

REPORT

Centre for  
Mental Health



# Shifting the Dial

Evaluating a community programme to promote young Black men's mental health

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FIRST CLASS FOUNDATION



LIGHTPOST  
THEATRE

the  
Rep

**NHS**  
Birmingham and Solihull  
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## A note on terminology

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We recognise that the language used by academia, services, and policy to talk about race and ethnicity can be problematic. It can create further barriers to having open and honest conversations about racism and the impact it has on people and our wider society. For the purposes of this report, we have aimed to be specific wherever possible, rather than using homogenising terminology. Where we refer to young Black men, this refers to young men of Black African and Black Caribbean descent.

Where we are referring to multiple communities who experience racial inequality, we have used the term 'racialised communities'. However, this report also cites multiple sources of research, many of which have used other labels or categorisations. In these situations, we have used their chosen terms, with inverted commas.

## Executive summary

Shifting the Dial is a three-year partnership that seeks to promote the mental health of young Black men aged 16-25 based in Birmingham. The innovative partnership includes:

- **Birmingham Repertory Theatre (The Rep):** Hosts the programme and Lightpost Theatre Company, a dedicated theatre group led by and for young Black men
- **Centre for Mental Health:** Leads on the evaluation and facilitates peer-led research
- **First Class Foundation:** Engages young Black men through the Dear Youngers project delivering peer to peer support, outreach, forums, mentoring and skill development
- **Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust:** Leads on the development of employment pathways and opportunities for young people including apprenticeships, volunteering and work experience.

The projects work together collectively to influence system change. The findings in this report are based upon a three-year process and impact evaluation led by Centre for Mental Health in collaboration with a network of young peer researchers.

### Implementation of the programme

- This evaluation is based upon evidence gathered by Centre for Mental Health between October 2018 and August 2021
- Overall, the projects report good levels of engagement with young African Caribbean men through sessions offered by First Class Foundation and Lightpost Theatre Company, and have overall surpassed the initial targets set
- A total of 500 young men attended at least one Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre Company session, with 111 engaging in three or more sessions over the three-year period

- There was also sustained engagement from peer mentors/youth leads. These young men had additional duties to other participants, supporting others by acting as relatable role models and providing informal pastoral support
- The programme had ambitions to engage the community in events and awareness raising about the mental health needs of this group
- Over 1,200 individuals attended events and productions hosted by the projects during the three year period.

### The impact of the programme

Young men at Lightpost Theatre Company and Dear Youngers valued having a space to feel part of a family. They appreciated the intimate close-knit nature of their group, and felt they could escape the daily hassles of life as young Black men.

Being part of a group made up of Black people made young men feel more comfortable, and sharing common interests was important for creating unity and belonging.

Attending Lightpost Theatre Company and Dear Youngers were seen by some as pre-emptive steps to prevent one's mental health getting worse, like a weekly therapy session through belonging, self-expression and providing a remedy to stress.

The main benefits of attending Lightpost Theatre Company, from peer researchers' point of view, were feeling more confident and seeing a positive future for oneself. Their dreams and aspirations felt more realisable on account of the support and brotherhood from the other Lightpost Theatre Company members and project leads. Young men felt greater confidence from performing at The Rep and improved their communication skills. The main benefits of attending Dear Youngers, from peer researchers' point of view, were fostering a growth mindset towards realising one's potential and goals, having the tools to work

towards this and being encouraged to persevere from the brotherhood between participants, mentors and leads.

Following the murder of George Floyd, young men reported feeling more depressed, anxious and angry, and attending Lightpost Theatre Company and Dear Youngers gave them a place to express those feelings and also a positive and fun distraction from low feelings.

Many young men felt lonely during the lockdowns, and digital sessions with Lightpost Theatre Company/Dear Youngers to check in with each other gave them focus and something positive to do. Although young men preferred in person sessions overall, they really appreciated the digital offer when this was not possible due to Covid-19 social distancing regulations.

## Key learning for projects

The programme has brought together organisations which each offer unique and complementary expertise that has benefited young people. Project leads demonstrated a strong commitment to the programme, and this facilitated collaborative working and problem solving, particularly during challenging periods.

Projects demonstrated resilience in the face of adversity and change brought on by the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement. Embracing innovative ways of working, particularly online, sustained engagement with projects.

However, the implementation of the programme was not without difficulties. For example, the pandemic affected project delivery and staff wellbeing. The evaluation also highlighted the many barriers faced by Black-led organisations in accessing sustainable funding. Different organisational cultures across the partnership also made it difficult to overcome challenges at times.

## Recommendations

### For policymakers

1. The Government should seek to address the causes of poor mental health among young Black men as part of the forthcoming

cross-government Mental Health Plan. The Department for Health and Social Care should find opportunities to meaningfully engage young Black men in the development of the plan.

