



youth
ACCESS
to information, advice and counselling

Under strain

How the recession is affecting young people and the organisations which provide advice, counselling and support to them

A briefing setting out the findings of a survey of young people's information, advice, counselling and support services (YIACS) at the end of 2009 into the effect of the recession and the impact of youth policy reforms.

This briefing is for policy makers and planners with an interest in: Integrated Youth Support Services; Community Legal Services; CAMHS; the impact of the recession on young people; social exclusion among young adults.

Key points

Our survey reveals a disturbing picture of a sector almost overwhelmed by demand for its services while struggling to cope with reduced funding and overstretched capacity. At the same time agencies are working against the background of reforms of the youth sector and the health sector which for most have been ineffectual and for many had negative consequences.

- **Increased demand** The recession has greatly increased the numbers of: young people seeking advice on social welfare problems, such as housing, homelessness,

debt and benefits; young people seeking counselling and other interventions for emotional and mental health issues; and runaways seeking help.

- **Increasing complexity** There is evidence that young people are presenting with more complex and severe mental health and emotional wellbeing problems than in the past.
- **Service capacity** More than three-quarters of services describe their capacity to meet demand as either 'under strain' or 'at breaking point'. Many services are attempting to meet increased demand with reduced capacity.
- **Service sustainability** Almost half of all services experienced funding cuts in 2009. Most services have worries about their immediate and longer term future and a quarter see themselves 'at real risk' in the next 12 months.
- **Policy reforms** Youth sector and mental health sector reforms have so far had little impact on services struggling to meet young people's needs for advice, counselling and support. Where there has been an impact it has more often been negative than positive.

“ The trends are well known – it’s just that we have a lot more people going from jobless to benefits to debt to drugs, to homelessness to anger management, etc. Not always in that order! Demand is snowballing while funding is dropping. ”
Youth Advice and Counselling Service

Why this is an important issue

As they enter and progress through adolescence, large numbers of young people encounter issues such as homelessness, emotional or mental health problems, unemployment, crime or domestic violence which often give rise to needs for advice, counselling and other forms of personal support.

- Even before the recession, 16–24 year olds experienced around 2.3 million serious social welfare problems each year, yet in about half these instances the young people do not even attempt to seek the advice they need and a further 200,000 try but fail to obtain advice.¹ The cost of this advice gap to the taxpayer has been estimated at £1bn per year.²
- Mental illness begins early; 10% of children and young people have a diagnosable mental health condition³ and 50% of lifetime mental illness is present by age 14.⁴ Recent estimates put the cost of mental health problems at around £77 billion per year.
- The Government has recognised the potential impacts of rising youth unemployment and, though most resources have been directed at the skills and

learning agenda, is anxious that barriers to engagement and wider social impacts should be addressed.

