



# Building back from the pandemic - supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing



## Abstract:

Young people's mental health and wellbeing have been badly hit by the pandemic. As we seek to help the nation build back better from COVID-19, this must be placed front and centre. Programmes like NCS can play a crucial role in promoting positive wellbeing through developing life skills, and supporting communities with social action and volunteering. In this latest report from NCS Trust, we share the experiences of our programme over the past 12 months, including a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing to support the nation's youth through and beyond the toughest of years.

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## Mental health - a growing issue for young people

Poor mental health among young people is a growing issue. Even before the pandemic, research showed one in eight 5-19 year olds had at least one mental disorder, and 5% met the criteria for two or more mental disorders.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the pandemic, with lockdown restrictions and school closures, the statistics look even starker.

As many as one in six 5-16 year olds are now believed to have a mental health problem.<sup>2</sup> Research by the Royal College of Psychiatrists showed that between April and December 2020, 372,438 under-18s were referred for mental health help; the highest number ever recorded. The number of children and teens needing emergency care due to mental health crises rose 18% to 18,269.<sup>3</sup>

Recent evidence found that average wellbeing scores on measures including life satisfaction, happiness, self-worth and anxiety declined during the pandemic,

with young people among the groups with the highest propensity to feel lonely.<sup>4</sup> Self-isolation and social distancing have led to increased anxiety and depression, feelings of demotivation, boredom, fear and anger.<sup>5</sup>

Through our own surveys, we know teens have been particularly worried about the impact of the pandemic on their education and development (43%), their mental (38%) and physical health (19%), and that they have been concerned for the health of friends and family (50%).<sup>6</sup> Our latest research, in February 2021, showed 60% of 16-19 year olds feeling more isolated and lonely than normal. Almost two in five (37%) say they have been struggling to cope with the everyday things.<sup>7</sup>

As the nation has grown ever more reliant on digital interactions, there are concerns about what this could mean for young people's welfare. Our survey found three in five young people (59%) feel they have had to rely too much on social media as a way to connect with friends during the pandemic. Experts argue that more

time online makes young people more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse,<sup>8</sup> with potential for further increases in cyberbullying.<sup>9</sup> The pandemic has highlighted inequalities in digital access for young people, with one in ten finding it hard to keep up because they don't have the best technology.<sup>10</sup>

There are also concerns about the impact of multiple lockdowns on those young people already vulnerable and at risk in England, including the 1.5 million (13.5%) with a parent or carer with a severe mental health problem,<sup>11</sup> the estimated 102,000 young carers,<sup>12</sup> and the 50,000 children on child protection plans suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm at home.<sup>13</sup>

There are also the economic implications - the wider costs of mental illness in England have been estimated at £105.2 billion each year, including direct costs of services, lost productivity at work and reduced quality of life.<sup>14</sup>

## **Supporting positive mental health in young people**

We know young people want more support for their mental health and wellbeing - two in three according to our own polling.<sup>15</sup> Tackling the issue is of increasing strategic importance to policy makers. In 2018 the Government published its strategy for tackling loneliness in England,<sup>16</sup> with £3.3 million made available for partnerships to deliver interventions focused on tackling youth loneliness.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Government has issued guidance to parents and carers on supporting young people with their mental health and wellbeing,<sup>17</sup> with specific guidance on supporting children's remote education.<sup>18</sup> £79 million has been approved for youth mental health, including support teams in schools and expanding access to community mental health services (talking therapies, cognitive behavioural therapy, eating disorder services, etc.)<sup>19</sup> During Children's Mental Health Week, a

new Youth Mental Health Ambassador, Dr Alex George, was appointed.<sup>20</sup>

A wide range of support is available to young people online, including guidance from organisations such as Public Health England<sup>21</sup> and YoungMinds,<sup>22</sup> so they can find the help they need.

