

Youth sector provision and mental health



Young people's mental health is a critical concern, impacting their present lives and future prospects. This briefing paper provides context on the importance of addressing youth mental health, highlights the role of youth provision and social prescribing, and summarises emerging findings and recommendations from recent research commissioned by NCS Trust and delivered by University College London (UCL) and the Social Prescribing Youth Network (SPYN). These insights aim to inform policy, research, and practice, contributing to an early intervention and preventative approach to mental health support for young people.

Youth mental health is in crisis and many young people struggle to access support

Children and young people across the UK are facing a deepening mental health emergency. The Big Mental Health Report 2024 by Mind, reported one in five children aged 8-16 were identified as having a probable mental illness in 2024. For young people aged 17-19, this increases to nearly one in four.¹ Key factors impacting youth mental health include politics, war and global affairs, climate change, the cost of living crisis and bullying - children aged 11 to 16 with probable mental illness are five times more likely to experience bullying.² Over half (54.8%) of young people aged 17 to 25 reported being worried about climate change, and those with a probable mental disorder were three times more likely to face financial strain.³

Too many young people are struggling to access support for their mental health and wellbeing. Over 300,000 children and young people are waiting for support after being referred to Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) in 2023-24.⁴ Meanwhile, emergency referrals to crisis teams for young people have surged to the highest level seen in more than four years.⁵

The youth sector can play a role in supporting young people's mental health

To address the youth mental health crisis, early intervention and preventive support is key. Youth provision, which includes a range of structured activities and support services, plays a vital role in supporting young people's wellbeing and can be part of the solution.

Evidence suggests that participation in youth programs can have a positive impact on

¹ Mind. [The Big Mental Health Report 2024](#).

² Mind. [The Big Mental Health Report 2024](#).

³ Mind. [The Big Mental Health Report 2024](#).

⁴ NHS England. [Community Health Services Waiting Lists](#).

⁵ Mind. [The Big Mental Health Report 2024](#).

mental health by fostering social connection, developing life skills, building self-esteem, and providing a safe and supportive environment.⁶ However, a robust and comprehensive evidence base supporting the role of youth provision in mental health is missing, and the role of the youth sector is often under-recognised in youth mental health support services and policy. We commissioned UCL to undertake a systematic literature review to build a rigorous and comprehensive summary of the existing evidence base to understand what the existing evidence demonstrates, where future research is needed, and what this means for future policy and practice.

Findings from the systematic literature review

The evidence base is underdeveloped, particularly in the UK, making it hard to draw robust conclusions. There needs to be better investment when it comes to investigating youth sector provision activities, drawing on robust scientific methods.

While the evidence is limited, there is evidence that:

- Music, arts, recreation and community activities can positively impact mental health outcomes.
- Universal youth sector provision activities and programmes positively impact emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- Time-limited activities can positively impact internalising and externalising difficulties.
- Universal youth sector provision activities and programmes may also help with depressive symptoms with three of four studies showing an impact.

The role of social prescribing: Connecting young people to support

Accessing youth provision and services is more difficult for young people with probable mental health outcomes.⁷ Social prescribing can help support young people by connecting them to services and activities in their community to support their health and wellbeing.

Evidence shows social prescribing is an effective early intervention for symptoms like anxiety, social isolation, and low mood.⁸ It offers flexible, tailored support

What is social prescribing?

Social prescribing connects young people with non-clinical mental health needs to community activities and support. It involves referrals to social prescribing link workers who create personalised plans focused on individual needs, aiming to improve overall health and wellbeing.

⁶ Oberle et al. [Screen time and extracurricular activities as risk and protective factors for mental health in adolescence: A population-level study](#); October 2020.

⁷<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up#top>

⁸ Barnardos. [The Missing Link: Social Prescribing for Children and Young People](#); October 2023.

to meet young people's specific needs and effectively addresses health inequalities by forming a 'web of support' around children and families.⁹ The youth sector can play a crucial role in delivering and coordinating these activities, ensuring young people get the support they need. Closer collaboration between the youth and health sectors can provide more joined-up and preventative care.

