018)

AIRPLAY

Airplay is the RAF Benevolent Fund's flagship youth support programme for children and young people in RAF families. The programme is delivered by a consortium of YMCAs across England, Wales, and Scotland in conjunction with RAF Community Support at each site.

Airplay sets out to fulfil the vision of the RAF Benevolent Fund that everyone in our RAF family gets support in their hour of need. Young people in RAF families face a unique set of challenges, often experiencing frequent changes of home, school, and friendship groups. Additionally, there is the challenge that comes with having parents out of area for long periods of time or on overseas deployment.

Airplay makes opportunities for young people to build new friendships and connect with others from their community in a positive way. 83% of young people who engaged in Airplay felt that it helped them to make new friends.



"On a base that is in an isolated location it gives the kids somewhere to go with friends that is safe and supervised. The staff get to know each child and they are made to feel welcome."

[Airplay Leeming parent]



One young person said: "What I like most about Airplay is the welcoming atmosphere and the fact that it's a constant in the constantly changing life as a military child." [Airplay Henlow member, aged 14]



Another young person said: "I love Airplay. I feel welcome and I know I can have a say and the staff will listen. They help when I'm sad too because sometimes things are hard." [Airplay Scampton member, aged 12]

IN 2023, 2,097 CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGED IN AIRPLAY ACTIVITIES. OF THESE YOUNG PEOPLE, 82% FELT THAT THROUGH ATTENDING AIRPLAY THEY HAVE GROWN IN CONFIDENCE, AND 76% FELT THAT AIRPLAY HAS HELPED THEM TO TRY NEW THINGS.

SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEN WITH PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION

Over 1.5 million pupils in England have special educational needs (SEN). This figure includes children and young people with learning difficulties; speech, language and communications needs; social, emotional and mental health needs; autism; physical disabilities; and hearing, visual, or multi-sensory impairments. The primary need of children and young people who receive SEN support in education is speech, language and communications

needs; this is followed by social, emotional and mental health needs, and moderate learning difficulty.⁹

Some children and young people who are identified as having SEN need more help than can be provided through SEN support, and so they are entitled to receive an education, health and care plan (EHC plan) which sets out the additional support they need.

Local councils are legally required to issue an EHC plan within 20 weeks of a request being made. However, government data shows that more than half of children and young people are being kept waiting past the 20 week deadline: only 49.2% of new EHC plans were issued within 20 weeks in 2022, which is a large decrease from 59.9% in 2021.¹⁰ This means that far too many children and young people are being left without the additional support they need to participate fully in their education, which can also have knock-on effects on their ability to develop social skills at a formative age.

Research has found that children with learning disabilities¹¹ are four and a half times more likely to have a mental health problem than children without a learning disability, and that 79% of autistic people will experience mental health problems in their lifetime.¹² Young people with SEN need and deserve to receive sufficient support in school and in their communities, so that they can form meaningful connections with the people around them and be included. YMCAs across England and Wales provide inclusive spaces and programmes to enable children and young people with SEN to succeed and flourish.

⁹ Gov.uk, 'Explore education statistics: Special educational needs in England, academic year 2022/23' (June 2023)

¹⁰ Gov.uk, 'Explore education statistics: Education, health and care plans, reporting year 2023' (June 2023)

¹¹ Mental Health Foundation, 'People with learning disabilities: statistics'

¹² Autistica, 'What is autism?'

CASE STUDY:**YMCA NORTH TYNESIDE,
OPEN ACCESS YOUTH GROUP
IN WILLINGTON QUAY**

One local family started attending YMCA North Tyneside's open access youth group after forming a positive relationship with YMCA staff through YMCA's community meals and holiday activities. The family's two daughters have previously found it difficult to attend kids' clubs due to anxiety; one of the daughters also has autism and ADHD, and so struggles in loud, busy environments.