## **The role of NCS**

Supporting young people's health and wellbeing has always been critical to the work of NCS. Through our core programmes, young people have the opportunity to develop essential life skills like positivity, teamwork, leadership, creativity and problem-solving, working in teams and mixing with new people. They learn about, and support, their local communities through social action projects and volunteering, helping them feel part of a generation with awareness of, and connection to, a diverse range of people, opportunities and networks.



Research shows that programmes like NCS help improve wellbeing among young people, with evidence that social action and volunteering are positively linked to enhanced wellbeing, improved life satisfaction, increased happiness and decreased symptoms of depression.<sup>23</sup> Further research has also found that discrete periods of youth engagement can lead to improvements in life satisfaction, with significantly stronger impacts among those from more economically disadvantaged communities.<sup>24</sup> Evidence suggests that people who volunteer have been protected from some of the worst effects of the pandemic; reporting

greater optimism for the future and higher subjective wellbeing.<sup>25</sup> Social and emotional learning programmes can help to improve emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, and social behaviour in young people,<sup>26</sup> leading ultimately to cost savings to the taxpayer.<sup>27</sup>

Independent evaluations of NCS show the standard summer programme has positively impacted participants' wellbeing across all four of the Office for National Statistics' wellbeing measures. We see evidence of improvements in life satisfaction, the extent to which participants feel the things they do in their life are 'worthwhile', happiness and anxiety levels, and can show a social return on investment with every £1 spent generating an economic 'wellbeing' benefit of £2.33.<sup>28</sup>

### **Supporting young people during lockdown**

We know that three in four young people have been missing face-to-face contact during the pandemic.<sup>29</sup> They've told us they want more opportunities to engage with their friends and peers about mental health, signposting on who they can talk to, free access to wellbeing apps and better mental health support in school,<sup>30</sup> while doing their bit to support others. Seventy-three per cent were either already volunteering or wanted to volunteer back in April 2020.<sup>31</sup> After almost a year of COVID-19, 67% say they are interested in volunteering or doing social action to help support their communities as part of the recovery.<sup>32</sup>

In the absence of our usual residential programme last year, NCS Trust, together with our partner network, have been making it our mission to support young people, and to provide them with opportunities to connect during the pandemic...

**Supporting young people to connect digitally:** Last summer we created a free digital experience through our Staying Connected hub, providing open access to articles, features and stories that aligned with core elements of the typical NCS curriculum, including skills and life lessons

not normally learnt in the classroom, and support with mental health and wellbeing.<sup>33</sup> We attracted over 350,000 unique visitors and over two million unique engagements with our content, including posts and live content on NCS social media channels. Seventy-four per cent of those accessing the hub said it helped their mental health and 78% that it made them feel more connected with other people.<sup>34</sup> The recently-launched NCS Connect digital hub for 2021 will continue to offer young people exclusive digital content, including on self-care and staying motivated, as well as fun challenges, building life skills, and delivering 'Do Good' projects in local communities.

**Providing opportunities to connect and make a difference:** NCS continued to create opportunities for young people to do their bit in their communities through the 'Keep Doing Good' programme last summer, offering volunteering and social action opportunities. NCS participants gave over 500,000 hours of social action and volunteering in support of local communities,<sup>35</sup> working in charity shops in partnership with the Charity Retail Association, volunteering in food banks, and supporting those lonely and isolated in their local communities, while supporting their own wellbeing, building confidence and skills, and connecting with fellow citizens.<sup>36</sup>



There are great examples of young people taking on projects with a mental health and wellbeing focus. One team, working with Hear2Listen in Milton Keynes, produced a podcast series on Spotify about reducing the stigma around

mental health,<sup>37</sup> and created [Facebook](#), Instagram and [JustGiving](#) pages to help raise awareness and encourage donations to support mental health charity, MIND (raising over £600 so far). And in Wakefield, a group of 18 teens working with Wakefield Trinity tidied up an overgrown allotment, which was a referral place for people with mental health issues or who were suffering from loneliness.

Some young people also chose to donate their refund (from payments made for the summer 2020 residential programme) to The Mix, the UK's leading support service for young people.

