

# National Youth Agency Response - Education and Health and Social Care Select Committees Joint Inquiry into Children and Young People's Mental Health

## About the NYA

The National Youth Agency (NYA) is the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work in England. The NYA is committed to enabling high quality youth work across a range of settings to benefit the health and outcomes of young people and strengthen local communities. The NYA do this by providing guidance, support, advice, training and staff development opportunities for youth workers and youth work organisations.

## Summary

The mental health crisis among young people in England is driven by rising social and economic pressures including the pandemic, cuts to early support services, and overstretched schools and NHS provision. This submission highlights the critical role of youth work in providing early, community based, trusted support that builds resilience and prevents escalation to clinical services, acting as the glue that holds a fragmented mental health system together.

Since 2010 cuts to youth services have reduced the availability of safe spaces and trusted support for many young people. These gaps, alongside wider pressures on local services, have contributed to inconsistent referral routes and a postcode lottery in access to both early and specialist mental health support, effects felt most sharply in marginalised and deprived communities. Youth workers are uniquely positioned within communities, can identify emerging needs, connect young people to wider services, reduce pressure on GPs and schools, and strengthen multiagency collaboration, but this requires sustained investment, workforce development and proper integration into health, education and local commissioning structures.

## **What factors are driving recent trends in children and young people's mental health, and how have changes in service thresholds influenced both the presentation of need and access to early support?**

1. The latest data from the NHS<sup>1</sup> shows that one in five children aged 8-25 and young people have a mental health disorder in England which has led to a mental health crisis among young people. There are a variety of driving factors for this including cuts to early support services, leaving many young people without places to go and relationships that support their mental, emotional and social development. Young people today are facing a growing wave of mental health challenges, driven by the lasting impact of the pandemic, years of cuts to youth services, rising youth unemployment, increasing poverty and inequality, unmet SEND demands, and the pressures of staying safe both online and offline in an increasingly uncertain world. As a delivery partner of the Government's Local Youth Transformation Programme including the Young Futures Hub early adopters, NYA has found that many youth providers have reported an increased demand for mental health support. NYA's National Youth Sector Census<sup>2</sup> corroborates this point and found that 84% of youth organisations reported a significant rising

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<sup>1</sup> NHS England (2023) [One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023](#)

<sup>2</sup> NYA (2025) [National Youth Sector Census, Snapshot Report, Summer 2025](#)

demand for mental health support among young people with over half (56%) operating mental health waiting lists.

1.1 Since 2010/11, more than 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 750 youth centres closed<sup>3</sup>. However, youth work has a critical role to play in turning the tide on young people's mental health through its relational practice with young people and collaboration with agencies supporting young people. Young people need timely, professional support when they have a diagnosable mental health condition, but young people also need much broader support before reaching crisis point to build confidence, develop aspirations and believe in their own future. Just as importantly, they need to feel listened to and involved in shaping the services they use. Meeting these needs is challenging. It requires greater investment in youth work, which provides trusted relationships and early support, alongside faster access to mental health services in cases where clinical support is needed. Both systems are currently overstretched and strengthening them is essential if we want young people to thrive.

## **Section 1: Community- based approaches to supporting young people's mental health**

### **What opportunities are there to provide mental health support for children and young people through community based approaches? What resources or support is needed to deliver them?**

2. Youth work is a distinct form of education supported by a youth work curriculum<sup>4</sup> that focuses on the personal and social development of young people to improve their wellbeing and agency. It aims to support skills for life and work as well as mental and physical wellbeing. Youth workers are critical in supporting young people and their mental health through non-clinical, trusted adult relationships through early support. They play an integral role in developing young people's emotional, social and mental health wellbeing building confidence and resilience.