However, the mother has provided feedback that this is the first time her daughters have felt excited to attend a club, and she has been surprised with how

well they have interacted with other young people attending. The daughter with autism feels safe to come to the sessions, knowing that she can ask a member of staff to do activities with her in a quiet room if she becomes overwhelmed. The Willington Quay staff have built trusting relationships with the girls, so they now come over to ask for support when needed. The group has provided coping strategies and support when either their neurodiversity or anxiety becomes too much, and continues to support them through their journey.

CASE STUDY:**YMCA EAST SURREY,
YOUTH PROGRAMME**

YMCA East Surrey runs a programme called Step Forward, which offers support and social group activities for young people aged 17-24 with mental health and emotional wellbeing needs. Activities are planned in consultation with attendees and can include anything from sport, fitness, creative projects, and emotional wellbeing support and advice.

One young person who has been helped by Step Forward is Lucy-Mae, who has suffered from severe social anxiety and depression from the age of 16. This meant she found it difficult to engage socially, missing out on a crucial period for learning adult social skills. She attended a special school from the age of 16-18 but only went sporadically, due to her anxieties. She was unable

to get any further qualifications after her GCSEs, and was also diagnosed with Aspergers at the age of 19. Since the age of 19 to joining Step Forward 4 months ago, now aged 23, she had been at home with no purpose, plans, or friends to engage with.

Step Forward has worked for Lucy-Mae because she is with people of a similar age who are also struggling socially and emotionally for various reasons. She looks forward to the regular meet ups with the other young people, and has enjoyed getting to know them through various games and other activities. Step Forward has provided a fun, safe, non-judgemental place where young people can be themselves, and Lucy-Mae has thrived in the sessions.

When Lucy-Mae first joined Step Forward, she was very reluctant to go in and her mum had to sit with her at the side of the room for the first two or three sessions. Her mum was then able to sit in an adjoining room for the next few sessions, while she tried to engage with the activities. After a few weeks, her mum was dropping Lucy-Mae off and she was then walking in by herself, looking and **feeling a lot more confident**. Recently, she has even been taking public transport to get there. This has been huge progress for Lucy-Mae. Because of Step Forward, she has become **more confident** in other aspects of her life and is now working two sessions a week in a café. She is even thinking of applying to college. Lucy-Mae is gaining crucial social skills that she missed out on in the last few years, and she has become **happier in herself**.

SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE WITH MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL INCLUSION

Young people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community experience higher rates of mental illness than other young people. Research shows that half of LGBT people (52%) out of a survey of over 5,000 said they had experienced depression in 2018. One in eight LGBT people aged 18-24 surveyed (13%) said they had attempted to take their own life in the past year.¹³

LGBTQ+ young people are also significantly overrepresented in youth homelessness: 24% of young people who were at risk of homelessness in 2015 identified as LGBTQ+.¹⁴ Of the LGBTQ+ young people who experience homelessness, many of them lose their housing because of family breakdown. Rejection by family members because of their sexuality or gender can have significant negative effects on young people's mental health, as well as the more general negative effects of experiencing homelessness on people's mental and physical health.



A number of YMCAs run support programmes for LGBTQ+ young people to give them a safe and inclusive space to socialise, to build up their confidence and social skills, and to give them support from trusted adults. These programmes are vital to help LGBTQ+ young people to maintain good mental health, to stay in education or move into work, to get access to healthcare, and to prevent them from experiencing homelessness.

¹³ Stonewall, 'LGBT in Britain: Health Report' (2018)

¹⁴ Arthur Kennedy Trust, 'National Scoping of LGBT Youth Homelessness', 2015.

CASE STUDY:

YMCA SWANSEA, GOODVIBES YOUTH GROUP

GoodVibes is an inclusive LGBTQ+ youth group, that supports young people between the ages of 11-25. It provides a safe space that reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation. Young people can build peer friendships within a community so that they belong, contribute, and thrive. It is a group where young people can be surrounded by likeminded individuals in an environment that promotes respecting other people's choices, citizenship, and cultural identity. It provides young people with the confidence to explore their own identity around people that really understand and care.



GoodVibes operates on the foundation of strong values of inclusivity and diversity.

Young people can come to GoodVibes without fear of judgment, harassment, bullying or discrimination and social pre-conceived norms. They can be 100% themselves and have a safe space to explore their identity. What they receive from each other and their youth workers is acceptance, without question.

