

REPORT

Centre for
Mental Health



Always there for us

Evaluating Project Future's work at Bruce Grove youth club

Androulla Harris, Dr Huong Le,
Zoë McHayle & Dr Yasmin Ahmadzadeh

Contents

Executive summary	3
Setting the scene	5
Project Future’s model and how it informed the pilot	6
Methodology	7
Young men’s general perceptions of Bruce Grove youth club	8
Overview of the support provided by Project Future staff	8
How working with Project Future staff benefitted young men	10
Young men’s perceptions of Project Future staff	13
Highlights of young men’s experience with Project Future staff	15
The support provided to youth workers by Project Future Staff	17
What is the difference between Project Future staff and youth workers at Bruce Grove?	20
How the pandemic impacted Project Future’s work at the youth club	22
Key findings from the quantitative data	24
What would the youth club be like without Project Future staff?	27
Conclusions	28
References	30
Appendix	31

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young men who shared their personal experiences of the youth club in focus groups and interviews. We wish you the best of luck and success in your journeys throughout education, work and beyond.

Special thanks are due to Chelsea Gardener for her dedicated support of the evaluation, especially throughout the data collection stage, during a pandemic. Many thanks to the Bruce Grove youth workers who gave time to the evaluation sharing their insights and expertise. Thank you to Curtis Sinclair for his excellent quantitative analysis at the interim report stage.



Executive summary

Since October 2019, a clinical psychologist and an assistant psychologist from Project Future worked at Bruce Grove youth club in the London borough of Haringey for two days per week. This early intervention pilot aimed to adapt Project Future's approach to work within an existing system (the youth club) to co-create provision for a younger cohort.

Project Future received funding to use their psychological expertise to support young men's mental health and wellbeing. This was aimed at young men and boys aged 20 or under who may have experienced marginalisation and be at risk of poor mental health. An equally important aspect of Project Future's role was supporting youth workers and managers' practice through training, consultation and practical support.

Centre for Mental Health evaluated the impact of Project Future staff working within Bruce Grove, how far they were integrated into this youth club, and the effectiveness of the partnership with youth workers and managers. We conducted two rounds of in-depth qualitative interviews and focus groups with Project Future staff, youth workers and young men. Quantitative methods were also used through outcomes monitoring on attendance, and wellbeing survey data was analysed using statistical tests.

From the data it emerged that Project Future's work was highly valued and brought a wide range of benefits. Young men reported having greater awareness and understanding of mental health and wellbeing. After working with Project Future, they had increased confidence and openness to discussing their emotions and seeking help. They also gained access to a safe space to discuss anxieties and concerns about gangs, racism and school pressures.

The personal characteristics of Project Future staff were a significant aspect of young men's positive experience of the support. Project Future staff were perceived as warm, friendly, always happy to listen, respectful and genuinely invested in young men's mental health and wellbeing. Through these characteristics, Project Future staff became highly respected

and trusted by the young men, who reported opening up to them about personal issues, including their mental health.

Project Future staff successfully integrated with the youth workers and fostered effective working relationships. Youth workers reported gaining expert support with their cases, which reassured them, extended the skillset of what they could offer young men and led to better support for young men's mental health. Youth workers also highly valued the confidential emotional support they accessed from Project Future staff during the pandemic. The youth worker team's functioning and communication was improved through Project Future supporting staff meetings and leading training sessions.

Overall, Project Future staff were adaptable and effective in delivering therapeutic interventions within the unstructured youth club environment. They successfully supported young men and youth workers, responding to increased needs throughout the disruption of the pandemic. The additional psychological knowledge and expertise from Project Future staff elevated the youth club into a therapeutic space.

Implications for other services

- Representation of racialised communities in clinical psychology is important for improving relatability and building trust with young men from racialised communities. A diverse range of men should also be actively encouraged into the profession
- For young men, taking part in regular shared activities (e.g. playing pool or football) was an important first step towards building trust with the clinical psychologists. Engaging in this way made young men feel at ease to open up about their concerns and mental health with Project Future staff. Therefore, NHS practitioners, including Children and Young People's Mental Health Service professionals, should try to visit and engage with young men 'where they're at', e.g. through forming partnerships with youth spaces and arranging regular visits

- Clinical psychologists being based alongside youth workers in youth clubs is a beneficial collaboration, where professionals learn from each other. It improves the mental health support offered to young men in a place they are already familiar and comfortable in
- Services for young men where trusting relationships are formed need sustained funding, so that the relationships and benefits of consistent contact can continue long-term. Abrupt endings to this can be harmful for young men. Austerity policies and short-term funding arrangements make this a significant risk in many places
- Interactive, game-based activities effectively engage and educate young men in mental health and wellbeing topics, and help them express their emotions. These should be used more widely.

Recommendations for Project Future

1. Project Future should have a daily presence at the youth club: both young men and staff would highly value this and it would provide more consistency and accessibility to the support offered
2. Wellbeing support (e.g. psychological framing around youth club activities, 1:1 therapy, groups, wellbeing activities), education, employment and training, and coproduction had the highest rates of engagement. It could benefit young men to focus more resources in these areas in the future.

Wider recommendations

1. Education and training providers, employers, and professional bodies should seek to address inequalities and improve accessibility in mental health provision. For example, they should increase the diversity and representativeness of mental health professionals, and work with communities

to improve services. Drawing on the NHS Long Term Plan and the Advancing Mental Health Equalities strategy, led by NHS England, frameworks can be implemented and sustained to achieve this shift in mental health provision.

2. Providers of children's and young men's mental health services should reach out to youth clubs and groups to provide improved access to psychological support. This should build on Project Future's model, where engagement and intervention are adapted to meet young people's needs and sustained via collaborative activities and relationships that are formed over time. This contrasts with access being based only on specific referral criteria or service thresholds. Psychological interventions need to move beyond structured therapy, and include psychologically informed spaces where interactive activities, one-on-one conversations and group discussions take place.
3. Commissioners of children's and young men's mental health services should ensure that sufficient funding and staffing are deployed to enable practitioners to reach out into youth services and engage marginalised young men in environments where they feel safe and understood. This would build on the relational safety that exists within their network and provide a helpful step in improving accessibility of mental health support.
4. Funders of youth outreach projects should ensure that funding is long-term and sustainable. It is vital that work with marginalised young men is not interrupted by short-term funding cycles and sudden loss of support. Funding for trips, food and engagement activities are important as this was highlighted as a core aspect of building relationships between young people and staff.

Setting the scene

Since October 2019, three staff from Project Future have been based at Bruce Grove youth club part-time. They work to support young men aged 20 and under and the staff at the youth club. At any one time, one clinical psychologist has been supported by an assistant psychologist.

Centre for Mental Health has evaluated the impact of this work through qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and young men, as well as surveys and wellbeing assessments completed by young men at the youth club.

Project Future staff reported that they employ a therapeutic framework in all their work with young men at Bruce Grove. Project Future staff aim to offer 'client-led', 'coproduced' and 'accessible' psychological support. Informal support for a young person (such as checking in with them during activities) can progress to formal support; for example, if a young person wants to meet weekly to work on certain mental health or wellbeing goals.

An essential aspect of their role at the youth club involves building trust and connection with young men, which often takes time. One of the assistant psychologists noted, "The first six months to a year would be just relationship building". Project Future's work primarily focuses on young men at Bruce Grove; however, they also occasionally provide support to young women as well. In addition to supporting young men, Project Future staff also offer support to the youth club staff and help to facilitate sessions with the young men, in both group and one-to-one settings.

Project Future's model and how it informed the pilot

Project Future is a coproduced, community-based and youth-led mental health project that supports young men aged 11-25 who are impacted by youth violence, offending and social exclusion. Young men who access Project Future are often exposed to significant deprivation, and experience multiple health, social and racial inequalities and adverse experiences early on in life.

Project Future is a partnership project with Barnet, Enfield and Haringey NHS Mental Health Trust, Haringey Council and Mind in Haringey. It adopts a multi-agency, holistic and integrated approach based on the understanding that no individual agency has the solution for the complex issues facing some young men. Young men are positioned as the experts in their own lives and in the community, and have coproduced a service that best meets their needs and those of their peers.

