

YMCA England
Submission to the Youth
Select Committee
Inquiry

21 May 2015

Mental Health

YMCA is committed to creating healthy, sustainable communities in which people can fulfil their aspirations. We are the largest voluntary sector provider of activities and services that promote health and wellbeing in England.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. YMCA works with all young people regardless of their background, gender or faith. However, central to our work is supporting those most vulnerable and in the communities with the greatest needs.

YMCA launched its Manifesto, *We Believe*, in Parliament on the 10th March 2015. The manifesto development process engaged over 350 people in total, including the five main stakeholders for YMCAs; its chief executives, staff, trustees, young people and service users. It is the thoughts and experiences of these stakeholders that form the basis of this response.

Awareness

- 1. What more could be done to prevent stigma and discrimination towards young people with mental health issues, particularly when it prevents young people from seeking support?**
 - 1.1 Mental health is one of the principle health worries affecting our young people. Despite increasing attention and awareness in some instances, many people with mental health problems still experience stigma and discrimination on a daily basis and this can discourage them from seeking support.
 - 1.2 Education and awareness are critical to end this stigma and discrimination. From our own experience, YMCA knows that young people, especially those who come from challenging backgrounds, often find it difficult to speak about their problems – which is frequently worse amongst young men. The young people at YMCAs spoke of a need for everyone to know about the signs of mental health problems to help facilitate open discussion. For too many, mental illness is hidden; a fact that often worsens the effects for the individual. Accordingly, a national campaign should be introduced which raises awareness of mental health issues and the available support, specifically targeted at young people to encourage people to seek help when needed.
 - 1.3 The media also plays an important part in tackling discrimination and stigma. Stories that equate mental health with violence, or portray people with mental health problems as dangerous, criminal, evil, or unable to live a happy and fulfilling life add to the damaging narrative that often surrounds mental health. When asked about the role of the media one young person suggested that horror films should stop being made about mental health problems, which further adds to the narrative.

1.4 Instead, media outlets should be encouraged to report on mental health cases responsibly, rather than in a sensationalist manner. There are a vast number of resources available for journalists on how to report mental health stories responsibly and these should be publicised more widely and followed by all. Those media outlets who are reporting on mental health issues irresponsibly should be held accountable for doing so.

2. Do young people feel informed about the services available to them? If not, what more could be done to raise awareness?

2.1 Awareness of mental health is still a significant issue with our young people. This suggests that there is inadequate information in the media, at school and on the internet around what mental health is and how support could be accessed.

2.2 Our research shows that young people are more likely to listen to their peers on health related matters. In response to this YMCA developed our Mental Health Champions Project, to tackle mental health problems from two angles. Firstly, young volunteers will be recruited, trained and mentored to deliver mental health awareness messages to their peers in settings where young people feel comfortable, both in the community in and schools and colleges. Secondly, recognising the important role that adults can play in supporting young people the project will also be supporting teachers, youth workers and parents to better understand the issues and how to deal with them.

2.3 This project is an example of just one relatively small intervention that is aiming to tackle the increasingly important issue of young people's mental health. If the Government is serious about tackling mental health issues it needs to look at ways of supporting the mental health agenda more generally.

3. Could more use be made of social media or mobile applications? If so, how?

3.1 Seven in tenⁱ five to 16 year olds own a mobile phone, and three in five owners now go online on their mobiles. Such tools can be utilised to help people suffering from mental health problems, if used correctly.

3.2 Firstly, social media can be a useful tool to help spread awareness about mental health problems. There are numerous examples of effective social media campaigns that have helped to raise awareness of mental illness by putting the issue into the public sphere and encouraging people to talk about their mental health. Such campaigns tend to reach a large number of people and encourage discussion. However, the use of social media also presents risks. It's hard to control the

conversation on social media platforms and thus there is the possibility that negative and unhelpful messaging reaching those most vulnerable.

- 3.3 Studiesⁱⁱ illustrate a link between excessive social media use and poor mental wellbeing as its use often encourages young people to compare their lives to others. It is important for young people to be made aware of the potential risks of using social media in such cases to make them more mindful of the possible outcomes.
- 3.4 Secondly, phone apps and podcasts make information on mental health easily and privately accessible for young people, which is useful if they are unwilling to seek help publically. Mobile apps can additionally allow people to track their mental wellbeing and can help with diagnosis.
- 3.5 In September 2013, YMCA DownsLink Group launched a new online tool designed to help young people speak to their GPs about mental health and prepare for visits. It was initiated after they carried out research and found that 36%ⁱⁱⁱ of young people did not feel comfortable speaking to their doctor about mental health issues.
- 3.6 The app allows the young person to plan what to say, record what happens and take control of the visit. It also enables them to create and print a personal agenda based on their symptoms.

4. What is the impact of websites which promote self-harm and other online material? Should something be done about these sites? If so, what?

- 4.1 Measures should be put in place to limit access to websites that promote harm. It is also important that parents, carers, teachers and support workers are made aware of such sites so they can take necessary measures to deter young people from accessing them.

Education

5. Is education on mental health in schools sufficient? What could be done to improve it? Should it be a compulsory part of the National Curriculum? If so, at what age should it be introduced? Could more be made of education around peer support?

- 5.1 The young people that engaged in our research felt that education on mental health in schools was far from sufficient, with one person even stating that you “don’t learn anything in school” on mental health. As such it is important that subjects such as personal, social and health education (PSHE) are made compulsory as they would be ideally placed to deliver mental health education.

5.2 In addition, it was highlighted that more needed to be done in the early years to teach young people about mental health and wellbeing. This would normalise the issue amongst peers at a young age and help to reduce the stigma.

