

Championing Youth Advice and Counselling

Key policy

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About Access

Our vision is that all young people can access support on their journey into adulthood that respects their rights and meets their individual needs.

Alongside our member network of 133 local youth advice and counselling services, we champion young people's right to access high-quality services in their community that provide a range of support, from mental health and wellbeing to housing and employment, all under one roof.



Summary

Together with our member services and young people they work with, we call on political parties to commit to changes that see:

- young people in all local communities able to access advice and counselling services
- mental health support that meets young people's needs and rights
- a fair plan for young people in social welfare policy and decision-making

We also endorse the recommendations set out in the manifestos from The Centre for Mental Health, Black Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance, The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition, the National Youth Agency and as part of #PlanForThe136k Campaign.

With the right early action, we can stop young people's problems from escalating. Instead of waiting until crisis point to respond, we can act

early and effectively. With appropriate support in place, we can ensure every young person has the tools they need to thrive.

from Cassandra Harrison, Youth Access CEO

Young people lead complex lives and are navigating specific challenges for the very first time. Whether it is pressures with school, joining employment or living independently, all these experiences depend upon, and affect their wellbeing and mental health.

On top of this, it is hard to ignore that young people are **facing several compounding crises simultaneously.** Historic increases in the costs of housing and basic goods, the aftermath of a global pandemic and more than 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 current crises have **deepened existing inequalities** in health, wellbeing, employment, housing, education and income for young people already at the sharp end of structural and intersectional discrimination based on race, age, sexual identity, gender identity, immigration status, class and/or disability.

Our member **network of youth advice and counselling services are on the frontline**, providing tailored support to young people to help them respond to and navigate the obstacles they are experiencing. We hear from members that more young people are accessing their services than ever before, and with a greater level of urgency and need. **The lived reality for young people currently is that:**

- 1 in 5 children and young people, aged 8 to 25, have a probable mental disorder (NHS England, 2023).1
- Child and adolescent mental health service referrals have soared by 76% since 2019, with 1.4 million seeking NHS mental health support last year (Campbell, 2023).
- Rising costs of living have disproportionately impacted under-25s (Demos 2021) and they are experiencing the worst impacts on their mental health as a result (Leaders Unlocked 2023).

It's clear that the obstacles to good mental health and wellbeing need dismantling. Yet, too often, young people are overlooked and ignored in decision-making that impacts their lives and their futures. Society can no longer 'kick the can down the road' on young people's futures.

We are calling on political parties to commit to:

- Fully fund early support hubs in every local area so all young people can access advice and counselling services and receive effective 'whole life' support
- Embed a rights-based approach to transform systems of support for young people's mental health
- Commit to a fair plan for young people in social welfare policy and decision-making to end age-related structural disadvantage

We need the next Government to take a joined-up, cross-departmental approach that prioritises prevention and early intervention to address the social, health and economic factors shaping young people's lives and wellbeing.

Primarily, there must be widespread recognition of young people's expertise in helping to develop the changes needed to ensure all young people can stay afloat and safely ride the waves on their journey into adulthood.

Cassandra Harrison
Chief Executive

Harrison

¹ The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to identify children who may have had problems with aspects of their mental health to such an extent that it impacted on their daily lives. Estimates of the likelihood that a child or young person might have a mental disorder was classified as either 'unlikely', 'possible' or 'probable'.

from Kyra and Ryan, Youth Advisors

We asked young people supported by Youth Access members what they would like the incoming Government to know about the lives of young people and their mental health and wellbeing. Below is just one of many voices we heard, but it represents a consistent message:

"Life is tough and becoming tougher... Cost of living is hard. Pressures to be successful in all areas of life [are] hard. Wellbeing is being impacted and those who suffer [are] increasing. Services aren't easy to access and it is becoming increasingly important for future generations to look after their mental health." Joung person at

Young people today are expected to lead, develop, work and exist within a system failing to meet our own needs, particularly regarding our mental health and wellbeing. There is no single root cause of the challenges young people face today. Young people shared with us that their lives and futures are being impacted by the cost-of-living crisis, overstretched support services, limited opportunities, and escalating money, education and social pressures, leaving them feeling powerless.

"Our mental health matters.
Without it, we won't learn or progress." Joung person at MPAG Liverpool

Though the current situation can at times feel hopeless to young people, it doesn't have to be this way. Collectively with Youth Access members and the young people they work alongside, we have set out the actions the Government can take to ensure that all young people can have confidence and control over their own lives.

We need spaces where we can drop in, be listened to, and receive practical and emotional support and advice on a range of issues, under one roof. We need mental health services that meet our needs and rights, without waiting lists and thresholds for support. We need fair treatment in policy and decision-making, with a platform to share our voices and be heard.