Project Future's core objectives are to improve emotional wellbeing, increase access to education, employment and training, improve stability and reduce offending. It wraps therapeutic psychological support around all activities delivered to meet young men's emotional and developmental needs, as well as practical issues of self-care and safety. Psychological approaches sit at the heart of the project and are used in ways which are accessible to young men, shaped around their strengths, needs and preferences (Durcan *et al.*, 2017). The main components of the Project Future intervention are:

Therapeutic relationships

Centring engagement and prioritising building relationships that suit and are led by the young man. Underpinned by psychological approaches, the team provides an experience of consistent and genuine care, where each young man is treated with curiosity, care and respect.

Reframing the problem

Accessing Project Future is not shaped around being or having a problem, but on development and growth. This enables young men to overcome possible feelings of stigma or shame for accessing a mental health and wellbeing service, and to challenge the unfounded but dominant narrative that they themselves are the problem.

Holistic approach

Recognising and connecting the different aspects of a young person's life which affect wellbeing, for example physical health, sexual health, feelings of safety, healthy eating and social inequalities. In addition, every individual is seen as part of a wider network: their friendships and community. Project Future seeks to connect all these different aspects of a young person's life, locating difficulties within contexts and recognising that social connectedness and belonging enable people to thrive.

Coproduction

Young people playing a key role in co-creating services, including how the space should look, how activities and trips are run, and how to keep the project safe. Drawing on community psychology principles, Project Future seeks to shift the balance from power traditionally being held by a service, to genuinely giving young people a voice so they have a sense of agency, feeling valued and empowered.

Clinical thinking

All interventions and interactions are underpinned by robust clinical thinking informed by evidence based psychological ideas. Formulations, mappings, supervisions and joint-working draw on evidenced-based approaches to develop the most suitable interventions.

Partnership and team approach

Working across multiple levels, highlighting that agencies need to work together to address multi-level risk factors and bring about sustainable change. Project Future works with the different systems around young people, including community and wider services. Young people experience a whole team supporting them and the opportunity to access different people for different types of support.

These central components of the Project Future approach informed and underpinned this early intervention and prevention pilot. Project Future joined the youth club at Bruce Grove and aimed to put coproduction with young people and staff at its heart. It aimed to enhance mental health outcomes for young people through increased accessibility, and to create long-term sustainable change.

Understanding young people and staff's pre-existing knowledge and expertise within the youth centre was important for Project Future to maximise the pilot's impact and outcomes. Therefore, the pilot was comprised of two streams: direct work with young people and indirect work via the staff team.

Direct holistic mental health and wellbeing support

This was offered during the open access sessions via youth-led activities, group workshops and one-to-one interventions. These were coproduced and adapted to improve accessibility and acceptability of mental health provision for the young men. For example, groups included games and activities to facilitate conversations about mental health, to hear young people's experiences and widen their perspectives. This enabled young men to reflect on contributing factors to difficulties, ideas around coping and their hopes and goals for the future.

Indirect mental health and wellbeing support

Youth club staff were provided with support to enhance psychologically informed knowledge and build skills in delivering basic mental health support. This was carried out through training, formulation meetings, consultation, reflective practice sessions, and joint clinical interventions on an individual basis and in groups.

Methodology

We carried out two rounds of data collection, the first from February-March 2021 and the second in February-March 2022.

Stakeholders

We conducted eight in-depth qualitative interviews with youth workers, including the manager of the youth club and four youth workers who run sessions with the young men. All had long-term experience working at Bruce Grove and some had attended the youth club as young men. We also interviewed a youth worker who referred young men to Project Future staff, based within one of the wider youth service teams.

We also conducted five in-depth qualitative interviews with Project Future staff.

Young men

We held five digital focus groups and two interviews with young men who regularly attended sessions run by Project Future staff. In total, we spoke to 13 young men, 3 of whom attended both rounds of data collection. Most were aged 16 or under.

Young men's general perceptions of Bruce Grove youth club

Most young men we spoke to had been attending Bruce Grove youth club for a while – the average time was two years and the longest-standing member had been attending for five years. Most of the young men attend weekly or more often, especially in the summer months. Young men can choose to take part in a range of activities, including football, table tennis, basketball, cooking, art and spray painting.

When asked what they liked best about the youth club, young men answered, “to have fun and learn new stuff”, “try new activities” and “develop my skills”. Young men felt a sense of family, community, warmth and productiveness from attending the youth club:

“[At the youth club] they treat us like a brother or sister... everyone's like a big family, it's a lovely environment... you can make new friends.” [Young person]

“On a normal school day you might just go home and sleep, but here you can do other stuff – [it's] a community where you get to talk to others.” [Young person]

Overview of the support provided by Project Future staff

Project Future staff interacted with young men in an open and non-judgemental way, listening to how they were feeling or any worries they had. They supported young men's mental health and wellbeing through confidential spaces and support on a one-to-one basis. During lockdown, young men appreciated that Project Future staff stayed in touch with them to see how they were doing via phone calls and text messages.

“They're really lovely men, over lockdown they checked up on me, I thought that was really good.” [Young person]

Young men valued that they could go to Project Future staff with anything, and felt listened to:

“[You can talk to them about] anything that's going on, if you need help with your schoolwork they will help you, you can talk to them about something that happened to you and they will listen to you.” [Young person]

In addition, Project Future staff supported young men in a group format. For example, the ‘Around the Table’ discussion group was mentioned as a particular success by several stakeholders. Here, young men talk in an open

space about any issues that are relevant to them at that moment in time. They share and hear their peers' perspectives with openness and without judgement, including on difficult topics relating to wellbeing.

“[From Project Future's sessions] I've learnt I don't need to keep my emotions bottled up, I can always tell someone about them... otherwise it hurts you more than anyone else” [Young person]

In addition, Project Future staff organised and ran interactive activities, often with a sporty or competitive aspect, such as an obstacle course. These educated young men about mental health in a fun and accessible way and encouraged them to share their feelings, concerns and worries, as well as their strategies, skills and strengths. The vibe at Project Future staff's sessions was described as “very fun and enjoyable”, “chilled, relaxed” and “no stress, no stress”. One young person reported, “there's no negativity, we all have fun”.

“More activities make better us!” [Young person]

“The sessions bring us closer together”
[Young person]

“From the sessions I know how to keep myself mentally and physically happy” [Young person]

Youth workers reported that Project Future staff engaged young men with mental health topics in creative ways that are “not formal or scary” and normalised mental health. Project Future staff “listen and chip in” their therapeutic perspectives and advice with a “light-touch” approach, to help young men understand and deal with their problems. Another youth worker reflected that Project Future do this in a “fun and friendly manner, which doesn’t make the youth feel like they’re being studied”.

“I like the fact that they are just there, and it does not feel so structured, formal or intrusive for young men” [Youth worker]

“They don’t just do boring talks. They like to make it fun with activities, art and creative stuff, to get the most out of the young men.”
[Youth worker]

Another aspect of Project Future staff’s offer was providing food to young men, including breakfast at early sessions and pizza, fruit and chocolate after school. It emerged from stakeholder interviews that access to food was a big problem for many young men during the pandemic, so food was highly appreciated. Eating together was a very important means for young men to feel welcomed and comfortable at the sessions, which encouraged them to start conversations with others:

“Young men get more interested when they see the food, they come and sit down and eat and start talking – it makes you feel more comfortable.” [Young person]

Occasionally, Project Future staff took young men on a trip outside the youth club, such as go-karting or to a trampoline park. All stakeholders and young men highlighted the significance of these trips in building a bond and trust between Project Future staff and the young men, which helped them feel able to speak to them about their feelings, concerns, problems, interests, hopes and strengths.

How working with Project Future staff benefitted young men

All stakeholders observed positive change in the young men who worked with Project Future staff. Youth workers reported that Project Future staff helped young men to find their voice and identity, and that this had happened organically through interactions with Project Future. Their ethos of coproduction helped young men to “feel valued, seen and understood”.