#### **Evolving our programme curriculum:**

Recognising that the pandemic and national lockdown were amplifying vulnerabilities in young people, we have introduced an additional core topic to the curriculum: 'Looking after your wellbeing'. Our network has also looked to incorporate local content, enlist specialist staff to support young people with mental health issues, and include more signposting to specialist support (including online).

#### **Making sure our staff feel well trained and supported:**

Linked to this, it has been important to ensure our staff feel able to support young people on programme. As well as the ongoing safeguarding measures we have in place, we have worked with youth mental health charity, YoungMinds, to provide training for our service providers and their programme staff around the issue of mental health. YoungMinds has designed a range of learning interventions for staff, and training materials for our service providers to use in the lead up to programme. In 2020, this included additional webinars to support understanding and management of the prevalent mental health needs of young people as they came out of lockdown, with a particular focus on trauma and anxiety management. It also included a comprehensive online module looking at the different types of mental health conditions, the importance of

removing stigma and some simple tools and skills to use whilst supporting young people.

#### **Supporting young people as they return to school/college:**

Supporting young people in getting back to the new normal has been a priority for NCS. In September 2020 we launched our Further Education (FE) and School Support programme to young people returning to their education in around 400 schools and colleges. The support offered a range of resources and workshops in areas such as resilience training, post-COVID-19 socialisation and health and wellbeing. In Spring 2021 we followed up on the success of FE/School Support with our Skills Booster lesson packs, which provided over 750 school and college staff with resources designed to have a direct positive influence on the school curriculum and student outcomes, in particular, helping young people focus on their wellbeing and future goals.<sup>38</sup> From April 2021, NCS will again be offering resources and workshops to schools to support them in developing their students' resilience, wellbeing, and optimism for their futures.

#### **Getting young people's voices heard:**

We know young people have strong views about the issue of mental health and we've been keen to support them in vocalising and sharing them. For example, our Change-Makers series included a selection of articles and other online content, highlighting the great work NCS graduates have been doing through their Local Action Groups to support mental health and loneliness.<sup>39</sup> We also addressed the issue of mental health through our Youth Rising podcast series, with two episodes focusing on mental health specifically.<sup>40</sup> We teamed up with Channel 4 to create four documentaries as part of their social series True Stories, which included one around Music and Mental Health, plus three other documentaries with over one million views, covering food waste, a clothes swap shop and social justice, helping bring communities together to improve wellbeing.<sup>41</sup>



We also hosted a 'Make a Change' letter-writing competition, inviting young people to write a personal letter to Baroness Barran, the Minister for Civil Society, about how digital technology is contributing to loneliness amongst teenagers, and their ideas for tackling this.<sup>42</sup> As the minister responsible for the Government's loneliness agenda, we were thrilled that - despite the pandemic - our four finalists got the chance to meet the Baroness (albeit virtually!) to talk through their brilliant ideas. Luke Stokes-Roberts, 19, winner of the competition, told us:

"I took part in the NCS 'Make a Change' competition because I felt I had a duty to help others who are in a worse position than I am. I hope the ideas I've come up with may help to bring about tangible results for teenagers struggling with an invisible illness. It's important that there are practical ways to help teens combat loneliness, particularly as we enter a second lockdown. Staying active and helping out other people who need support can help steer teens away from feeling isolated."

### **Learnings from our Network**

Our network of providers has also been working to ensure delivery on the ground has been suitably tailored and adapted to the challenges of mental health and their local contexts.

For example, **Catch 22** observed how young people in the West Midlands had been experiencing the pandemic differently - with those in more rural Herefordshire feeling more isolated than

those in urban Wolverhampton, as well as cultural differences in how young people talked about mental health. In response, Catch 22 took a more holistic approach to supporting wellbeing by running additional online sessions which covered physical health and nutrition as well as mental health, which would complement the mental health sessions young people were already receiving at school. They also introduced a session run by The Young Gamers and Gamblers Education Trust around keeping safe online during lockdown and the potential addictions that come with gaming.