"Being heard and seen is not only validating, but also helps you to feel like you matter and you are worth something." Joung person at hos Joung People

As this manifesto sets out, action has never been more important than it is right now. The next Government must act to address the issues that young people are raising.

"We've had enough of empty promises, we'd like to see long term change and support for young people." Joung person at Croydon Drop In

We urge political parties to pledge to take these steps to protect the mental health and wellbeing of current and future generations. This is the chance and now is the time to seize it!



Young people in all local communities able to access advice and counselling

services

Young people are navigating more obstacles than ever before. Getting the right support and advice at the right time is pivotal for setting them up for a healthy adulthood.

The Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Service (YIACS) model is a ready-made and evidenced solution for supporting young people in navigating unmet health, wellbeing and social needs. Also known as early support hubs or open access hubs, YIACS offer free easily accessible and age appropriate



'whole life' support to young people aged 11-25. These services are designed specifically for young people. They can 'drop in' with no referral required, be listened to and receive practical and emotional support and advice on a range of issues under one roof.

YIACS often have a mix of staff, including clinical staff, counsellors, youth workers, advice workers, support staff and volunteers. The support can cover housing, homelessness, debt, employment, relationships, sexual health, drug, alcohol and mental health support, including counselling and therapeutic interventions and other wellbeing services.

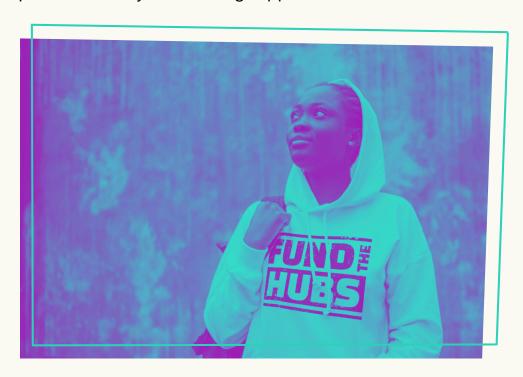
The support offered by YIACS can be a lifeline for many young people, because YIACS:

- are highly effective at addressing the range of challenges faced by young people and improving young people's mental health (Youth Access, 2012). Counselling at YIACS has comparable clinical outcomes to CAMHS and school-based counselling (Duncan et al, 2018), plus young people report higher levels of service satisfaction (Youth Access, 2020).
- have wider reach with young people who might otherwise slip through the cracks of statutory services and school settings. Research has shown that YIACS serve higher proportions of LGBTQ+ young people, Black and racially minoritised young people and young people with experience of contact with the youth justice system (Youth Access, 2020).
- enable young people to find their way on their own terms, by identifying their strengths, tailoring the service based on their needs and providing them with the information needed to understand their legal rights, responsibilities and choices available to them.
- are a bridge, not a cliff edge, at a time when young people lose access to support from children's agencies.
 By working with young people up to the age of 25, YIACS support young people through key life transitions such as leaving education, leaving home or the care system, joining the workforce and gaining financial independence.

Three quarters of all mental health problems emerge by the age of 24 (Kessler et al, 2005). YIACS can support young people at an early stage, providing them the tools and techniques to navigate life challenges, promote positive wellbeing and prevent mental health problems from escalating. It is a cost-effective way of achieving good outcomes for young people and society as a whole (42nd Street, 2020). What's more, this type of support has broad public support, with 9 in 10 parents (90%) saying that young people should have access to drop-in mental health support in their communities (Mind, 2022).

By filling significant gaps in existing provision for those aged 11-25, YIACS are a vital piece of the puzzle in service provision for children and young people. Where they exist, these services meet the needs of young people who do not meet the high clinical threshold of many NHS services, are too old for family hubs, or are not in education. They also provide an alternative setting for those seeking support outside of statutory avenues.

However, the lack of dedicated, long-term funding means many existing services are forced to patchwork funding together from multiple sources to keep vital provision running. Not only does this prevent services from being able to plan and adapt to meet levels of need, but it also places these services under significant strain and risk of being discontinued year on year. The absence of national sustainable funding for this type of provision means also that many local areas have no free youth advice and counselling services, with young people facing a postcode lottery in accessing support.



#FUNDTHEHUBS

That's why, with the Fund the Hubs campaign, we are **calling for a network of early support hubs**, based on the full YIACS model, across the country. To sustain a hub in every local authority area, we estimate that it will cost the Government between £114m to £134.5m per year for running costs. An additional £125.4m to £205.2m for capital costs to establish hub sites, with opportunities to build on existing infrastructure in some areas (Fund the Hubs, 2024).