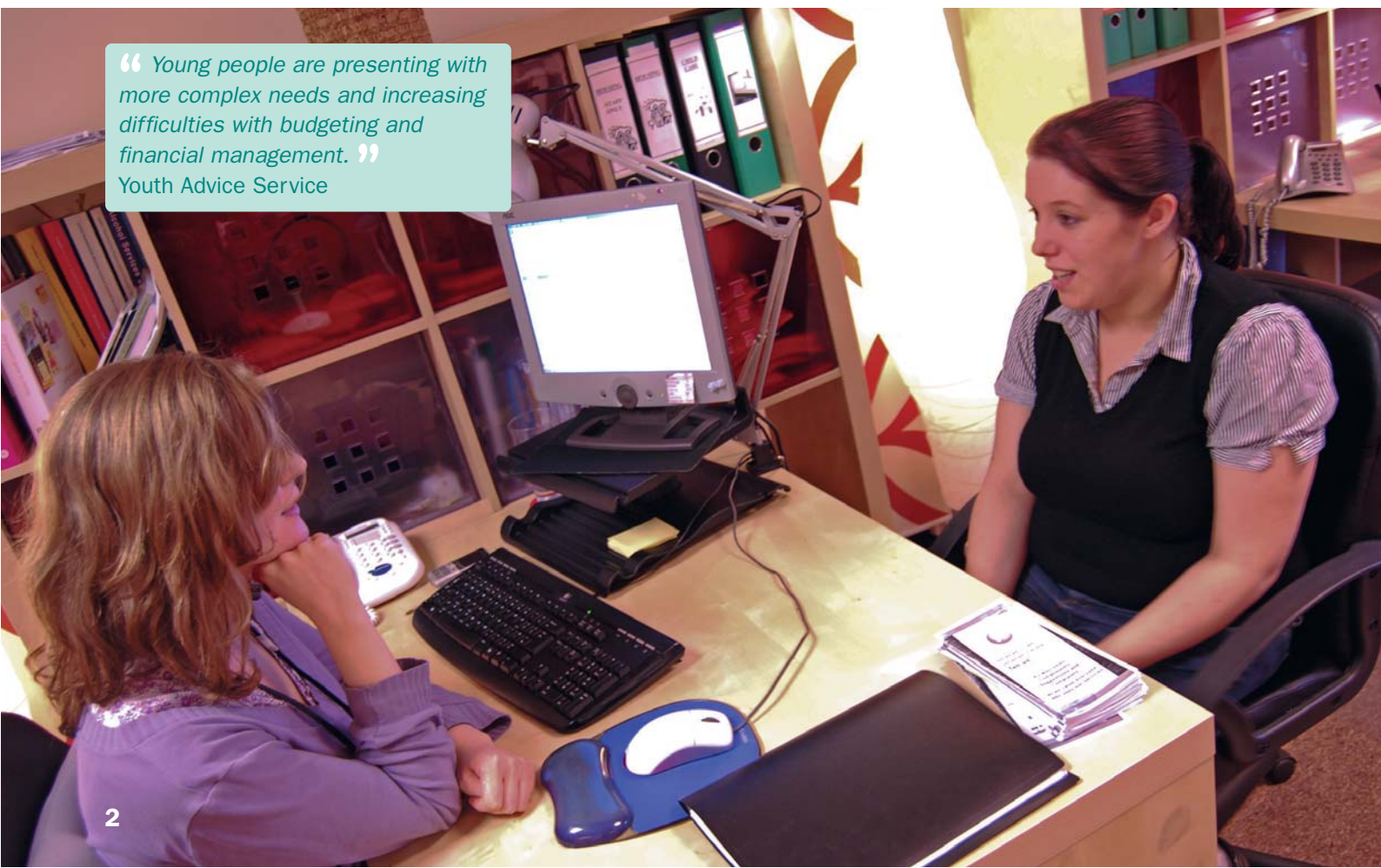
- A further consequence of recession and the public bail-out of the banking sector is the enormous pressure to cut expenditure on public services to address the budget deficit. At the same time, children’s services resources (including those for Integrated Youth Support Services) are under pressure as a consequence of the Baby Peter case.
- It is essential for society as a whole that adequate age-appropriate services are in place to support young people to overcome their problems if the worst impacts of the recession are to be mitigated and the spectre of another ‘lost generation’ avoided.

Introduction

In July 2009 Youth Access warned of the consequences which the recession was likely to have on young people and their needs for advice and counselling.⁵ Not only would rising unemployment and NEET numbers lead to more young people needing advice on benefits, housing and debt, but also mental health and emotional wellbeing would suffer.

As 2009 progressed, anecdotal evidence from our members suggested that as a result of the recession, not only were the numbers of young people requiring support on the increase, but the complexity and severity of their problems were becoming greater too.

“ Young people are presenting with more complex needs and increasing difficulties with budgeting and financial management. ”
Youth Advice Service



In late 2009 Youth Access surveyed its membership about the impact of the recession and changes in youth policy upon them and the young people who use their services. An electronic survey was issued to all 260 member organisations. 54 completed surveys were returned, a response rate of almost 20%. The characteristics of the respondent agencies gave a broadly representative sample of the membership as a whole in terms of size of agency, type of work conducted and geographical spread.⁶

The results are disturbing and reveal a sector almost overwhelmed by demand for its services while struggling to cope on reduced funding and with overstretched capacity. At the same time, agencies are working against the background of reforms of the youth and health sectors which for most have been ineffectual and for many had negative consequences.