2. NHS England should invest in and design dedicated and tailored mental health support for young Black men as part of the second phase of the NHS Long Term Plan.
3. The Government must commit to tackling all forms of racism, discrimination and exclusion. This should include action to address the specific injustices faced by young Black men across health, education, employment and criminal justice systems. The Government should be led by robust evidence across these areas and not follow the conclusions reached by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.
4. Organisations seeking to work in partnership with Black communities should invest time and effort in developing trusting relationships when working ‘arm in arm’. And larger scale organisations working with smaller racialised groups should actively involve them in planning, decision-making and review processes.
5. NHS England and professional membership bodies should work together to ensure the mental health workforce reflects the communities they serve and that values of anti-racism, diversity and inclusion are actively promoted.
6. NHS England should ensure the unique experiences and engagement preferences of young Black men are considered as part of the development of the Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF) and the implementation of the NHS Advancing Mental Health Equalities Strategy.

### For funders

7. Ensure Black-led charities are able to equitably access funding and support, particularly funding and programmes aimed at improving the mental health of Black and racialised communities.

## Introduction

Shifting the Dial is an innovative partnership that launched in October 2018 to boost the mental health and wellbeing of young Black men in Birmingham.

The programme is based upon a collaboration comprising Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Centre for Mental Health, First Class Foundation and Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust. A grant totalling £750,000 was allocated to cover a three-year period.

Shifting the Dial was borne out of an earlier pilot, Up My Street, which was commissioned by the charity Mind. This was evaluated from September 2015 to December 2016 with funding from Comic Relief. Centre for Mental Health published its evaluation of that project, **Against the Odds**, in 2017, drawing together emerging insights and learning from the model following a two-year evaluation (Khan *et al.*, 2017). Shifting the Dial builds upon the findings and recommendations set out in the report, aiming to work with even more young men over a longer period.

This report presents findings from an impact and process evaluation based on data gathered between October 2018 and September 2021. It draws together insights from young Black men engaged by the projects and from project leads. Collectively, the projects worked with over 500 young Black men, involving them in a series of cultural and creative activities.

The evaluation explores the extent to which participating in the projects has led to improvement in the young men's wellbeing and self-confidence. It also examines the ways in which the projects worked together to deliver on the programme's theory of change, which seeks not only to improve outcomes for young Black men but also to drive change across the systems they interact with.

Commissioners, service providers and policymakers will find insights from this evaluation useful in better understanding the needs and experiences of young Black men, as well as those of Black-led organisations or initiatives.



*Dear Youngers. Photo credit: First Class Foundation*



*Lightpost Theatre Company. Photo credit: Kris Askey*

## What do we know about young Black men's mental health?

Evidence on race, ethnicity and mental health present a mixed picture, but it is generally recognised there are significant inequalities that impact on the mental health of racialised communities. Young Black men are amongst the groups facing the starkest inequalities, yet often fly under the radar.

Research suggests that among boys aged up to 14, being from a 'Black, Asian and minority ethnic' background reduces the risk of poor mental health (Gutman *et al.*, 2018). However, later in adulthood, African and Caribbean men are three times more likely than their white counterparts to be diagnosed with schizophrenia, but less likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety. The use of the Mental Health Act varies widely by ethnicity, with higher-than-average rates recorded for people from African and Caribbean communities (NHS Digital, 2018). A recent article by The Independent revealed that Black and mixed-race children accounted for 36% of young people detained in acute mental health services despite making up 11% of the population (based on unpublished data from NHS Benchmarking). Conversely, young Black people made up just 5% of those accessing community-based child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) (Thomas, 2022).

While there are many competing explanations for these inequalities, it should be noted that disproportionality within mental health cannot be explained by genetic or cultural difference; rather, racism and discrimination is the most likely explanatory factor (Synergi Collaborative, 2017). A recent review by the NHS Race & Health Observatory of ethnic inequalities in health care found evidence that young Black men were deterred from seeking help by their knowledge of injustices in mental health services relating to Black people (Kapadia *et al.*, 2022).

Experiences of racism can 'wear down' resilience during teenage and young adult years (Khan *et al.*, 2017) and have been linked to later diagnoses of anxiety and depression, psychosis, and trauma (Karlsen *et al.*, 2005). Racial trauma is a term being increasingly used to describe this phenomenon as people experiencing racism often face psychological and physical symptoms akin to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to Kinouani, "Part of the case for racial trauma as a conceptual tool is that so many people distressed by racism were not meeting the diagnostic criteria for PTSD..." (Kinouani, 2021). Therefore, many people experiencing racial trauma are left to manage their distress alone and in isolation.

Racism and discrimination expose young Black men to multiple and significant risk factors for poor mental health (Khan *et al.*, 2017). These include:

- Poverty
- Unemployment
- Housing insecurity
- Homelessness
- Difficulties at school and subsequent reduced access to opportunities
- Living in unsafe neighbourhoods.

The Covid-19 pandemic is likely to have further exacerbated mental health inequalities for young Black men, according to analysis. For example, men from 'Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds' reported a 14% deterioration in mental health while white males reported a 6.5% decline (Proto *et al.*, 2021). Young Black men's mental health has been impacted by several factors, including bereavement, educational disruption, job losses, misinformation surrounding Covid-19, and further disproportionality in stop and searches as a result of Covid-19 enforcement measures (Abdinasir and Carty, 2021).