Recognising young people's experience with COVID-19, family bereavement and economic hardship, **Headliners (UK)** in the North East, introduced a range of additional wellbeing layers to their 2020 programme, including pre-programme check-ins with young people and their parents, daily wellbeing check-ins, and additional breaks for young people and staff taking part in the programme.

### **In conclusion...**

Young people have fared badly during the pandemic, with their mental health and wellbeing taking a particularly bad hit. As the nation begins to build back better and fairer, children and young people's mental health and wellbeing must be placed front and centre.

Programmes like NCS have been shown to deliver positive impacts for young people's wellbeing, with clear cost-benefits.

Together with our partners NCS Trust has learnt much about the challenges young people have faced during lockdown, their aspirations for the future, and the positive support they will need for their mental health going forward. Meeting those needs remains at the heart of what NCS does.

For more information about this article email [research@ncstrust.org.uk](mailto:research@ncstrust.org.uk)

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# Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>NHS Digital (November 2018) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England](#). Note: 9,117 children aged 2 to 19 assessed between January and October 2017

<sup>2</sup>NHS Digital (October 2020) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England](#). Note: 3,570 children and young people interviewed face to face in 2017 and followed up online in July 2020, now aged between 5 and 22 years

<sup>3</sup> Royal College of Psychiatrists (April 2021) [Country in the grip of a mental health crisis with children worst affected, new analysis finds](#)

<sup>4</sup>Kantar on behalf of The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) (December 2020) [Community Life COVID-19 Re-contact Survey 2020](#). Note: The re-contact survey (CLRS) is a follow-up to the Community Life Survey (CLS), an annual household self-completion survey of adults aged 16+ in England. This report compares survey data from the same respondents over two time periods. The two waves of data are based on the 2,812 respondents who participated in both waves. Wave 1 (pre-pandemic: July 2018 to February 2020) Wave 2 (during pandemic: 7 - 26 July 2020)

<sup>5</sup>Debut (January 2021) [Voice of the future: Listening to Gen Z on Covid-19, mental health, education, work, and misinformation](#)

<sup>6</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust (April 2020) Note: A representative sample of 1,032 16-24 year olds in England online, using Youthsight's youth panel, April 2020

<sup>7</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust Young People Survey (February 2021) Note: A representative sample of 1,084 young people aged 16-19 in England online, using Youthsight's youth panel, between 17 and 22 February 2021. Data available via our [NCS website](#)

<sup>8</sup>UNICEF (April 2020) [COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online](#)

<sup>9</sup>Healio, (March 2020) [Cyberbullying may increase during COVID-19 pandemic, expert says](#)

<sup>10</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust Young People Survey (February 2021)

<sup>11</sup>Children's Commissioner, (April 2020) [We're all in this together? Local profiles of childhood vulnerability](#)

<sup>12</sup>Children's Commissioner, (July 2019) [Trends in childhood vulnerability](#)

<sup>13</sup>Children's Commissioner, (April 2020) [We're all in this together? Local profiles of childhood vulnerability](#)

<sup>14</sup>Centre for Mental Health (October 2010) The Economic and Social Costs of Mental Health Problems in 2009/10. Cited in Department of Health (February 2011) [No health without mental health: A cross-Government mental health outcomes strategy for people of all ages](#)

<sup>15</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust Young People Survey (February 2021)

<sup>16</sup>Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (October 2018) [A connected society. A strategy for tackling loneliness: laying the foundations for change](#)

<sup>17</sup>Public Health England (March 2020; last updated March 2021) [COVID-19: guidance on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing](#)

<sup>18</sup>Department for Education (April 2020; last updated February 2021) [Supporting your children's remote education during coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

<sup>19</sup>Department of Health and Social Care (March 2021) [£79 million to boost mental health support for children and young people](#)

<sup>20</sup>Prime Minister's Office (February 2021) [Prime Minister appoints Dr. Alex George as Youth Mental Health Ambassador](#)