The success of the model relies on responsiveness to local community needs and established and trusted relationships. Therefore, the rollout must build on the expertise, practice and evidence of YIACS currently delivering the model and on the existing ecosystems of support services in local communities. In practice, this could mean support services that are already established in local communities expand to deliver the full YIACS, or nearby YIACS extend their provision to neighbouring communities.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

Young people tell us they want a 'whole life approach' that treats mental health as an issue interwoven with every element of their life, such as education and employment, housing, relationships and money. 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. They want safe, social spaces where they can be themselves.

"We don't always need a diagnosis for mental health just somewhere to feel safe, listened to and having accessible support in a variety of venues."

Young person at Croydon Drop In

"Challenges around transition is when support fades. [Young people have] more struggles and worries around employment and housing [but] less support."

Young person at The Market Place Leeds

2 Based on 152 upper tier, county, metropolitan and unitary local authorities in England. A breakdown of these costings are available upon request.

Tactions needed

1. Young people in all local communities able to access advice and counselling services

We are calling on the next Government to ensure young people in all local communities can access advice and counselling services and receive effective 'whole life' support by:

- Committing to £125 million³ a year to fund early support hubs in every local authority area, putting the services that already exist on a sustainable footing and establishing YIACS in underserved areas.
- Investing £165 million⁴ in capital costs to support the initial national roll out, with opportunities to build on existing infrastructure in some areas.

³ This is the median figure for the estimated range for annual running costs for a hub in every local authority area (£114 million to £134.5 million).

⁴ This is the median figure for the estimated range of capital costs to establish a hub in every local authority area (£125.4 million to £205.2m).

Mental health support that meets young people's needs and rights

Children and young people have the right to the best possible standard of mental health (United Nations, 1966) and to be involved in decisions about what that looks like and how to achieve it (United Nations, 1989) at both an individual and system level. This means that **mental health support should be available when and where it's needed**, accessible to everyone without discrimination, accepting of different needs and of the highest quality. However, **this is not currently the case**, as too many young people are not getting the right support at the right time.

Statistics on children's and young people's experiences of the mental health system:

- Only just over a third of young people (37%) with a diagnosable mental health condition are able to access NHS specialist support (NHS England, 2021).
- Children are waiting on average 21 weeks for a first CAMHS appointment in England (Smith, 2023).
- Nearly half of 17-19 year-olds with a diagnosable mental health disorder have self-harmed or attempted suicide at some point (NHS Digital, 2017).
- 72 young people aged 18 or under, who have a recorded diagnosis of a psychiatric condition, are admitted to A&E every day on average (Lintern, 2020).

There is a strong case for embedding a rights-based approach to transform systems of support for young people's mental health. It is estimated that three quarters of young people experiencing mental health problems are forced to wait for so long that their condition gets worse, or they are unable to access any treatment at all (Local Government Association, 2023).

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 economic and social costs of mental ill health in England is £300 billion (Centre for Mental Health, 2024), measured in terms of losses to the economy, reduced quality of life and health and care costs. An effective rights-based approach to support that prioritises early intervention and prevention could reduce these costs, generating significant benefits for young people through their life course and society as a whole.



WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

Young people have told us they want respectful, knowledgeable and non-judgmental practitioners, capable of helping them navigate the unique and intersecting issues they face today. Too often young people are passed from pillar to post or placed on long waiting lists without transitional support. Sometimes there are simply no appropriate services for a young person to access, especially for those with neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD or autism (Hill, 2019).

Tactions needed

2. Mental health support that meets young people's needs and rights

We are calling on the next Government to embed a rights-based approach to transform systems of support for young people's mental health, as set out by young people (Youth Access, 2021):

- 'Experts who understand'

Build more schemes to support young people with lived experience to access training and join the mental health workforce.

- 'Services made for us'

Offer a range of services, in a range of places, such as in-person as well as online, dedicated support in schools, colleges and universities, and accessible support in informal settings like youth clubs and drop-in services, which are tailored to young people.

- 'Services made with us'

Centre the participation of young people in any decisions being made about their own mental health care, as well as supporting them to co-design services and the wider system.

- 'Equity, diversity and accessibility'

Offer tailored support to specific needs and preferences relating to gender, culture, race, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, disability and other characteristics.

- 'Help when we need it'

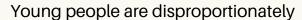
Strengthen links within and between statutory health systems and youth services, community-based organisations and schools, and remove barriers to flexible, appropriate and timely support, to make sure no young person falls through the gaps.