2.2 Currently, much policy related to young people's health and wellbeing is delivered within statutory services, specifically the NHS and schools and whilst we welcome Mental Health Support Teams in schools, teachers and health professionals are often overburdened, under resourced and expected to deliver beyond their remit and limited resource<sup>5</sup>

*“Young people spend 85% of their waking hours outside of their school and so it's entirely logical that as a nation we need to invest in young people's personal and social development in the community spaces where they spend the majority of their time”*

*Leigh Middleton, Chief Executive, National Youth Agency, 2023*

2.3 Young people often perceive youth workers as separate from school and part of their local community instead. They can play a vital role in forging connections between young people, their families, schools and communities, helping to address complex challenges by developing

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<sup>3</sup> Local Government (2020) [Re-thinking local: youth services](#)

<sup>4</sup> NYA (2025) [National Youth Work Curriculum](#)

<sup>5</sup> NYA (2019) [Youth Work's role in supporting young people's mental health](#)

a holistic network of support.<sup>6</sup> Youth workers can help lift the burden of pressure on already stretched services through effective community-based approaches. GPs for example have reported that one in five appointments in England are for non-clinical issues and are increasingly recommending social prescribing, an approach that connects people to activities and services to meet their social and emotional needs.<sup>7</sup> As a practice, youth work delivers in many spheres that both the education and health sectors simply cannot.

### Case Study: Paul's story of supporting young men in Barnsley

Paul Savage is a young men's mental health project worker in Barnsley. He runs BRV, an initiative by the young people's empowerment project Chilypep. In his role he tackles issues from misogyny, toxic masculinity, racism and mental health predominantly with young white boys. By offering them a chance to speak their mind, he also creates opportunity to change it.

“We work with lads to break down barriers. We talk about men's mental health, masculinity, how to ask for help and to challenge the stigma towards men asking for help looking weak. We talk about what it is to be male and what masculinity or manliness means. There is a lot to unpick.

Barnsley itself is not that racially diverse. We meet lots of white boys and young men with extreme right-wing views and channelling a lot of anger, and we open up the space for them to talk about their views and challenge them. We encourage them to delve more deeply into why they think the way they do too.

Other settings like schools often aim to shut down the conversation, but we encourage debate and exploration of certain mindsets.”

**Paul Savage, Chilypep**

2.4 Youth workers based in communities are uniquely placed to spot early mental health issues among the young people they work with and partner with other agencies in their local communities to ensure young people get the support they need early. However, like the education and health sector, the youth sector has been under resourced for years and as a profession, the youth workforce requires significant and sustainable investment into training, recruitment and retention. Whilst we welcome investment set out into the youth workforce in the National Youth Strategy, we would like to see the government go further so that youth work is robust enough withstand any future shocks and most importantly, to ensure this generation of young people and future generations can access the mental health support they need, when and where they need it.

2.5 A sustainable community-based response to young people's mental health cannot rely on clinical services or schools alone. It requires serious commitment to prevention: trusted relationships, accessible community spaces, and timely youth work support.<sup>8</sup> For these

<sup>6</sup> NYA (2023) [Better together: Youth work with schools: Complementing formal education to change lives - new approaches to improving wellbeing and attendance](#)

<sup>7</sup> Barnardo's (2023) [The Missing Link: Social Prescribing for Children and Young People](#)

<sup>8</sup> UK Youth (2026) [Another way is possible: Building hope, belonging and better mental health through youth work](#)

reasons, youth workers must be recognised as core preventative partners at the community level with strengthened integration with DHSC Early Support Hubs, DWP Youth Hubs, NHS neighbourhood health hubs and schools as set out in the Schools White Paper.

### **What mental health support should be available through Young Futures Hubs, and how should these hubs connect with other local services?**