Demand up Young people under pressure

The survey returns tell a tale of **increased demand for services across the board** since the onset of the recession at the end of 2008.

“ There is increased tension in some families because of unemployment and debt. Sometimes young people are thrown out/move out for financial reasons when they are just 16. We seem to be hearing more about domestic violence. Increase in young people running away. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

The greatest increases were in relation to social welfare advice:

- 89% reported an increase in demand for debt advice with over a third reporting increases of more than 20%.
- 87% reported an increase in demand for housing advice – 16% said it was up by over 30%.
- 87% reported an increase in demand for benefits advice, though the size of the increase was slightly less than in respect of debt and housing.

“ Homelessness continues to be a massive problem in our region and is getting worse with the recession. ”

Youth Advice Service

Demand for counselling services has increased at an only slightly lesser rate:

- 86% of counselling services said they had seen demand increase, with more than half reporting a rise of more than 10%.

“ Unemployment and financial worries have been an increasing trend as contributory factors in young people presenting with emotional and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and relationship difficulties. ”

Youth Counselling and Advice Service

A big rise in demand for employment related services was also reported. Smaller, but still significant, increases were reported in relation to sexual health and drug and alcohol services.

YIACS also told us that young people were presenting with **new, more complex and often more severe problems**, often attributed directly to the recession:

- Greater numbers of young people reporting domestic violence in the parental home.
- Increases in problems with anger management, bullying and domestic violence.
- More young runaways.
- Increased prevalence of homelessness among 19–25 year olds.
- More young people presenting with depression, anxiety, panic attacks, suicidal ideation and self harming.
- Lower levels of self esteem and self confidence.
- A real growth in feelings of hopelessness.
- More risky behaviour such as drug taking and sex work.

“ Our stats for counselling issues brought showed a significant rise for April 08–March 09 in young people presenting with anxiety, depression, panic attacks and self-harming (up by a third), while suicidal ideation and serious depression rose by a half. Usually the Issues profile barely changes year in year out. ”

Youth Counselling Service Manager

While this recession may technically be over, the evidence of previous downturns suggests that its negative effects are likely to continue long into the future. This is particularly true for young people, who in the recession of the 1990s saw slower recovery in employment levels than any other age group.

Funding and capacity down Services under strain

Many agencies reported that they were experiencing unprecedented funding pressures, often as a result of local authority cut-backs.

- Half of all counselling services experienced funding cuts in 2009, with over 20% suffering substantial reductions.
- 45% of advice services had suffered cuts, with 14% reporting substantial reductions.
- 48% of other support services had been cut, with 17% taking substantial reductions.

“ Our funding has been removed and therefore will no longer be able to deliver housing advice to vulnerable young people as from 31st March 2010. Holistic Services seem to have been cut across the service. ”

Youth Advice Service

It has also proved more difficult for agencies to fundraise from trusts and other sources, where they have encountered tightened criteria and altered funding priorities favouring ‘positive activities’.

A small number of YIACS had been able to access recession linked Government funding, such as The Hardship Fund and the Targeted Support Fund, though the one-off nature of the awards left these agencies very concerned about the year ahead. Some have succeeded in diversifying their funding through other streams such as Supporting People.

The practical effect of this squeeze on funding has been the reduction and sometimes loss of vital services, such as housing advice or counselling, for young people. Funding has sometimes even been withdrawn in the midst of delivery of projects due to financial crises in local authorities. Restructuring and enforced mergers have led in some instances to loss of services and independence. Overall, the picture is one of reducing capacity to meet rising demand:

- Almost 70% of agencies report their capacity to meet the demand from young people for advice, counselling and support as ‘under strain’.
- 7% are currently operating at ‘breaking point’.
- Remarkably, 40% are attempting to meet increased demand with reduced or much reduced capacity compared to at the onset of the recession.