6. What is the impact of mental health issues on young people's education?

6.1 Many young people spoke of a pressure to achieve certain grades at school with those who struggle or do not follow the traditional academic path being left behind. This is illustrated by the fact that school and education problems appeared in the top ten issues^{iv} facing young people calling ChildLine last year.

6.2 Similarly it was felt by many of the young people we spoke to that students who were disruptive, difficult or withdrawn as a result of mental illness were often ignored or told off rather than supported. This can have a negative impact on their education as such students often spend large periods of time in isolation units or suspended.

6.3 Leaving secondary education without the necessary qualifications can potentially damage a young person's prospects. One problem is that the funding often is not there to target the people who are less likely to succeed due to mental health problems, in order to raise their attainment level and allow them to have an equal chance of success.

7. Do teachers, parents/carers and others working with young people receive sufficient training and support? If not, what more could be offered?

7.1 The difficulties faced by some at school illustrate the need for more information to be made available to those who interact with young people frequently. Teachers and youth workers would be ideally placed to support young people at an early stage but training would be needed to enable a greater understanding of mental health.

7.2 A general lack of understanding about mental health can reside in individuals, but also in the families of those affected. For families to be supportive of young people with mental health problems they must be informed, and thus services should include family members where appropriate to help create a supportive network for the individual.

7.3 Therefore, while it is important that individuals are mindful of their own mental health, it is also important that parents and carers understand the issues faced by young people and the key warning signs of possible problems. A targeted campaign should be introduced aimed at parents and carers, which clearly communicates

prevention and early intervention messages and signposts the services available for mental health problems.

8. How accessible is published literature and online information about mental health? Could it be made more "youth friendly"?

- 8.1 Mental health apps or websites are often the most frequently^v used by young people to access mental health information. It is important that all information is corroborated by professionals and that services are signposted within this information so that young people can easily access them when needed and are encouraged to do so.

Services

9. What is the current state of services and treatments available (e.g. through CAMHS)? What experiences have young people had in using mental health services?

- 9.1 Our manifesto research highlighted a complete lack of trust or confidence in the National Health Service (NHS) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), from both YMCA staff and young people.
- 9.2 CAMHS was seen as ineffective, unhelpful and poorly run. Waiting times were highlighted as a particular issue, with some people having to wait in excess of six months for an appointment. Many young people find it difficult to seek help, and don't see the value of going to the doctor. Long waiting times and an inefficient service adds to these perceptions and puts vulnerable young people in danger.

10. Are changes needed to the provision of mental health services? Are they accessible and appropriate for young people? If not, what could be done to improve them?

- 10.1 Our young people felt that more should be done in schools to help people with mental health problems. Access to trusted and recognised school counsellors could help with early intervention and catching problems before they increase in severity. In addition, peer-to-peer support, talks, group sessions and mentoring have also been highlighted as useful ways to help young people deal with mental health problems. School can be a particularly stressful time for young people, particularly with the pressures of exams, and workshops from experts on coping and strategies for overcoming difficulties in life would help encourage young people to speak out about problems, rather than internalise them.

- 10.2 The importance of delivering mental health guidance in settings familiar with young people is paramount. Nurses and practitioners should come into schools and work with young people to talk about the issues.
- 10.3 Mental health problems do not just affect people in schools, but often have consequences in other areas of people's lives. For example, our research has shown that those young people who access the job centre found that staff there were not aware of the complexities of their needs and were often unresponsive when informed. Jobcentre Plus advisors should be trained and supported to better understand the difficulties and barriers that young people commonly face to enable them to provide more tailored support.
- 10.4 Stability is key for the young people we work with who experience mental health issues and having a single key worker assigned to each individual would also help to facilitate continuity and trust, leading to the best possible outcomes for the young person.

11. Could more be done to promote the sharing of best practice between services? Is the process for transition between children and adult services effective? If not, what could be done differently?

- 11.1 YMCA believes that the CAMHS age range needs to be reviewed. Our manifesto research highlighted a number of cases where a young person has effectively become lost in the system when transferring from CAMHS into adult mental health services. Those who have accessed CAMHS described the child element of the service as good but the services for adolescents to be extremely poor. It was felt that extending the upper age limit for CAMHS to 21 would help to increase the continuity for young people in the system and renew focus on the 16-21 years where young people often have the highest support needs.

12. How does mental health provision compare with the services available for physical health?

- 12.1 Poor mental health service provisions are compounded by the traditional lack of parity between mental and physical health budgets. That is why YMCA is calling for mental health to be given the same priority as physical health within NHS budgets.

If you require any further information or have any follow-up questions regarding our response, please contact Liam Preston, Senior Parliamentary and Policy Officer at YMCA England at liam.preston@england.ymca.org.uk or on 020 7186 9552.

ⁱ UK Youth, Young People & Technology, <http://www.ukyouth.org/resources/youth-statistics/item/658-young-people-and-technology#.VWR9LrIvHx> [Accessed 21 May 2015]

ⁱⁱ Everyday Health, Depression and Social Media, <http://www.everydayhealth.com/health-report/major-depression-resource-center/depression-social-media.aspx> [Accessed 21 May 2015]

ⁱⁱⁱ YMCA England, YMCA Snapshot 2014, page 11, http://www.ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/YMCA_SNAPSHOT.pdf

^{iv} NSPCC, Young people contacting ChildLine struggling with mental health issues, <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/fighting-for-childhood/news-opinion/young-people-contacting-childline-increasingly-struggling-with-mental-health-issues/> [Accessed 21 May 2015]

^v Young Minds, Report on Children, Young People and Family Engagement, December 2014, page 4, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/413411/Young_Minds.pdf