According to the Project Future staff and the youth workers at Bruce Grove, young men “developed their thinking and thought processes”, “learnt more about themselves, who they are, who they want to become”, and “how to make positive contributions to their society”. Youth workers reported that young men appeared more “comfortable in their own skin” and projected a higher sense of “self-worth”. One youth worker reported Project Future had “meaningful conversations” with young men which built their self-esteem, which is “the best thing that you can give anybody” and the most valuable outcome of their work.

Greater awareness and understanding of mental health and wellbeing

Young men and youth workers consistently reported that young men had become more aware of their wellbeing needs and how to express them. Most young men we spoke to had no previous knowledge of mental health, and gained awareness for the first time from Project Future staff.

“I won't lie to you, I didn't even know what mental health was [before meeting Project Future staff].” [Young person]

“I'm from Jamaica... when I came here, [Project Future staff] opened my eyes to something new... and now I'm aware of mental wellbeing, they've helped me... now it's natural to feel upset or to feel depressed, it's just normal, just talk to someone about it.” [Young person]

A few young men were aware of mental health and wellbeing topics before working with Project Future, and working with Project Future expanded their knowledge.

Definitions of mental health provided by young men centred around coping with life, feeling stable and able to manage your emotions.

Mental health was described as:

“Your wellbeing and how you're getting along with the situation, how you're coping with what's going on.”

“How stable a person is.”

“How you feel walking at night, why is your heart rate turning up, why do your emotions play with you?”

“[Someone's] wellbeing and ability to reach their potential.”

“Not necessarily happy but [being] sure of yourself and stable, having men you can talk to and being able to not stress about stuff.”

“A calm positive mindset.”

Increased confidence and openness to discussing emotions and seeking help

In the focus groups, young men spoke about mental health with an ease and maturity that was striking and appeared to have been gained directly from their experience working with Project Future. All young men reported feeling free to speak with Project Future staff about their worries or any issues they faced (“If I don't feel good, I ask for advice or help”) for example with schoolwork, feeling scared in their local area, or having ‘trust issues’. A key message from Project Future staff was summarised by one young person: “Don't be afraid to voice your opinions, don't be afraid to be seen as weak for sharing your problems”.

Speaking about their feelings had become normalised and young men were confident of Project Future staff's responsiveness to their needs through their advice and feedback:

"We just talk about whatever we feel comfortable with, they are there for us, they're like our Siri!" [Young person]

"It's made me more aware of mental [health] problems and just told me how to handle certain situations mentally, and what to do if I do end up getting any problems mentally – to speak out." [Young person]

Youth workers agreed that mental health and help-seeking had become destigmatised at the youth club. Young men became more engaged in authentic, deep conversations about mental health. They trusted Project Future staff with clinically significant problems affecting them. It should be noted that this outcome was not achieved immediately because young men were not used to being asked to explore their views.

"[Project Future] is making mental health services for young men more normalised, more accessible, and more acceptable among their peers... and it is extremely important in the current climate that we are living in. Especially for males... they don't talk about their feelings, but those are the men I see accessing that service [Project Future] the most... whether it's now or in the future, Project Future has made it normal that they access that support." [Youth worker]

"The term 'wellbeing' isn't such an ugly and alien word to the young men now" [Project Future staff]

Young men valued learning about mental health and wellbeing, which helped them to understand their emotions and how to cope with difficult feelings such as anger and anxiety.

"[Working with Project Future staff] has changed me in a lot of ways... I know more about wellbeing, how to keep my heart rate down, how to control my emotions." [Young person]

"They really changed me, they taught me mental health, coping with situations because I'm a very sensitive person and when someone says something that hurts me I'll get angry and storm off. [Project Future staff] help me control my emotions and not take this personally." [Young person]

Project Future's discussion groups often used scenarios where young men were asked to put themselves in the shoes of someone else, which helped them to understand other men and to increase empathy. This was indicated by comments such as, "I learnt how to communicate with men I don't know, because anything could be going on with their lives".

Emotional support for fears about gangs and discussions on how to stay safe

A frequent discussion topic between young men and Project Future staff was "gangs in our area, sometimes kids might be scared and... influenced into gangs and it messes with your mental health" [Young person]. Project Future staff reassured young men of the importance of sharing their concerns:

"They tell us not to feel scared to tell anyone about any issues we have, sometimes young men get involved in gangs out of fear for themselves and their family." [Young person]

Some young men said that they would only talk about these anxieties with their close friends and Project Future staff. They could speak to Project Future staff because, *"They put it in a fun way and just talk about it, you can say it freely without worrying. It relieves the stress and when you get it out it just is better... you feel relief"* [Young person].

Young men were provided with spaces to think with Project Future staff about gang issues and youth violence challenges within the area, including the risks of coercion. Young men found these conversations reassuring because "there's really nothing to be afraid of... if you tell someone soon they can get it sorted and everything can be fine".

Young men gave examples of practical ways to stay safe which they had co-developed with Project Future staff, including:

- Information about “things going on in the area and how they [Project Future staff] can prevent it happening to us”
- “Advice about what to do in certain situations, what to do if someone approaches us to get involved in gangs”
- Discussions on fears, risks and how to avoid “being seen in the wrong area and being misidentified as someone who is in a gang”.

A safe space to discuss concerns about school and racism

Young men discussed stresses or worries relating to “school, the area we live in, and everything going on in the world”. School worries might include worrying about preparing for exams and dealing with “the pressure of homework”. One young person valued that Project Future staff “help us build a timetable. Talking about it makes you arrange it in your head and get your priorities straight.”

Another young person added that from talking with Project Future staff they developed practical ideas for how to handle situations in school which could be intimidating. They “can help you if you have a predicament with a teacher, and you're going into restorative [a process to resolve a conflict or incident between a student and a teacher]. They advise you on how to behave – saying sorry and coming across as a good person”.

Racism was discussed with Project Future staff, especially as the Black Lives Matter movement was becoming more prominent in the mainstream media. When racism came up in the news, young men were encouraged to share their thoughts about it during group discussions. The impact of racism featured heavily in an interactive ‘word step game’ to help young men understand the different benefits or barriers they may face on account of their race, social class and other factors.

Young men's perceptions of Project Future staff

Stakeholders observed that young men 'vote with their feet' and show appreciation for Project Future staff by attending their sessions. Young men keep coming back to see Project Future staff and speaking for longer and in more depth each time. All young men highly valued the personal qualities of Project Future staff. In the first round of evaluation, each young person at the focus groups was asked to describe the Project Future staff in three words. The word cloud captures the responses; a larger font size indicates a more frequent response.



A word cloud containing the following words: upbeat, loving, charismatic, friendly, beautiful, light-hearted, hearing, warm, caring, fun, communicating, and approachable. The words are in various colors (green, purple, orange) and sizes, with 'loving', 'friendly', and 'caring' being the largest.

Across both rounds of data collection, young men consistently reported Project Future staff to be:

Caring and invested in young men's happiness, particularly shown by the trips they organised.

"They make us feel comfortable to talk to them, they express their ideas and try to help us to do things... they just wanna check on us and for us to be our best – not depressed. They are always planning stuff for us just so we can be happy." [Young person]

"They really care 'cause when you come to the youth club, they always say hi, they're always generous and they have trips planned to make us feel at home." [Young person]

Good listeners and communicators

"I think they're respecting and good men who want to hear other's point of view, always nice, always willing to listen to us... it's a lot of communication that we have."

Effectively building trust with young men through:

Not pressuring young men to open up about themselves, and waiting until they are ready

"Their priority was not trying to find out our deep secret but to really help us – if you want to say something, to speak up, if you want to communicate and share your issues – they weren't trying to force us into it. They share their experiences and see if we want to add on to theirs. It's sharing knowledge because every day you learn something new from them or they learn something new from us." [Young person]

"These are intergenerational problems that young men are dealing with. It's difficult to just talk about these things like it's easy. Young men do it with [Project Future staff]. Sitting down to talk for an hour or two... that takes a skill. That's the success of it all." [Youth worker]

One young person mentioned that it took only two weeks to feel they could trust Project Future staff, which is testament to how well they were embedded in the youth club and built a rapport with young men.