<sup>21</sup>[Public Health England](#)

<sup>22</sup>[YoungMinds](#)

<sup>23</sup>Ricky Lawton, Lulian Gramatki, and Will Watt, W. (2019) Happy Days: Does volunteering make us happier or do happier people volunteer? [Jump, https://jump-projects.com/](https://jump-projects.com/); Martin Binder (2015) Volunteering and Life Satisfaction: a closer look at the hypothesis that volunteering more strongly benefits the unhappy, Applied Economics Letters, 22 (11), pp 874 – 885 cited in What Works Wellbeing (October 2020) [Volunteering wellbeing: what works and who benefits?](#)

<sup>24</sup>James Laurence (February 2021) [The Impact of Youth Engagement on Life Satisfaction: A Quasi-Experimental Field Study of a UK National Youth Engagement Scheme](#)

<sup>25</sup>Belong - The Cohesion and Integration Network (February 2021) [Community, Connection and Cohesion During COVID-19: Beyond Us and Them Report](#)

<sup>26</sup>Durlak JA, Weissberg RP, Dymnick AB et al. (January/ February 2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Child Development. Cited in Department of Health (February 2011) [No health without mental health: A cross-Government mental health outcomes strategy for people of all ages](#)

All photos show real NCS social action and volunteering projects delivered between 2019 and 2020.

<sup>27</sup>Knapp M, McDaid D, Parsonage M (editors) (April 2011) Mental health promotion and mental illness prevention: The economic case. PSSRU, London School of Economics and Political Science. Cited in Department of Health (February 2011) [No health without mental health: A cross-Government mental health outcomes strategy for people of all ages](#)

<sup>28</sup>Based on independent cost benefit analysis which estimates the monetary value associated with the impact of NCS on wellbeing based on self-reported life satisfaction scores. Figures based on latest published analysis of the summer 2018 programme, Source: Kantar and London Economics (July 2020) [National Citizen Service 2018 Evaluation](#)

<sup>29</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust Young People Survey (February 2021)

<sup>30</sup>NCS social media poll (March 2021) Note: NCS Trust surveyed young people via its social media channels between 17 and 19 March 2021 (base sizes vary per statement). Saying yes to statements: engage with their friends and peers about mental health (82%; base: 345), more signposting on who they can talk to (76%; base: 311), free access to wellbeing apps (83%; base: 341) and better mental health support in school (76%; base: 360)

<sup>31</sup>YouthSight and NCS Trust (April 2020)

<sup>32</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust Young People Survey (February 2021)

<sup>33</sup>NCS Trust (March 2020) [Keeping calm through coronavirus](#); NCS Trust (January 2021) [Looking after your wellbeing in isolation](#)

<sup>34</sup>YouthSight for NCS Trust (March 2021) Wave 5 Brand Tracker Survey. Note: a representative sample of 1,640 young people living in England aged 15 to 17 years old, surveyed online 23 February - 12 March 2021. Base = 81 young people who have interacted with the digital hub

<sup>35</sup>NCS 2020 participation stats (includes Keep Doing Good and autumn programmes)

<sup>36</sup>NCS Trust (March 2021) [NCS 2020: Programme Evaluation Summary Report](#)

<sup>37</sup>NCS Trust (August 2020) [Let's Get Loud](#) (Spotify playlist)

<sup>38</sup>NCS Trust (February 2021) [Skills Booster launch](#)

<sup>39</sup>Some examples include: NCS Trust (October 2020) [Change-Makers: #Reflectingonmentalhealth](#); NCS Trust (May 2020) [Change-Makers: Supporting the vulnerable and lonely](#)

<sup>40</sup>NCS Trust [Youth Rising Podcast](#)

<sup>41</sup>NCS Trust (February 2020) [Youth Rising: Our E4 True Stories series](#)

<sup>42</sup>NCS Trust (November 2020) ['Make a Change' letter writing competition winners](#)