3. Young Futures Hubs (YFHs) are intended to provide a local, youth friendly 'single front door' where young people can access early, holistic support - with mental health improvement as one of the three core aims, alongside the aims of increasing opportunities and reducing crime. The Government have committed to 50 YFHs across the country and NYA is leading a consortium of youth sector partners (including UK Youth, Regional Youth Work Units (RYWUs), Young People Foundation Trusts, StreetGames, the Local Government Association, Youth Access, Solve, and the Centre for Young Lives) supporting eight YFH early adopter local authorities through a tailored review process, involving young assessors to ensure youth voice is central to the design, delivery and evaluation of YFHs. These early adopter hubs are due to start delivery on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2026.
  - 3.1 YFHs offer a crucial opportunity to strengthen youth voice in co-design and early mental health support by placing non-clinical, trusted adult relationships at the heart of their model. To be effective, they must combine universal access, targeted early help, culturally competent support, and consistent partnership between youth work and both statutory and non-statutory services.
  - 3.2 YFHs have the potential to stop young people falling through service gaps through better join up with other local services that work with young people including youth services, schools, health services and the voluntary sector.<sup>9</sup> By bringing youth workers, mental health practitioners, education and employment advisers, safeguarding partners, and community organisations together under one roof, YFHs can ensure that young people are triaged swiftly and connected to the right support - whether that is child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), social services, or other mental health support teams including those based in schools.
  - 3.3 YFHs can also help integrate and strengthen the fragmented youth support ecosystem which is currently failing young people with many being sent miles away from home for costly out of area mental health treatment.<sup>10</sup> This practice is harmful to young people and their families, as well as costly and inefficient for the NHS and the wider state. YFHs provide an opportunity for the government to integrate early mental health support with other agencies supporting young people and to effectively signpost them to the support they need.

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<sup>9</sup> Centre for Young Lives (2025) [Transforming opportunities for the most vulnerable young people: How Young Futures Hubs can keep vulnerable teenagers safe and support them to succeed](#)

<sup>10</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists (2025) [Time to act: Hundreds of children sent out of area from mental health treatment](#)

## **What regional and local variability is there in provision of open-access mental health support across the country and how can this be reduced?**

4. Evidence shows that young people face a postcode lottery in accessing mental health services.<sup>11</sup> This variation is not linked to local levels of need, deprivation, urban/rural status, or population size, meaning some high -need areas have fewer services than better resourced- ones. In several regions, NHS specialist providers are unaware of community based services in their own area, preventing effective signposting for young people who do not meet CAMHS thresholds.<sup>12</sup> In addition, many young people struggle to access the mental health support they need once they reach the upper age limit of CAMHS when they are aged 16-18 leaving them falling through service gaps.<sup>13</sup>

4.1 Access to mental health support is even more acute for young people living in deprivation with 39% of young people who live in less affluent neighbourhoods reporting that they struggle to get the support they need.<sup>14</sup> For marginalised young people including ethnic minorities, refugees and care-experienced young people, accessing mental health support becomes even harder meaning that geography, social class and race often and unfairly determines whether certain cohorts of young people get appropriate early mental health support.

4.2 The Government's commitment to improve young people's mental health through the rollout of Young Futures Hubs is very welcome but this policy and funding commitment is limited in resource. To end the postcode lottery of support and ensure equity for young people across the country, we recommend the expansion of YFH beyond the 50 once the hubs have been evaluated for their impact and effectiveness in supporting young people's mental health to ensure there is YFH in every community.

## **Section 2: The importance of the youth workforce in improving young people's mental health**

### **How effective are current referral pathways between education, community services and NHS services in ensuring timely and appropriate access to mental health support for children and young people?**

5. As highlighted in previous sections above, the burgeoning mental health crisis is not slowing down, and existing referral pathways are patchy, inconsistent and leave many young people falling through the gaps of early support. Instead, young people often encounter a fragmented system, marked by delays, unclear routes into support, and gaps between education, community organisations, and NHS services.

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<sup>11</sup> Children's Commissioner (2023) [A postcode lottery: the picture facing children's mental health services](#)

<sup>12</sup> Education Policy Institute, Youth Access and Prudence Trust (2024) [Non-specialist mental health support for young people in England](#)

<sup>13</sup> British Journal of General Practice (2022) [Young people who have fallen through the mental health transition gap: a qualitative study on primary care support](#)

<sup>14</sup> UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies (2023) [39% of young people in the most deprived areas struggling to get mental health support](#)

5.1 A vital workforce often missing from the existing design of mental health referral pathways is the youth work sector, despite often acting as a young person's first trusted adult outside of the home.