“ Budgets have been trimmed to the point where only staffing remains to be cut. Unless we receive an uplift in funding then our staff compliment and services will have to be reduced. ”

Youth Advice Service

The impact of national policy Youth sector reforms

“ I sit on the TYS group but there is currently no money available to projects, IAG is dominated by Connexions and despite asking to be part of the group, have not yet been invited to a meeting. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

Since the *Youth Matters* Green Paper was published in 2005, central Government has directed a policy of Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS) for 13–19 year olds, focussing on Positive Activities (things to do and opportunities to contribute); Information, Advice

and Guidance (IAG) and Targeted Youth Support (TYS). The intention of the policy was that services for young people would be reshaped, including responsibility for Connexions services moving to local authorities, with IAG and TYS being rolled out in 2008.

In reality it seems that national policy has had a slow translation to local practice.

Most YIACS (55%) feel that they are seen as part of the delivery of TYS, with 47% seen as involved in IAG. In funding terms though, only 45% said that were funded under TYS and just 33% under IAG. A cautionary note here is that some agencies were not clear under what heading they were funded, which is perhaps not surprising given the slow implementation of IYSS.

The bald facts about the reforms, however, are:

- More than half of the survey respondents (53%) had not felt any impact from them at all; and
- Just 9% had experienced a positive impact; while 33% reported a negative impact.

Though there are several examples of good practice in the application of the policy, in many areas there has been a retraction of services back in-house by local authorities and a reluctance to commission services from voluntary sector organisations. This can compromise both accessibility and independence of services, which is of particular concern around delivery of social welfare advice as part of IAG.

Services which have been commissioned reported having to expend considerable resources reporting to funders, at the expense of frontline services. Some feel that they are now in competition for funding with other areas of work with young people, such as participation.

“ Commissioners should ask themselves ‘what would young people do?’ ‘Where would they go if free services such as ours no longer existed?’ ‘Why do they access us in preference to anywhere else?’ ”

Youth Advice Service

Many agencies felt that funding is not joined-up, making it very difficult for services to plan coherently, particularly since most are offering counselling for mental health problems and services to older young people, who continue to fall through gaps in provision. Agencies’ experience is backed by the findings of the recent CAMHS review which found joint commissioning for mental health provision under-developed and continuing problems for young people needing to access services at 17+.⁷

The most common complaint, indeed, was the arbitrary cut-off of support for most young people at age 19, which does not reflect real transitions into adulthood and fails many young people just when they need the help most.

Significantly, and understandably in view of the experience of many respondents, many of those who have not yet felt any impact from developments in youth policy are fearful of what is to come when the policies are fully implemented locally, particularly in the context of public spending cuts.

“ Local authority has recently ended a long term working partnership with the agency, endangering the services provided. Although we have been advised to apply for funding via commissioning, this is not guaranteed. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

The impact of national policy Health sector reforms

Policy around young people’s mental health has also undergone numerous changes in recent years. Initiatives have included the 1995 introduction of the 4 tier model of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS); the NHS Plan 2000 requiring local authorities and CAMHS to work together to increase access to early intervention and prevention; the 2002 target for comprehensive CAMHS to be available in all areas by 2006 and the 2004 NSF for Children, Young people and Maternity Services with its 10 year programme for raising standards, including in mental health. The New Horizons strategy agenda now replaces the NSF for Mental Health and outlines the next steps in improving services for those with mental ill-health. Other programmes include the introduction of Early Intervention in Psychosis and the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programmes.

While these initiatives were intended to improve emotional and mental wellbeing, it is clear here too that for most YIACS (57%) the reforms have had no impact, and as many have suffered unintended negative impacts (19%) as have experienced positive ones (19%).

“ The emphasis on throughput and short term work and an over-emphasis on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy impacts negatively on young people who are socially isolated with low self esteem. Being tied to NHS contracts compromises our independence as a voluntary sector organisation. ”

Youth Counselling Service

Some services have seen improved referral procedures and access to new money, such as Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TaMHS) – though this too is ending. Some also speak of good working relationships with their local CAMHS, though the evidence does not point to an overall improvement.

Changes in policy around sexual health services are in the main seen as very positive.