Being warm, honest and open

"I opened up very quick with them, they are very honest men and I feel safe around them, they kinda give me the warm vibe if you get what I mean. I caught on to their personalities very quickly – they're very nice men. I feel like I could tell them basically anything now." [Young person]

“When they first came I had only recently started the youth club so I wasn't talking a lot, but when they approached me that's when I started talking more because they were really friendly.” [Young person]

“It was like an instant bond when they came, like a shining light coming to talk to us, they were super friendly... they're just as nice as [it's possible] to be.” [Young person]

Treating young men with respect

“They treat us like adults, not like little kids.”

“At first I didn't really want to open up to them, as our relationship developed I started to open up to them more... they treat me like an adult, not a kid.” [Young person]

“They treat us all like equals, so we feel confident and comfortable around them.” [Young person]

Going to where young men are

“You'd come in and you'd see Project Future staff playing pool, you'll see them upstairs at the computers, you'll see them in the gym... They have immersed themselves in their environment... They don't just talk to men who they were asked to work with, they talk to everyone.” [Youth worker]

Some young men and staff at the youth club also mentioned that it was important that at least some of the Project Future staff came from a similar background to the young men, in terms of being from London and from a racialised background. This helped them build rapport through having a closer understanding of young men's culture and more relatability.

Highlights of young men's experience with Project Future staff

Young men recounted highlights of their experiences with Project Future staff with great enthusiasm, which conveyed the sense of belonging and contentment they felt there. It emerged from the data that the sessions were a safe space and a lifeline, especially during the pandemic. It provided stress relief, fun and excitement while their lives were restricted by school closures, having to drive one's own learning from home, homework and exam pressure, and greater isolation from support networks.

Young men recounted the following highlights of their experiences with Project Future staff with great enthusiasm, conveying a sense of belonging and contentment.

The trips organised by Project Future staff

Most young men highlighted their enjoyment of the trips to a trampoline park and go-karting. These were exciting new experiences for many and provided relief from the pandemic: "it was all fun vibes and it really helped us be happy because we all just came out of lockdown".

'Playful' based mental health discussions

Project Future used interactive games and activities to enable discussion, learning and engagement on mental health topics. This included discussing what impacts and what promotes wellbeing, including how to cope with anxiety or stress. Young men identified these highlights:

Taking part in 'games night' as part of a wellbeing group

Young men reported that this "was a very good thing because we had been in lockdown and I hadn't seen anyone in quite a long time and it was nice to see everyone so happy and fun". His comments were echoed by another young person: "[It was] good to see everyone so happy after such a long depressing time in lockdown; after all the struggles, it made things easier for me".

Youth workers expressed disbelief and admiration when recollecting the 'games night' run by Project Future staff, which had 100% attendance from the young men who signed up. The young men remained engaged and attentive for around three hours, which involved discussion and playing games on topics surrounding mental health.

Project Future staff witnessed this learning in action in later weeks, through young men reflecting on topics that were covered in the 'games night'. Young men had, for example, learnt about the 'fight or flight' response to a threatening situation. One young person said, "It was very good because I didn't know much about it before" and spontaneously mentioned fight or flight several times during the focus group; it seemed to have made a lasting impression on him. He elaborated:

"We thought it [mental health] didn't really affect us ... wasn't a proper topic. But then we had a chat with [Project Future staff] who really understand why it really is and how it affects you – you wouldn't know about it but it's still affecting you. Then you learn about it and you're like, "Oh that's why that happened, that's why your heart rate went up." [Young person]

Mental health-based obstacle course

This was played in two teams. Young men were asked to spend less than one minute jotting down the things worrying or bothering them, each one on a separate piece of paper. Then they were asked to go through an obstacle course, racing the other team, to transfer as many of their pieces of paper onto a board on the other side of the room. The young men we spoke to could still remember items put on the board, such as 'lack of sleep due to overthinking', 'school', 'parents', 'girls', 'the future' and 'exams'. A group discussion followed on why the men had chosen the words they had and to elaborate on them.

“We had to write down five words of how we're currently feeling, and it felt very relieving, weight off my shoulders... it was good to look at it and reflect.” [Young person]

Young men shared solutions with one another, and Project Future added some, which was a valuable experience:

“We felt we had more options for how to deal with our problems, there are different ways to resolve them: going for a walk, music, talking to someone.”

“It was really helpful ‘cause you can see how other men are dealing with their problems and ask them about it, they can help you out and you help them out if you have the same problem.”

Young men noted that everyone in the game felt comfortable to take part and really enjoyed it. They embraced the competitive side of the game and joked in the focus group that “we need a rematch”. The overall outcome was a normalisation of discussions on mental health and sharing advice on how to cope with problems and challenges, in a fun way.

“Normally you don't know where to start [talking about mental health], but as a game you pick up certain topics... it's easier to talk about.” [Young person]

The support provided to youth workers by Project Future Staff

Project Future staff co-facilitated and supported sessions alongside the Bruce Grove team, which made them familiar to the young men.

Project Future staff supported youth workers at Bruce Grove in their work with young men and families. This happened formally through staff meetings and one-to-one meetings, and through informal catch-up conversations. According to Project Future staff, they helped to “generate conversations, slow it down, take different perspectives and share and develop ideas”, and commented that the youth workers were “constantly curious for our opinions and perspectives”.

This was echoed by youth workers, who reported it was very helpful to ask Project Future staff for advice and support on helping specific families or cases in a ‘holistic way’. Youth workers felt that they had a space for open conversations to consider how to think differently about a situation.

“Project Future staff help us to prioritise how best to move forward with our cases and consider what is important for that family and that child”. [Youth worker]

“It’s the kind of clinical supervision that we needed.” [Youth worker]

According to one youth worker, the team could “engage more with families and young men” because Project Future staff “come with practical ideas about navigating challenges, behavioural or mental challenges, that young men are facing” and “they have a professional and analytical approach... which helps us with our own practice”.

Consultations with Project Future staff continued throughout the pandemic and took place digitally when necessary. One Project Future staff member reported positive staff feedback and engagement with these online team meetings, despite initial hesitancy. All stakeholders reported that this has been a positive space to help the group think more about their cases.

Embedding a psychologically informed approach

Project Future staff aimed to embed a psychologically informed approach to working with young men at the youth club, through teaching and training sessions. As Project Future staff were only based at the youth club part time due to funding constraints, they aimed to build the youth workers’ skills and confidence to sustain this approach, rather than being “the sole holders of the [psychological] skills”. Many examples were given by youth workers of how the support from Project Future benefitted them:

“They’ve helped me to be more analytical in how I think about stuff... to better analyse and reflect on my practice.” [Youth worker]

Supporting staff team functioning and communication

Project Future staff also supported the staff at the youth club to communicate openly and function efficiently as a team. This covered both strategic managerial support and individual staff support.

At fortnightly meetings with Project Future staff, the youth club managers brought concerns and questions about how to best support the youth workers, in terms of their duties and wellbeing. Project Future staff helped managers think about how to support their staff through difficult decisions and how to implement changes. They applied their psychologically-framed thinking to understand staff group dynamics, respecting different individual perspectives alongside the needs of the team as a whole.

In addition, Project Future staff supported managers to think through how staff meetings could work best as spaces for collective thinking and reflection. At whole-team workshops they focused on how to improve working relationships and facilitated an “open space for conversation, where the team could talk openly and constructively to think of ways forward”. For

example, Project Future staff described the ‘Tree of Life’ workshop they facilitated. Youth workers were asked to reflect on their shared journey at the youth club and had an “experience of enjoying each other’s work, not just each other’s company”. This workshop led youth club managers to facilitate their own follow-on session with the youth club team, to develop and commit to shared values and a common ethos.

Offering mental health and wellbeing support to youth workers

Project Future staff provided emotional support to the youth workers at Bruce Grove. All stakeholders reported there was a higher focus on staff wellbeing during the pandemic. On top of personal anxieties and bereavements, youth workers had to adapt to working online, with many individuals navigating changes to their job roles, as allocated by the council.