5.2 Youth workers are a critical bridge between education, community settings, and health services particularly because they can offer relational, low threshold support while formal services remain overstretched. Youth workers often also carry the emotional load of supporting young people who are waiting months for specialist intervention.

### **How can education-based, voluntary and community, and health workforces collaborate to optimise the mental health workforce and ensure sufficient support for children within capacity constraints?**

6. Evidence shows that NHS providers of specialist mental health services are often unaware of non NHS community services operating in their own area, making effective signposting difficult.<sup>15</sup> In some deprived regions, commissioners and local authorities struggle to identify local early support services at all. Whilst YFHs offer a tangible opportunity to strengthen collaboration across workforces they are not a panacea to the existing funding and capacity constraints facing professionals working with young people.

6.1 To ease pressures on multiple workforces, including the youth work sector multi-agency collaboration must be strengthened for example through:

- Shared and regularly updated cross-sector service directories so that youth workers, teachers, school counsellors, GPs and NHS practitioners can effectively signpost young people to mental health support that is appropriate and in their best interests.
- Including youth workers in Integrated Care System planning to ensure clear, joined-up pathways between universal, targeted and specialist support.
- Recognising youth workers as core members of mental health multidisciplinary teams across localities and regions.
- Shared training and workforce development across education, youth, community, voluntary and health sectors to promote shared understandings of trauma-informed practice, cultural competence, safeguarding and early intervention.
- Creative commissioning – through strategic partnerships, commissioning youth work should form a core part of the mental health system, not a voluntary add-on. This would also align community provision with health and education workforce planning which would help address capacity constraints.
- Better local service mapping and data sharing for professionals to identify need across areas.

6.2 Research from King's College London and Onside<sup>16</sup> highlights the vital role youth workers play in supporting young people's mental health and in turn reducing school absence. Through the

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<sup>15</sup> National Institute for Health and Care Research (2024) [Signposting services for people with health and care needs: a rapid realist review](#)

<sup>16</sup> Onside (2026) [Back to School: Can youth work help turn the tide on absence?](#)

Schools White paper, the government has an opportunity to harness and join up expertise between schools and youth workers to better support young people's mental health.

### **How should the needs of children and young people who do not meet CAMHS thresholds be identified and addressed?**

7. Children and young people who do not meet CAMHS thresholds still present with significant emotional and social needs, and youth workers play a crucial role in identifying these early on providing opportunities for listening, relationship building (with youth workers and among their peers) and confidence building. Youth workers, who often have the strongest trusted relationships with young people, are essential for early identification through day to day contact, observation, and voluntary engagement. Open access, drop in services such as YFHs where young people can seek help without thresholds are also vital for identifying emerging needs, yet as outlined above, current provision is highly uneven across the country. To improve early identification, youth workers must be included in local service mapping, multi-agency discussions and Integrated Care System (ICS) planning so that they can act as a reliable first point of contact and connector between young people and wider services. Addressing the needs of those below CAMHS thresholds requires expanding community based, low threshold support where youth workers are key contributors.

### **Section 3: Commissioning change together with young people**

#### **Are resources targeted to where they are most needed? Are there changes to commissioning and funding arrangements that would most improve the join up of local delivery of mental health support for children and young people?**

8. As outlined in previous answers, evidence shows that resources for early mental health support are not consistently targeted to where need is greatest, creating a postcode lottery that youth workers must navigate. To improve join up, commissioning must shift from fragmented, short term funding towards integrated, long term frameworks that place youth work at the heart of local mental health systems. YFHs have a key role to play in ensuring NHS, education and voluntary-sector services operate as a single ecosystem to support young people's mental health, rather than disconnected providers. In this context, youth workers act as a lynchpin to coordinate multi-agency provision taking a community-based approach to supporting young people's wellbeing. Furthermore, better local service mapping and data sharing would indicate which areas show major gaps in their systems and allow commissioners to target investment where early help demand is unmet and ensure youth workers can connect young people to the right support at the right time.