It seems though that commissioning by PCT’s is a closed book for many agencies as services tend to be procured internally. A common complaint is that referrals from primary care and CAMHS are increasing, but with no funding attached.

Once again, the fact that funding and delivery arrangements for young people end at age 19 causes great difficulties for the services who are trying to meet their needs. Many of the young people presenting the most complex needs are aged 19 and over.

The future for advice and counselling for young people

“ We have faced some moderate decreases in the past year, but the year coming faces us with substantial cuts and seeing the service cut by almost half. The counselling service had 6 paid days to coordinate a service of 14 student and volunteer counsellors. That is going to be cut to 3 days coordination time. It takes time to build up a busy, effective counselling service. It is going to be a very hard job to work out how to shrink such a service and work out who you turn away or make wait. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

Advice and counselling services targeted at young people provide vital support for those at the most important and most vulnerable times in their lives. The interventions that they provide produce positive outcomes which are life-changing for many of their users.

“ Young people have a lot of problems and it is easier for them to walk into a place that deals with young people ... It is good to come to just one place where they sort everything out. I wouldn't want to keep explaining my situation over and over again, it is just too difficult and upsetting. ”

20 year old male

“ I was feeling suicidal. If I hadn't got advice I would be dead now. ”

20 year old male

“ I would have been homeless. [Now] my outlook has changed, I know that I need to do things for myself ... I don't get into trouble now. ”

17 year old male ⁸

A recent outcomes study with over 500 young people who had received assistance in YIACS found substantial improvements in relation to levels of stress (improvements reported by 70% of users), housing situations (49%) and involvement in education, employment and training (35%).⁹

Despite the evidence of the effectiveness of their work, more than half of YIACS (52%) see at best an 'uncertain' future for themselves and a very worrying 24% report that they are currently 'at real risk'.

“ Cuts to funding are expected from the local authority of approximately 15%. Some current services are being put out to tender with a 35% decrease in funding available for them and a significant increase in the level of service to be provided. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

Conclusions and concerns

- Young people are under greater strain than at any time in recent memory. Experience from previous recessions shows us how damaging and long-lasting the consequences can be for the young people themselves and for society in general, e.g. in terms of increased crime, ill-health and poverty. While difficult spending decisions need to be made, it is imperative that services young people themselves choose in preference to others and which can be life changing and resilience-building should not be seen as easy targets for funding cuts, forced mergers or restructuring.
- There is a real risk that local authorities and PCT's will seek to target savings at services which have a lower profile and that commissioning will favour larger organisations.
- Experience suggests that local authorities and the NHS may seek to bring commissioned services in-house, thereby jeopardising the independence, vitality and accessibility of YIACS.

An effective solution

Youth Access' national network of more than 250 members provides vital information, advice, counselling and support to over 1 million young people each year in services offering a holistic, independent, accessible and young person-friendly approach to the sort of problems which young people are suffering in increasing numbers. There is extensive and robust evidence that YIACS provide young people with interventions that contribute to real and significant improvements in mental health, emotional wellbeing and self esteem; and the practical support they need to re-engage with the world of learning and employment.

YIACS, with their roots in youth work, yet with a distinctive set of values, principles and standards, have been identified as particularly important for 16 to 25 year olds, since this group faces specific issues associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood; few, if any, other services are able to meet their needs holistically.¹⁰

YIACS offer young people

- Simple and easy access to information, advice, counselling and support, either through self referral or with the support of friends, family or another professional.
- A range of free services 'under one roof' delivered by professional and trained staff who understand young people and who have good links with other services that young people may also want help to access.
- A young person-friendly environment offering a flexible mix of drop in and appointments, and with help available on a one off, occasional or regular basis, and over the short, medium and long term.
- Impartial help that works alongside young people at their own pace; helping each young person to identify and understand their unique needs and aspirations, supporting them to make their decisions and achieve their goals.
- Respect and recognition of every young person's right to privacy and confidentiality within a framework that promotes the safety and well-being of all young people.
- Help to negotiate and reduce the gaps and age barriers present in other services by being available to a broad age range of young people, often up to 25 years.
- Accountable services that secure young people's participation and involvement in supporting and evaluating their continued quality and effectiveness and ensuring they deliver the best outcomes for young people.