Developing a social prescribing pilot: A joined-up early intervention approach

NCS Trust commissioned the Social Prescribing Youth Network (SPYN) to design a social prescribing pilot that better connects youth provision to social prescribing. SPYN engaged with existing social prescribing providers, youth providers and young people to co-produce three pilot options.

Several key features were identified that should be considered in taking forward a new pilot:

- **Place-Based Approach:** A place-based pilot in specific localities (e.g., a town) allows for stronger local delivery and resource use, avoiding a fragmented, GP-centric approach.
- **Personal Budgets:** Young people should have needs-based personal budgets (up to £100) to remove financial barriers to participation.
- **Accessibility and Integration:** Accessibility for young people can be improved by basing SPLWs in youth settings or other community locations.
- **Awareness and Education:** The pilot should include activities to raise awareness of social prescribing among young people, parents, and service providers. This could involve targeted campaigns, training sessions for youth workers, and clear communication about the benefits of social prescribing.
- **Connector Role:** A "connector" role refers to a social prescribing link worker who creates a personalised plan focused on individual needs, aiming to improve overall health and wellbeing. This role is crucial to help young people engage with youth provision. This role could be fulfilled by SPLWs or dedicated individuals who build relationships with young people, accompany them to activities, and provide ongoing support.
- **Flexibility and Personalisation:** The pilot should adopt a "What Matters to You?" approach, with personalised care and support plans tailored to each young person's needs and preferences. Flexibility in delivery and adapting to young people's pace and interests are also important.
- **Clear Referral Pathways:** Clear and accessible referral pathways should be established, allowing young people to be referred from various sources, including GPs, schools, youth provision, family, friends, and self-referral.

⁹ Centre for Mental Health. [A dual crisis: The hidden link between poverty and children's mental health](#); July 2024.

- **Evaluation and Monitoring:** Robust evaluation and monitoring mechanisms should be in place to track outcomes, gather evidence of impact, and ensure accountability. This includes goal-based outcome measures and the collection of case studies.
- **Sustainability:** The pilot should aim to develop a sustainable model that can be embedded in local communities and mainstreamed beyond the initial funding period.
- **Youth Voice:** Young people should be involved in the design and delivery of the pilot, including the creation of awareness campaigns and the evaluation process.

The full report detailing the approach to the pilot design and findings is available [here](#). As [NCS Trust draws to a close](#), the continuation of this work will be taken on by UK Youth to secure funding and take forward a social prescribing pilot for young people.

Implications for policy, research and practice

For Policy

This research highlights the necessity for increased government investment in youth social prescribing, alongside policies that champion collaboration and establish clear national guidelines. It is crucial for these policies to prioritise an early intervention and preventative approach, aligning with the Government's broader trajectory towards proactive mental health support. By investing in prevention, the Government can reduce long-term costs and improve outcomes for young people, ensuring that support is available before mental health challenges escalate.

For Research

Future research should prioritise longitudinal impact studies to track the long-term effectiveness of youth social prescribing on mental health outcomes. This includes evaluating different delivery models to identify best practices and determine which approaches yield the most significant positive impact. Additionally, research should explore the role of digital technologies in enhancing and expanding the reach of social prescribing.

For Practice

For effective implementation, increased training and education for professionals across sectors (including healthcare, education, and youth work) is crucial. This training should focus on understanding social prescribing principles, effective communication with young people, and navigating referral pathways. Clear, streamlined referral pathways are essential to ensure young people can easily access social prescribing services.

Services must be designed and delivered in a youth-friendly manner, taking into account their unique needs, preferences, and developmental stage. This includes creating welcoming environments, using appropriate language, and offering a range of activity options.

Ultimately, this research advocates for a strengthened preventative approach, leveraging youth social prescribing as a key tool for early intervention in mental health, building resilience among young people, and reducing the strain on CYPMHS services.

Supporting young people's mental health is a shared responsibility that requires collaborative action from all sectors. By investing in evidence-based approaches, such as youth provision and social prescribing, we can create a society where all young people have the opportunity to thrive and reach their full potential.