*“One of the most important parts of youth work for me is advocating for young people, making sure their voices get heard. It's difficult in a system as rigid as health care to find the space for young people to deviate from what is prescribed or considered the norm.”*

*Clare Anderson, Youth Worker, Nottingham University Hospital Service*

## **What role should ICBs and local authorities play in joining-up mental health support in health and education settings?**

9. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a local youth offer for young people<sup>17</sup> Under Section 507b of the Education Act (1996), all young people aged 13 to 19 years (and up to 25 years for those with special educational needs and disability (SEND)) have the right to access youth work activities which are for the improvement of their wellbeing and promote their personal and social development. Key elements of the nine ‘essentials’ of a local youth offer relevant to supporting young people’s mental health include a needs assessment, youth engagement and workforce planning. However, compliance with the statutory duty across local authorities in England is patchy and as result universal access to youth work has disappeared for many communities.

9.1 The NYA has long called for the strengthening of this statutory duty to provide a local youth offer. In 2025, a 10-minute rule bill was introduced to Parliament to place clear duties on councils to properly plan, deliver and resource youth services, rather than treating them as optional so that young people can access safe spaces, a trusted adult and opportunities to help them thrive.<sup>18</sup> By strengthening the statutory duty, local authorities could signal the importance of youth work to addressing the burgeoning mental health crisis among young people and by doing so facilitate better join up between agencies working with young people whilst at the same time alleviating pressure from the health and education workforce. Local authorities could also focus on mapping local provision, coordinating early help services and reducing the postcode lottery that currently affects young people’s access to mental health support.

9.2 ICBs should play a central role in bringing health, education and community sectors together, ensuring that youth workers are fully recognised within local mental health pathways. Embedding youth work into ICS planning and commissioning frameworks would create clearer pathways between schools, youth services and NHS teams, and ensure that community based early support (including youth work) is aligned with specialist provision and not treated as an optional add-on. By requiring ICBs to collaborate directly with youth workers, schools and voluntary organisations, young people would benefit from a more coherent system where early needs are identified sooner and escalated effectively when required.

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<sup>17</sup> NYA (2023) [How to fulfil your Statutory Duty under Section 507B of the Education Act: A toolkit for local authorities](#)

<sup>18</sup> NYA (2025) [Youth Services Bill](#)

## **Is there sufficient alignment between the strategies and reviews of the Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education?**

- **How can accountability for outcomes be better shared across government?**
- **How can public services be held accountable for delivering these outcomes?**

10. There is not yet sufficient alignment between national strategies led by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Department for Education (DfE), DCMS (which leads Young Futures Hubs), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Home Office (through Young Futures Prevention Partnerships). As outlined throughout this submission, evidence shows that young people experience a mental health system that is fragmented, with inconsistent provision, limited coordination and major gaps in how early mental health support is planned and delivered across sectors and workforces. There is substantial geographic variation in non-specialist mental health provision with no clear link to local need, reflecting mismatched national leadership and disconnected commissioning structures across health, education and youth services. Similarly, NHS mental health providers frequently lack awareness of local youth and community services, demonstrating weak join up between DHSC led NHS systems and DfE/DCMS aligned community-based provision. Youth workers often become the de facto coordinators for young people who fall between service thresholds, precisely because national strategies remain siloed.

11. The National Youth Strategy is taking steps to break down siloes and meaningfully implement cross-government working but to improve accountability, central government must adopt shared cross departmental outcome frameworks for children and young people's mental health that explicitly include DHSC, DfE, DCMS, DWP and the Home Office. Current arrangements place responsibility for mental health largely with DHSC/NHS, despite schools, youth services and community organisations playing equally critical roles.

To see the impact youth work has on young people's lives and mental health and wellbeing, [this film](#) brings to life the unique role of youth workers in providing holistic support for young people which considers all the challenges they are facing, be that at school, home, hospital or in the community. It shows how youth work supports young people's mental wellbeing and meets them where they are.

*For more information, please contact [policy@nya.org.uk](mailto:policy@nya.org.uk)*