One Project Future staff member reported that this was an unexpected challenge, as they navigated the added layer of pandemic-related emotional support, alongside the baseline support that they had expected to provide.

Project Future staff stayed connected with the youth workers and helped to create structure throughout uncertainty. They did so by providing youth workers with wellbeing check ins and emotional support through one-to-one consultations. This included one-to-one phone calls during pandemic restrictions, which they perceived to be greatly appreciated by the youth workers, who engaged well with this offer. Project Future staff ran workshops to discuss staff mental health and wellbeing, including sharing and co-developing coping strategies for their anxieties.

Project Future’s integration with the youth workers

Project Future staff acknowledged from the outset that building connection and engagement with staff at the youth club would take time. No challenges were reported in terms of building good working relationships. All stakeholders reported bonding over like-mindedness, common interests and a shared commitment to supporting young men.

All stakeholders agreed that they were successful in managing this after four months together in person, before the pandemic. During this time, Project Future staff became integrated with the team, attending work socials and getting to know everyone. All stakeholders reported that Project Future staff had become integrated at all levels of the youth club, from running sessions with young men to attending senior team meetings. At the same time, Project Future staff found it helpful to maintain a degree of distance from the youth club team, so that they were both within and outside the group, positioning themselves as “outside observers who can offer support”.

All youth workers and managers reported that Project Future staff were “part of the furniture”, “embedded” and “very much part of the team”, or similar. Project Future staff had “been supportive in everything that they do”, “made everyone feel comfortable” and it was “always a pleasure to have both of them”. One youth worker added that “on a scale of 1 to 10 – I can only give them a 10!”.

Project Future staff reported feeling “trusted”, “respected” and “valued” by the youth club team. They felt “welcomed with open arms”, thanks to the strong managerial team who were “very appreciative and understanding of why we are there and what we can contribute”.

“They’re really talented and engaged, considerate and they just care a lot. And I think that they maybe recognise that in us as well... I think they’ve really appreciated us.”

[Project Future staff member]

In some ways it was easier for Project Future staff to build a connection with the youth workers compared to young men, given the consistent presence of staff at the centre. According to one Project Future staff member, their work with the staff team progressed faster during the pandemic, given the need for targeted remote communication.

On the other hand, Project Future staff wondered whether some youth workers were contacting them less while working remotely, given their frustration with online meetings and the loss of spontaneous face-to-face conversation. Project Future staff also wondered whether their training sessions had as much impact when delivered online rather than in person.

How working with Project Future staff benefitted youth workers

All youth workers described significant improvements in team dynamics. Youth workers reported that Project Future staff:

- Helped the team to identify and maximise the strengths of each individual to better understand and respect each person's role
- Improved staff meetings so they were more focused on evaluating their practice, communicating any issues and coming up with solutions. (One staff member reported that the team had moved "from strength to strength" since these improvements, with changes being actioned at a faster pace)
- Helped the team to keep working through the pandemic and to support one another effectively
- Promoted better emotional understanding

"They've definitely helped us understand ourselves – and how our understanding of ourselves can in turn help us better our communication with each other and the young men – to make life easier for young men and ourselves." [Youth worker]

"In the same way as how they'd gear it towards the kids, they do it to us – almost like a game, we don't even realise that we are... reflecting and learning. Each one of us has individual styles and approaches to youth work. [Project Future staff] are helping us better map each other out as a team, so we can better utilise our skills." [Youth worker]

Expert support with mental health issues and cases

Youth workers felt grateful and relieved that they could direct young men to Project Future staff to discuss their mental health, with trained professionals who are "part of the team, someone you know, someone you recognise, someone you work with on a daily basis". The youth workers perceived Project Future

staff's clinical skills as something that could not be transferred to them as youth workers. They reported not feeling equipped to guide young men through mental health issues independently "because we're not mental health professionals". All youth workers agreed it is a "benefit for the youth club staff – knowing that the young men have someone to go to if they need it".

While all stakeholders described significant changes in the way that the youth club staff now function as a team, they did not describe significant changes in the way that the youth club staff now work with young men. Instead, managers at the youth club are seeking funding to continue the partnership with Project Future, to ensure that the young men continue to benefit from the psychological support offered by Project Future.

Accessible emotional support

One youth worker emphasised that Project Future staff always had an 'open door' for any conversation and made emotional support accessible, by being flexible in where they could meet them. Other youth workers echoed this, sharing that they had been supported by Project Future staff through emotional challenges both in and outside of work, including anxiety, lack of sleep and bereavements during the pandemic.

"You know there's someone on the end of the phone who is there for you, or who you can see on a Tuesday or Thursday and have that conversation with".

"If it wasn't for [Project Future staff], and I bet it's the same for other colleagues, it wouldn't have been something we would have done or we would have dealt with. I wouldn't have gone anywhere; I wouldn't have spoken to anyone. So that's a success for me." [Youth worker]

"I don't take for granted that they [youth workers] trust us with their work and wellbeing questions. Both in formal and informal conversations." [Project Future staff]

What is the difference between Project Future staff and youth workers at Bruce Grove?

From our interviews with Project Future staff, the youth workers and the young men, it is clear that there are a lot of similarities in the work of Project Future staff and the staff at the youth club. Overall, stakeholders thought that the Project Future staff and youth workers' different approaches to working with young men would not be obvious to someone visiting the youth club.

Young men thought that youth workers and Project Future staff are all caring and friendly. Yet most felt there was a distinction between youth workers and Project Future staff. As one young person put it: "They all care, but the Project Future staff focus on our mental health, they want deeper info on how we live our everyday lives". For example, with Project Future staff, young men "go into serious topics; with the other youth workers we just joke around".

Project Future's specific focus on support with emotional wellbeing came across strongly to young men:

"They take that extra step to make sure we are OK and if you need anything they're always there for us." [Young person]

"[They] want to know more about what it's like in our shoes and help us a lot to speak out, that's why I feel men can benefit from [Project Future staff]."

Young men also commented that youth workers are busy organising activities for young men, which means they can't talk to them in as much depth as with the Project Future staff. Youth workers observed that young men "share experiences [with Project Future staff] that they don't necessarily share with us". They found that some young men were now "coming in specifically to talk with [Project Future staff]" who were often "their first point of call to discuss serious issues about family".

Another youth worker observed that young men give Project Future staff "the same, if not more, respect than they give us", and that the young men now think that the Project Future model is "part of what the youth club does".

Project Future staff recognised youth workers' nurturing relationships with young men, for example some youth workers were referred to by young men as 'uncle' or 'big brother'. Youth workers support wellbeing indirectly through the activities that they run, the relationships they build, and the support they give to encourage young men who have disengaged from education to reconnect with it. Project Future staff work "off the back of these existing relationships, bringing a psychological perspective in understanding young men's needs" and developing strategies to support them.

Project Future staff's clinical training is the main thing distinguishing them from the youth workers' approach. It grounds their work with young men in a psychological framework and means they "focus on holding mental health in mind and designing intentional activities to create a therapeutic space". As one Project Future staff member described it: "Even though we [Project Future staff] are having conversations that might look very similar to what the youth workers are doing... [we are] holding in mind the wellbeing and mental health context... and that leads to specific interactions where we do a tailored piece of work with a young person". Project Future staff reported they can "delve a bit deeper... and have the confidence to do so" in their discussions with young men about mental health.

Youth workers agreed that Project Future staff have a more clinical, formal, analytical approach and are “specialists”. If a young person had depression, youth workers said they would take a ‘broad-science’ approach, offering general solutions to make them feel better. By contrast, Project Future staff would “analyse why they [young men] are depressed first, to get more to the root of the issue, so they get a faster response and better outcomes”. In addition, while youth workers work on a day-to-day basis, Project Future staff address a young person’s problem “on a structured calendar basis, with a point, a plan and an end goal”.

Before Project Future joined the youth club, youth workers could only refer young men with mental health concerns to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). A youth worker observed that Project Future staff are “adding a lot, a lot more to what we offer... bringing ‘in house’ what Bruce Grove couldn’t offer before”.