- 'Education and training for all'

Educate all professionals and young people in mental health, wellbeing and where to access support. Professionals should receive specific training to understand the barriers faced by young people experiencing marginalisation and how to be responsive to diverse needs.

A fair plan for young people in social welfare policy and decision making

A person's mental health and emotional wellbeing is closely 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.



impacted by these health, economic and social inequalities, which have been further exacerbated by the pandemic and through the rising cost of living. This challenging external environment means that many young people are struggling to have their basic needs met, contributing to their mental ill health, loneliness and isolation and impacting their ability to shape their own futures.

Young people's experiences of social, economic and health inequalities:

- On an average day, 165 young people are assessed as homeless, or at risk of it, in England and Wales (YMCA Downslink, 2024). Of all social welfare problems, homelessness is the greatest contributing factor to stress-related illness (Youth Access, 2010).
- Nearly half (47%) of 16-25s experience debt-related problems and 53% of those experiencing such problems found it negatively impacted their mental health (YouthNet and Citizens Advice, 2008).
- 17-25s with a probable mental disorder were **three times more likely to not be able to afford** to take part in activities such as sports, days out, or socialising with friends (Children's Commissioner, 2023).
- Nearly half of young people said the increasing cost of living was having a 'large' or 'catastrophic' impact on their mental health (Leaders Unlocked, 2023).

In addition to being **disproportionately impacted**, **young people are also disproportionately under-supported**. As an age group, under 25-year-olds are structurally disadvantaged in policy decisions and support systems that are available for other adults. For example, young adults are entitled to lower levels of universal credit, a lower minimum wage and a lower rate of Local Housing Allowance, despite many under 25s living independently with the same outgoings as older people.

Too often, there is a systemwide lack of recognition and understanding of the diverse needs of young adults around transitional life periods, and national policy decisions are often not tailored to or reflective of their circumstances. For instance, there is a widespread expectation that young people can continue to live at home or receive practical and financial support from parents or carers as they enter adulthood, despite this not being the case for an increasing number of young people. A report by Centrepoint found that 46 per cent of the young people who were homeless or at risk of homelessness were in that position because their families were no longer willing or able to accommodate them (Centrepoint, 2023).

Put simply, young people are experiencing sharpened social and economic pressures which are further exacerbated by age-related discrimination in social welfare policy.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAY

Young people tell us they face significant pressure in multiple aspects of their lives including education, employment, money and housing, whilst simultaneously feeling powerless, under heard and disconnected from decisions made for and about their futures.

"Isolation and loneliness has hugely impacted me as not being heard or seen can you make you feel invisible and like you don't matter."

Young person at No5 Young People, Reading

"It's getting harder and harder to get by." Young person at Croydon Drop In

"Ever since covid us young folk have been set back... A lot of us don't think we have much of a future." Young person at BYHP Oxfordshire

"Our voices need to be heard and we shouldn't be ignored."

Young person at Croydon Drop In

Actions needed

3. A fair plan for young people in social welfare policy and decision making

We are calling on the next Government to commit to a fair plan for young people in social welfare policy and decision making to end age-related structural disadvantage:

- Requiring national and local decision-making structures to meaningfully engage with young people in policy making across departments and agencies, with a focus on young people experiencing marginalisation, and respecting their voice and experience.

- End structural disadvantage experienced by young people, by removing age-related discrimination in universal credit, low pay and housing options and reviewing the specific and diverse needs and challenges facing young people as a distinct cohort in social welfare policy.

Work members say

"If this manifesto was the blueprint for support for young people in the future, it would truly transform young lives and prosects – delivering early intervention and prevention whole life support' for all young people."

Carly Newman Pos Jong Reple

Carry Newman for Govern reogne

"It can feel that we are fighting against the tide. A tide of increasingly complex need, combined with a lack of universal youth services and a highly challenging funding environment. With investment from the next government, this tide can be turned, through the roll out of a proven solution, the YIACS model. We fully support the policy asks set out in this manifesto."

Natalie Webb No Limits

"The Youth Information Advice & Counselling Service model has served our local community for the last 46 years and remains a well-evidenced, solution-focused and compassionate model of supporting children and young people. This manifesto makes it crystal clear that early intervention services, wrapped around and rooted in the community, are best-placed to work effectively with the ongoing socio-economic and emotional well-being challenges that today's generation of young people encounter. We do not need to reinvent the wheel but we do need the resources to make the wheel turn!"

Gordon Knott Croydon Brop In

Aeknowledgments

Thank you to Youth Advisors, Kyra and Ryan, and No5 Young People for supporting the development of this manifesto. Thank you also to our member services and the young people they work alongside who shared their insights and perspectives.

Contact

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