If these services are allowed to contract and even go to the wall, where will young people, especially those aged 18–25 years and those not reached by statutory provision, turn to for the help they so desperately need?

Recommendations

Local policy making

- Those making procurement and commissioning decisions must look beyond their own in-house provision and consider issues wider than narrowly defined short term costs. YIACS deliver important social and health outcomes over and above mere number crunching and throughput. They must be given the opportunity to demonstrate this in the procurement process.
- Planners in local authorities, PCT's, CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Services (AMHS) must effectively involve their local YIACS and service users themselves in planning service provision.
- Local authorities, PCT's, CAMHS and AMHS must accompany referrals to YIACS with funding.
- Local authorities, PCT's, CAMHS and AMHS must join up their commissioning across advice, mental health and youth services. The sort of effective joint commissioning as envisaged in the Joint Planning and Commissioning Framework (2006) and The Department of Health Commissioning Framework for Health and Well-being (2007) must become reality.
- Local authorities, PCT's, CAMHS and AMHS must recognise the enormous value of *independent* services.

- Implementation of New Horizons, with its recognition of the need for improved transitions, must build upon the already successful models of YIACS.
- Funders must work in compliance with local Compacts and funding should never be withdrawn without proper notice and consultation with funded groups.

National policy making

- The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) must ensure that legal aid resources meet the needs of vulnerable and NEET young people, particularly around homelessness, welfare benefits and debt, by focussing resources on services targeting this group.
- The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) must ensure that IAG services for young people are responsive to needs for social welfare advice, counselling and other personal support needs as well as careers advice.
- The Government must ensure that its NEET and IAG strategies encompass the need for interventions beyond careers and learning, dealing with complex problems in a holistic manner through independent services.
- It is essential that the arbitrary ending of many support services for young people at age 19 is scrapped and policy changed to reflect the true and more varied nature of transition to adulthood.



“ Young people are despondent. There is a lack of hope that employment options will improve, affecting self esteem and motivation. ”

Youth Advice and Counselling Service

- 1 *The advice needs of young people – the evidence*, Kenrick, J. Youth Access, 2009.
- 2 According to calculations made in 2009 by JustRights, the campaign for fair access to legal services for children and young people, and based on Ministry of Justice figures.
- 3 *New horizons: a shared vision for mental health*. December 2009, DH.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 *The impact of the recession on young people and on their needs for advice and counselling services*. Youth Access, July 2009.
- 6 Please contact Steve@youthaccess.org.uk for further methodological details and full results.
- 7 *Children and Young People in Mind: The final report of the CAMHS Review*. November 2008, DH.
- 8 These quotes from young people who have used YIACS are taken from a longitudinal study conducted in 2006–07 for Youth Access' Rights to Access Project.
- 9 Results from Youth Access' youth advice outcomes project will be published later in 2010.
- 10 *Heads up: mental health of children and young people. A guide for donors and charities*. I Joy, M van Poortvliet, C Yeowart. New Philanthropy Capital, November 2008.



About Youth Access

Youth Access is the national membership organisation for a network of 200 youth information, advice and counselling services.

Through its members, Youth Access is one of the largest providers of youth advice and counselling services in the UK, dealing with over one million enquiries a year on issues as diverse as sexual health, mental health, relationships, homelessness, benefits and debt.

Youth Access provides the training, resources, research, campaigning and other infrastructure support to ensure high quality services exist to meet young people's diverse needs.

Youth Access has published a number of reports on advice, covering: young people's needs; advice-seeking behaviour and access; effective models of delivery; the impact of advice. All our reports are available to download from our website.

Youth Access is a charity recommended (in November 2008) by New Philanthropy Capital.

© Youth Access 2010

Youth Access
www.youthaccess.org.uk
 Registered Charity No. 1042121
 Company No. 2967126

This briefing has been produced with support from

Big Lottery Fund



as part of the
 Working Together
 for Advice Project