“Young men don’t see Project Future staff as therapists [but] as youth club staff who you can talk to and engage with. The young men are not aware... they are having their problems looked at in a therapeutic way. It’s not like going to CAMHS and having to ‘sit on the couch’... when you refer them to CAMHS they don’t turn up, they don’t see the value.”
[Youth worker]

Throughout the partnership, Project Future staff reported that they had coproduced all of their work with the youth workers and young men. Project Future staff emphasised that they are collaboratively “learning together with the youth workers” about how they can support the young men together.

“It’s not that psychological thinking is better. They have a youth worker model that they use, and we need to learn from each other at all times... What’s the utility of both [approaches], what can we gain from yours?”
[Project Future staff]

How the pandemic impacted Project Future's work at the youth club

Young men's needs increased

When asked about how young men's needs changed during the pandemic, all stakeholders acknowledged it increased isolation and mental health needs for those aged 16 years and younger. Specifically, Project Future highlighted that it created a surge in anxiety among young men and heightened pre-existing issues. Sleep habits were significantly disrupted, and many young men struggled with existential questions, bereavement and the pressure of exams and schoolwork.

"In the lockdown I had to focus on school 'cause I was in year 11 and the school was really hitting down on us, we had GCSEs to do." [Young person]

Youth workers highlighted that for over 16s, unemployment, food access and housing were more prevalent issues.

Young men's disrupted routines and lower motivation made engagement harder

From the start of the pandemic, youth workers observed a general 'flatness' and 'frustration' from young men. As a result, all stakeholders reported difficulties with maintaining connection and building motivation in young men to engage with the youth club.

While schools were closed, most young men were "stuck in the same four walls with no one to speak to", with a "lack of consistent contact". All stakeholders reported that young men felt alienated and detached due to the lack of consistency in their routines, and as one youth worker put it: "being able to talk to men is a big help at the moment".

Young men valued the adaptability of the approach during lockdowns

Project Future staff were flexible in adapting to government guidelines and available resources, while transitioning the Project Future framework to remote digital working. Support via phone and video calls during lockdowns were valued by young men, although access to video calls was limited amongst some. A number maintained consistent phone contact, including some individuals who started attending the youth club during the pandemic. Youth workers acknowledged that Project Future staff persevered with young men and the engagement "paid off". As a result of their one-to-one work with a "reduced, targeted cohort", some relationships between Project Future staff and young men grew stronger than they might have done otherwise.

One youth worker reflected that Project Future staff had been flexible, patient and shown skill and intuition in their work with young men.

"We were lucky that we got [Project Future staff] ... I think if we'd got some other men, who think 'this is the way therapy is meant to be done', it wouldn't have been successful." [Youth worker]

When there were safe opportunities to meet back in person during lockdowns, Project Future staff facilitated this through social distancing, sitting together in bubbles of six men and outdoor activities.

"Everyone's practice has had to change. They've [Project Future] been as hands on as they can be... When we have been available to have hands on work, they've been the first ones through the door to help deliver that." [Youth worker]

Young men valued that Project Future staff members kept in touch with them. As one young person put it, “I was talking [on the phone] to them for a couple of months and then went quiet because I was dealing with my troubles, then they came back and checked up on me.” This young person greatly appreciated that the Project Future staff member gave them a bit of space but then got back in touch. They added that speaking with Project Future staff “helps me get a new perspective”. Another young person commented that, “Just speaking to them [on the phone] made a big difference to my mental state. The advice they give is useful and makes a real change”. Their advice related to practical strategies to boost mental health and wellbeing.

Youth workers and Project Future staff were affected by competing organisational demands and structural changes

Project Future staff emphasised that working at the youth club required navigating significant organisational change and competing demands, “keeping you on your toes” both before and during the pandemic. This included a high turnover of staff at the youth club and frequent structural changes, including changing management and expansion of the service. These sometimes impacted on the consistency of Project Future and youth workers’ work, in combination with inconsistent attendance from young men. Project Future staff sometimes felt that they were “playing catch up” and found it difficult to keep up with organisational changes, especially as they were only stationed at the youth club two days per week.

In addition, Project Future staff reflected that frequent structural changes for youth workers seemed to “bring uncertainty that impacts on morale and working environments”, especially during the pandemic. For example, staff job specifications changed to cover new service duties, such as home visits and supporting a new list of vulnerable young people. This required youth workers to develop new skills, which one youth worker described as “really draining and exhausting”. Project Future staff reported that time was needed for teams to adjust to these changes and they provided the space for youth workers to acknowledge the organisational changes and consider ways to adapt and move forward. Project Future staff supported the Bruce Grove team to manage stress associated with the changes.

In this demanding work context, youth workers highly valued their access to regular supervision from Project Future staff and wanted this to be maintained. Project Future staff observed that the youth worker team became “more hopeful and optimistic, despite all of the challenges of the pandemic this year”. They linked this to their involvement in “offering opportunities to find solutions”, “supporting the managers in team leading strategies” and “finding clarity around [staff] roles and expectations”.

Key findings from the quantitative data

Project Future and youth club staff collected wellbeing surveys and outcomes monitoring data from young men who accessed support from Project Future for over two years (September 2019 - December 2021). This data included additional support young men accessed outside of the youth club, which they had been signposted to by Project Future staff. Specifically, data was collected over four periods: September 2019 to April 2020, May 2020 to December 2020, January 2021 to June 2021, and July 2021 to December 2021.

The key findings from statistical data analysis are:

- Engagement with support and activities from Project Future at the youth club increased over time. The exception to this was work with families, where engagement decreased between September 2019 and December 2021
- Young men engaged most with wellbeing support services, such as informal conversations
- Young men demonstrated an increased awareness of their own wellbeing needs from pre- to post-intervention
- For youth workers, personal development, working practices and sharing psychological knowledge, skills and approaches were the primary outcomes.

Young men's outcomes

Project Future staff's direct support to young men can be categorised into six areas: education, employment and training (EET); stability; offending; wellbeing; coproduction; and social action. Project Future staff also provided support to the youth workers and managers, which indirectly affected young men.

The sample was made up of 51 young men, aged between 10-22 (with an average age of 17). Overall, the number of young men accessing support at Project Future increased by 40% between September 2019 to December 2021.

Between September 2019 to April 2020, more young men engaged with EET support than any other area. However, between May 2020 and December 2021, more young men were engaging with wellbeing support. This increase in need for wellbeing support could be the result of the pandemic, as well reflecting improved engagement and relationship to help-seeking.

Mental health and wellbeing

Nearly all young men (96%) accessed some form of wellbeing support between September 2019 and December 2021. Support ranged from individual contact (i.e. informal conversations and one-to-ones), wellbeing groups and activities, to work with parents and families. More young men engaged with wellbeing support services as time went on.

Based on the mental health and wellbeing support provided, the main presenting difficulties Project Future has supported with include: anxiety, anger, low mood, self-harm and suicidal ideation, challenging behaviour, substance use, risky sexual behaviour, motivation, self-esteem, stress at school, impacts of being a young carer and challenges in family relationships.

Psychological conversations and sessions

Over the course of the project, nearly all young men (90%) engaged with informal conversations. These were wellbeing-related, intermittent conversations that emerged on an ad hoc basis from general conversation with a young person.

In addition, 61% of young men engaged in one-to-one sessions with Project Future staff. These were more formal sessions, for example scheduled structured interventions, with the majority being one-off in frequency. Engagement increased over time for both forms of support.

Wellbeing groups and activities

Attendance data for wellbeing groups and activities was collected between May 2020 and December 2021. 47% of the young men at Bruce Grove accessed group support in that time, and 43% attended a wellbeing activity. These included:

- ‘Around the table’ – a wellbeing discussion group on a variety of topics affecting young people, which was co-created by young people and staff. Topics included safety, wellbeing, mental health, social media, sex and relationships, identity, inequalities and trends.
- ‘Play-ful’ mental health groups – a targeted intervention developed by Project Future and Bruce Grove aimed at re-engaging young men following the onset of the pandemic. This one-off group used games and activities to facilitate engagement in conversations about mental health.
- A ‘transition workshop’ – to help young men with managing mental health during the pandemic, focused on the impact of choosing GCSEs remotely and transitioning to college. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, psychoeducation and narrative therapy were used to inform this workshop.
- The ‘Team of Life’ workshop group – a collective narrative therapy intervention that aimed to help young men with their wellbeing by identifying strengths and resources to help navigate future challenges.