GoodVibes equips young people with the understanding and skills to enable them to exercise their rights by teaching and supporting them to learn about their rights and to be proud of who they are; to foster confidence and self-esteem. Young people who attend describe it as their safe place, their family away from home.

OVER THE PAST YEAR, YMCA ST PAUL'S GROUP HAS SEEN A TOTAL FOOTFALL OF 255 YOUNG PEOPLE ATTENDING THESE SESSIONS.

CASE STUDY:

YMCA ST PAUL'S GROUP, TRUE COLOURS PROGRAMME

True Colours is an arts and wellbeing programme with youth-led discussions, to help female-identifying and LGBTQ+ teens aged 10-16 feel supported with their mental health. The programme gives young people a much-needed safe space to express themselves through movement, art and creative writing, where they can feel authentically themselves.

The programme was originally named "Good for Girls", however in 2022 the young people themselves proposed changing this name to the more inclusive "True Colours". The impact of this has been to make the group more welcoming to young people with different gender identities, and participants report a greater sense of belonging.

An average week sees 11 young people participating, and some sessions have welcomed as many as 20 young people.

True Colours sessions explore themes of loneliness, mental health awareness, and connection. They provide a space for young people to share and feel supported by their friends. True Colours considers the many emotions young people go through, explores the many genders and sexualities, and discusses neurodiversity, culture, and personalities. One of the participants said about the programme: **"It means a lot. It's made me express myself more, it's been really fun, and I've made new friends."**

Young people in the group produced a film documenting their experiences with the True Colours programme. They invited friends and family to a viewing and displayed artwork and creative expressions of their experiences. Two young people supported by the programme also took part in a training course to become wellbeing ambassadors, enabling them to connect to others even more effectively and become advocates for positive mental health.

SUPPORTING LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN

Children and young people who are being looked after by their local authority, whether living in a children's home, foster care, or another family arrangement, are at much higher risk of having poor mental health.

The experience of being taken into care, as well as the common reasons why this outcome has become necessary (such as family breakdown, abuse or neglect), can cause trauma to children and young people which significantly affects their mental health: 45% of looked-after children have mental health disorders.¹⁵ Children sometimes have to move repeatedly to different foster placements in different geographical areas, which makes it much harder to maintain continuity of healthcare, including support and treatment for their mental health.



Looked-after children are much more likely to have special educational needs than the general population (55.9% in comparison to 14.9% of all children). Around half of the children in custody in England and Wales have been in care at some point in their lives.¹⁶ It is clearly important that looked-after children and young people receive significant, ongoing support for their mental health and overall wellbeing throughout their lives to enable them to cope with the challenges they face.

Some YMCAs deliver counselling in schools to support vulnerable children, including children who are in care. This can be vitally important to ensure they develop healthy emotional and social skills, and to give them a safe space to share their feelings and experiences with a trusted adult.

¹⁵ National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guideline, '(October 2021)

¹⁶ Ibid.

CASE STUDY:

YMCA TRINITY GROUP

Tasha is a looked after child in foster care. During lockdown, Tasha's foster father died from Covid, leaving his wife to care for both girls alone. Tasha has had to stay with another foster family while her foster mother was supported by her family following her husband's death, this caused further disruption in Tasha's short life.

Tasha has no learning needs and is bright and able but currently only just working at the expected level for her age.

Tasha lacks confidence in her abilities, particularly in Maths. She has often sought emotional support from pastoral care staff at school when her emotions have been difficult to cope with, in particular in relation to her bereavement.

Tasha expressed a huge need to share her feelings with the YMCA therapist who works in her school. She has regularly mentioned how valuable the one-to-one time spent together has been for her, and that she can share her feelings with someone who understands and listens. Tasha is very artistic and during the therapy sessions has produced paintings, decorated positivity pebbles, and created meaningful items out of clay.