Work with parents and families

Project Future staff also provided support to 8% of the young men through parent and family work, which focused on the wellbeing of a whole family to support the young person’s wellbeing.

Wellbeing outcomes

Of the 49 young men who accessed a form of wellbeing support between September 2019 and December 2021, 19 (39%) demonstrated an increased awareness of their own wellbeing needs.

19 young men were assessed using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) at each reporting period. A small decrease in mental wellbeing was found; the average first score was 30 and the average last score was 29. Although this was not statistically significant, a score change of 1 to 3 is considered a meaningful change (Shah *et al.*, 2018).

58 young men were assessed using the Health of the Nation Outcome Scale (HONOS) at each reporting period. First and last scores were compared; these suggested a small increase in health and social functioning but no significant differences were found.

These non-significant differences may be the result of small sample sizes and, in the case of the SWEMWBS, variations in the length of time between first and last scores amongst the young men. In addition, external influences, such as the pandemic and contextual factors in the cohort, may have influenced health and wellbeing scores. For example, youth violence, a local murder, an increase in caring responsibilities, and increases in food and housing needs will have impacted scores.

Coproduction

Around 90% of young men at Bruce Grove were involved in coproduction activities between September 2019 and December 2021, and engagement increased as time went on. These activities included youth led activities, Project Future service design, co-facilitation, consultation, social action and Project Future risk management.

Social action

Five young men (10%) were involved in social action activities between July 2021 and December 2021, including consultations, written communications, co-leading peer research and planning. This highlights the way building relationships through coproduction over time can lead to social action, as young men voice their needs and wishes to influence wider systems.

Education, Employment, and Training (EET)

In total, 30 young men (58%) accessed EET support between September 2019 and December 2021. Engagement with this service increased by 21% over the course of the pilot, with education guidance and goal setting the most sought-after support. Two young men went from part-time to full-time employment over the course of the pilot, and one young man went from being unemployed to having a volunteer position. EET work was often an initial aspect of engagement with the cohort, in building relationships with young men.

Stability

In total, five young men (10%) accessed stability support over the course of the pilot. This included support for housing, food and necessities, benefits, finance, driving, and immigration issues.

Offending support

Given this was an early intervention pilot, offending was not the sole focus of the project, but was an important aspect in acknowledging contextual challenges, pressures on young men and risks of offending.

In total, 27 (53%) young men accessed offending support between September 2019 and December 2021, with engagement increasing over time. Ages ranged from 13 to 22 years. Support was mostly informal conversations about offending and serious youth violence, followed by indirect offending support. This type of support was focused on preventative conversations, risk, and vulnerability for youth violence.

Young women

Although young women were not the focus of the pilot, they were also supported through the presence of Project Future staff at Bruce Grove. Between September 2019 and December 2021, 15 young women engaged with Project Future's mental health and wellbeing support. They all took part in informal conversations with Project Future and nine young women took part in formal one-to-one sessions. Seven young women (47%) demonstrated increased awareness of their own mental wellbeing following engagement with Project Future.

Support to youth workers and youth managers

Project Future staff provided support to youth workers and youth managers to enhance psychological knowledge and build skills in delivering basic mental health interventions.

Between September 2019 and December 2020, personal development and sharing psychological knowledge were primary outcomes. However, between January and December 2021, the primary outcomes were sharing psychological knowledge, skills, approaches and informing working practices.

In total, there were 203 staff outcomes resulting from 768 contacts or sessions. Most sessions and contacts occurred between May 2020 and June 2021. It may be that staff needed more support sessions during the pandemic, particularly during the lockdowns which occurred during this period.

What would the youth club be like without Project Future staff?

Youth workers and young men were asked to consider what the youth club would be like without the Project Future staff. They all highlighted the important role of Project Future staff in destigmatising mental health and promoting open communication on this topic.

Young men emphasised that they would feel significantly less able to speak openly about their mental health and any issues they were facing:

“Because I feel comfortable talking to them [Project Future staff], I might not talk much at the youth club anymore [if they weren’t there].” [Young person]

“If they weren’t here, you wouldn’t feel comfortable talking about it [mental health] because they introduced us to it... I wish they could be here more.” [Young person]

“It would cause problems because men wouldn’t be able to communicate efficiently and properly. Most men don’t want to talk about mental health but when they [Project Future staff] are here and bring the whole centre together, it helps men understand different men’s scenarios. Without them the youth club would be quiet – just play football, go home, play football, go home – it would just be a sports centre really.” [Young person]

In line with young men’s reflections, youth workers consistently highlighted the vital role of Project Future in normalising mental health and help-seeking behaviours for young men in the area.

“They [Project Future] are an amazing organisation ... Considering that we are very high up in youth violence, it’s a very deprived area, [Project Future staff] are essential to normalise accessing emotional wellbeing support for young men. It is integral for our young men thriving and having positive outcomes for the future.” [Youth worker]

Young men reported that without Project Future staff, the youth club would be a much less positive place:

“There’d be a drop in positive atmosphere, they bring a very light-hearted energy to the community, whenever they see us they always come to us smiling, ‘Hi, how are you, how’s your day been?’” [Young person]

“Honestly I wouldn’t be talking to anyone, everyone would be down and depressed.” [Young person]

When asked how support from Project Future staff could be improved, every young person and youth worker we spoke to said they could think of no improvements as the support already meets their needs successfully. The only suggestion made was that Project Future could be present at the youth club more often; if they had more funding, it would benefit more young men. For example, one young man thought they should be available every day because “if something happens you don’t have to wait until they come to talk about it, instead of you keeping it in, they will listen to you talk about it”. The same views were shared during interviews and focus groups with youth workers. If Project Future staff received more funding to expand their capacity, it would be beneficial for young men and staff at the youth club.

True to the original Project Future model, peer-to-peer referral was the way most young men had come to the youth club, and all had recommended it to their friends. This indicated how far young men valued the support from Project Future staff.

Young men shared their views on what those who don’t know about Project Future’s sessions miss out on:

“They’re missing out on the opportunity to talk about their stress – I know a lot of men who keep things to themselves and don’t tell anyone, they’ll just be crying and you never know why they’re crying... if they came to the sessions they could actually talk about it... keeping it to yourself is not good because it can make you worse, in your exams it might pop up in your head and you might fail due to overthinking.” [Young person]

“I think about those men who are going through depression, and how they could benefit from them [Project Future’s sessions], men who are really going through a tough time.” [Young person]

Conclusions

Between October 2019 and December 2021, Project Future supported young men and staff at Bruce Grove youth club. The aim was to create an early intervention pilot, which adapted the Project Future approach within an existing system to co-create provision and reach a younger cohort. This happened through direct work, such as running group discussions and activities on wellbeing; and indirect work, such as the clinical supervision of staff. Project Future staff successfully built trusting relationships with young men and staff and applied their psychological and therapeutic expertise. This was used to support young men with their mental health and wellbeing in a holistic way, including with contextual challenges in Tottenham such as youth violence, safety issues, and distrust of services.

Project Future's intervention was adapted to meet young people's needs and sustained via collaborative activities and relationships. This was very valuable to young men and contrasted with traditional mental health services where access is based on specific referral criteria or service thresholds. This finding is consistent with other evaluations by Centre for Mental Health (Snell & McHayle, 2022; Snell & Durcan, 2018).

Project Future's work at Bruce Grove youth club is also consistent with many aspects of their original model's theory of change (see appendix 1). The most prominent impacts on wellbeing from their work at the youth club were being helped, supported, cared about, having an increased support system, being understood and taking different perspectives.