Having a regular safe, confidential space to play and talk has allowed Tasha to explore some very strong emotions and feelings. With ongoing school input and support from the YMCA play therapist, Tasha appears less emotional and more able to deal with small losses in her day, such as her best friend being absent from school. Noticeably she has been more settled and has enjoyed the support sessions, particularly whilst her foster mother was visiting family abroad and she was in yet another foster placement, albeit a familiar one.

** Name changed for anonymity*

GETTING INTO WORK AND INDEPENDENT LIVING

Many YMCAs across England and Wales offer supported housing for young people and adults in need, housing more than 20,000 people every year. A significant proportion of residents have mental health challenges which make it more difficult for them to move into work or education, or to live independently. YMCA's 2023 report 'Breaking Barriers to Work' found that 47% of the 129 young supported housing residents surveyed were not able to move into employment, or increase the small number of hours they were working, because of struggles with their mental health.¹⁷

Supported housing gives people somewhere safe to stay along with extra help to get back on their feet, such as help with accessing benefits, employment advice, and mental health counselling. This support can be crucial to enabling people to rebuild their lives, achieve their goals, and maintain good mental health.

¹⁷ YMCA England & Wales, 'Breaking Barriers to Work: Exploring the impact of the benefits system on young people living in supported accommodation and their ability to work' (August 2023)

CASE STUDY:

SASHA, FORMER YMCA HUMBER RESIDENT

"I first moved into YMCA Humber's supported housing as an emergency in March 2021. I was so lost, I did not know what mental health was, what triggered my mental health, or how to deal with it, until I came to YMCA.

I attended counselling during my time at YMCA, although I did not speak or open up much, these sessions helped me more than my counsellor realised. I now understood mental health, am more self-aware and mindful of others around me who may be struggling.

My coach gave me a chance and encouraged me to attend the healthy relationships course. This course saved me, I now have a healthy relationship with myself, and I believe if I did not attend this, I would still be the old me.

I progressed a lot whilst I was at YMCA, I volunteered in the café for over a year which helped me with my mental health, helped me to communicate with people, and to build my confidence. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for all the support I received.

I am really proud of myself; I have come a long way over the last two years, and I am currently living in a semi-supported flat which I would not have been able to achieve if it wasn't for the YMCA."




CASE STUDY: YMCA CREWE, MENTAL HEALTH FIRST AID

YMCA Crewe offers sessions with Mental Health First Aiders for residents of its supported housing. One resident came to a session because they had been struggling with feeling low. They had been unable to attend college throughout the lockdowns and there had been no opportunities open to them for work experience placements. Although YMCA Crewe offer employability schemes, they did not feel that the placements offered were for them. They were unsure whether they would find employment and were feeling like they were going to be 'stuck' in YMCA accommodation and unable to take steps towards improving their life.

The Mental Health First Aider worked with the resident to create a list of their existing worries and put action points against them that were realistic responses to their situation. After doing this, the resident felt more in control of their situation and that they would be able to find a way forward. They did not return for another session with the Mental Health First Aider, but stopped by a month later to say they had secured a job.

CONCLUSION

While YMCAs work hard all year round to support mental health and wellbeing, we need to see more action from the Government to tackle the growing mental health crisis amongst our young people and communities. Our recommendations for the next Government are:

-  There needs to be increased investment in NHS mental health services to bring down waiting times for people who are in crisis, and to ensure that young people can access timely, appropriate mental health services whenever they need them.
-  We need a national network of early support hubs, so that every young person can access early support for their mental health in their community and place of learning.
-  We need investment in community sport facilities and universal access youth services, so that all young people have access to youth services with trained professionals such as youth workers and sports coaches, who can help them to build resilience and manage their emotions.

ymca.org.uk



#NewsOurChance

Get in touch

For any questions or support,
please get in touch via email
at policy@ymca.org.uk
or by calling **020 7186 9500**.

EVERYONE

**SHOULD HAVE A FAIR CHANCE TO DISCOVER
WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY CAN BECOME.**

YMCA

Here for young people
Here for communities
Here for you

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

FAMILY & YOUTH WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

HOUSING

TRAINING & EDUCATION

SUPPORT & ADVICE