From our interviews and focus groups with stakeholders and young men, we found that Project Future staff were highly valued by young men who attended the youth club, especially during the pandemic. Young men felt listened to and respected, and said that Project Future

provided them with a safe space to share their concerns and worries in a creative, informal way. Our analysis of attendance and outcomes data showed that more young men were engaging at each reporting period, particularly in wellbeing support activities.

Furthermore, our findings supported staff reports that young men gained greater awareness and understanding of their mental health and wellbeing. Young men told us that they would feel less able to speak openly about their mental health and any issues they were facing if Project Future staff were not there. Despite agreeing that youth workers and Project Future staff were equally caring and friendly, Project Future's focus on emotional wellbeing support came across strongly to young men.

Project Future staff were also highly valued by youth club staff, who reported that working with Project Future had improved team dynamics, helped them continue working during the pandemic, provided expert psychological support for their casework and emotional support to the staff.

From our findings, we recommend that Project Future should have a regular presence at Bruce Grove youth club, as this would benefit young men, both directly and indirectly through supporting staff. More resources ought to be allocated to wellbeing support, coproduction, and employment, education and training.

We further recommend that providers of children's and young men's mental health services should reach out to youth club groups to provide easy access to psychological support, building upon Project Future's model with sustained relationships and engagement. Sufficient, long-term and sustainable funding is essential to ensure this vital work can reach marginalised children and young men, and run without interruption.

Recommendations for Project Future

1. Project Future should have a daily presence at the youth club: both young men and staff would highly value this and it would provide more consistency and accessibility to the support offered
2. Wellbeing support (e.g. psychological framing around youth club activities, 1:1 therapy, groups, wellbeing activities), education, employment and training, and coproduction had the highest rates of engagement. It could benefit young men to focus more resources in these areas in the future.
3. Commissioners of children's and young men's mental health services should ensure that sufficient funding and staffing are deployed to enable practitioners to reach out into youth services and engage marginalised young men in environments where they feel safe and understood. This would build on the relational safety that exists within their network and provide a helpful step in improving accessibility of mental health support.
4. Funders of youth outreach projects should ensure that funding is long-term and sustainable. It is vital that work with marginalised young men is not interrupted by short-term funding cycles and sudden loss of support. Funding for trips, food and engagement activities are important as this was highlighted as a core aspect of building relationships between young people and staff.

Wider recommendations

1. Education and training providers, employers, and professional bodies should seek to address mental health and social inequalities and improve accessibility in mental health provision. For example, improve the diversity and representativeness of mental health professionals and working with communities to improve services. Drawing on the NHS Long Term Plan and The Advancing Mental Health Equalities strategy, led by NHS England, frameworks can be implemented and sustained to achieve this shift in mental health provision.
2. Providers of children's and young men's mental health services should reach out to youth clubs and groups to provide improved access to psychological support. This should build on Project Future's model, where engagement and intervention are adapted to meet young people's needs and sustained via collaborative activities and relationships that are formed over time. This contrasts with access being based only on specific referral criteria or service thresholds. Psychological interventions need to move beyond structured therapy, and include psychologically informed spaces where interactive activities, one-on-one conversations and group discussions take place.

References

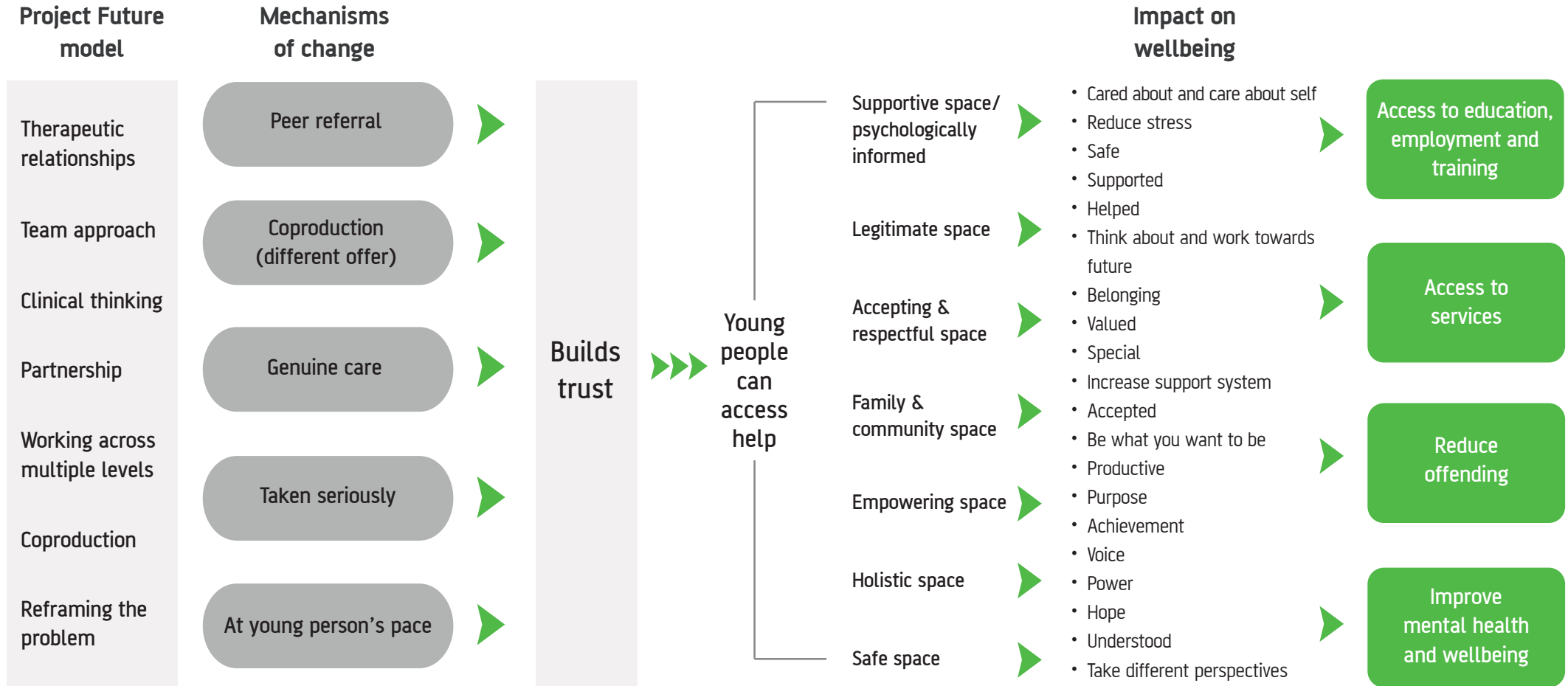
Durcan, G., Zlotowitz, S. and Stubbs, J. (2017) *Meeting us where we're at: Learning from INTEGRATE's work with excluded young people*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/meeting-us-where-were> [Accessed 15 September 2022]

Snell, J. and Durcan, G. (2018) *A space to talk: An evaluation of the WISH Centre's services with young people who self-harm*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/space-talk> [Accessed 15 September 2022]

Snell, J. and McHayle, Z. (2022) *Someone to talk to: Evaluating a young people's enhanced mental health service at Centre 33*. London: Centre for Mental Health. Available at: <https://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/publications/someone-to-talk-to> [Accessed 15 September 2022]

Vaswani, N. (2018) *Adverse Childhood Experiences in Children at High Risk of Harm to Others: A Gendered Perspective*. Glasgow: Centre for Youth & Criminal Justice. Available from: <https://www.cycj.org.uk/resource/adverse-childhood-experiences-in-children-at-high-risk-of-harm-to-others-a-gendered-perspective/> [Accessed 15 September 2022]

Project Future Theory of Change



Always there for us

Published September 2022
Photograph: Project Future

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity and relies on donations to carry out further life-changing research. Support our work here: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

© Centre for Mental Health, 2022
Recipients (journals excepted) are free to copy or use the material from this paper, provided that the source is appropriately acknowledged.



Centre for
Mental Health



Centre for Mental Health
Room AG.22, 11-13 Cavendish Square
London W1G 0AN

www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

Follow us on social media: @CentreforMH

Charity registration no. 1091156. A company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales no. 4373019.