## What did we set out to do with the Shifting the Dial programme?

Shifting the Dial set out to establish a Birmingham-based brotherhood of young Black men who feel mentally stronger and healthier. The programme is a follow-up initiative to the Up My Street project which ran in Birmingham and was evaluated from September 2015 to December 2016. Young Black men aged 16-25 were engaged in a range of cultural and wellbeing activities delivered by First Class Legacy, Lightpost Theatre Company, and St Basil's. These projects engaged and supported the young men through:

- Creating a culturally and psychologically informed safe space to 'release emotional stress', explore experiences of discrimination, stigma and their impact on resilience, and to move forward
- Creating a positive and empowering sense of brotherhood or community
- Challenging negative perceptions of Black heritage or stereotypical peer or media expectations which undermine young men's self-worth, sense of self, aspiration, choices, and self-image
- Exploring perceptions of masculinity, fatherhood, and relationships
- Encouraging consideration of historical trauma and associations between Black history and resilience – offering a critical appraisal
- Celebrating young men's strengths, talents, capability, growth, aspiration
- Providing role models for achievement and excellence
- Community awareness raising and mobilisation of community assets.

An independent evaluation carried out by Centre for Mental Health found that engaging in these activities was beneficial to young men's wellbeing (Khan *et al.*, 2017), as they created an atmosphere of brotherhood and unity and explored new dialogues within the community about mental health, self-esteem, and the potential for young men to achieve. Up My Street positively affected the mental health of young Black men.

The benefits to wellbeing and mental health were articulated by young men in interviews and focus groups. For example:

### **Experiencing brotherhood and community:**

*"I didn't know what it means to have a group of men in a room together, that we could be so positive. I didn't know that it was spiritual, that I would feel unstoppable, feel powerful and it has been so precious to be at the centre of it... and it's been stopped for hundreds of years."*

### **Using the power of creativity:**

*"That's why I use spoken word. It's very therapeutic. It's an outlet. I explode on paper rather than exploding in the outside. And I can track how things have moved. It's a form of self-therapy and it's creative at the same time."*

### **Improved self-knowledge:**

*"It's made me think more about my race and my culture and this is who I am, this is how I need to be, and I am not afraid of being who I am."*

These projects achieved significant improvements in the young men's wellbeing without being overtly 'about' mental health.

The Shifting the Dial programme was designed to sustain the valuable outcomes of the original project and build upon the recommendations of the evaluation by:



- Working arm-in-arm with young Black men to design, deliver and evaluate the projects, harness learning, and use it to influence wider systems change
- Continue strengthening the mental health resilience and wellbeing of young Black men
- Improve young Black men's self-esteem, self-belief and mental health awareness
- Assist young Black men's personal development, increase their economic opportunities and encourage inclusion
- Upscaling to reach more beneficiaries and encourage a sustainable wave of young Black leaders who will 'pass it forward' to other young men.

There are three broad aims of Shifting the Dial:

1. To coproduce with young Black men:
  - Ways of promoting their resilience and wellbeing
  - Ways of promoting improved opportunities for young men
  - Ways of influencing local and national system change.
2. To increase the numbers of young men working in community health settings
3. To decrease mental health stigma and improve community support for young men.

Project partners sought to achieve this by focusing on:

- Outreach and engagement through forums, theatre productions and community events
- Development and leadership through volunteering and employment, speaking opportunities and personal development through mentoring
- Coproduced evaluation through peer research including participant observation
- Policy and systems change through Fix It events, influencing decision-makers and policy change.

## What did Shifting the Dial aim to achieve, and how did it support young Black men's wellbeing?

### About the Dear Youngers project – First Class Foundation

The mental health and resilience project, Dear Youngers, is an innovative, therapeutic, solution-based initiative. It engages young African Caribbean males around wellbeing and mental health resilience and explores adverse childhood experiences in a safe environment that is psychologically informed and culturally sensitive, delivered and facilitated by relatable role models. The project does this through a mixture of group work sessions and one to one sessions.

A series of 12 workshops (of up to two hours per session) delivered within Forum spaces where motivational and relatable leaders and men come together to talk about life in an authentic environment.

(First Class Nation, n.d.)

According to project leads, the key aims of First Class Foundation's Dear Youngers programme were to:

- Look at a range of pathways for young Black men to be successful
- Embed support mechanisms around their personal development
- Look for business opportunities and raise aspirations
- Promote positive mental health.

There was an important intergenerational aspect to Forums through the guest speakers who attended. A project lead explained why it was valuable and the impact it had: "You have the younger and older community coming together to have a dialogue around experiences, so the older generation can share their hurt, their pain, their scars, their challenges and trials, and to give an insight into how they can overcome some of those trials before they are exposed to them."

## About Lightpost Theatre Company – The Rep

Lightpost Theatre Company is a company of young Black men aged 18-26 from across Birmingham and the West Midlands. The company seeks to actively challenge some of the social stigmas and ideas associated with young Black men, using theatre as a gateway to create new plays of social and historical importance.

Addressing the effects of racism, discrimination, negative self-image and invisibility, Lightpost Theatre Company helps to strengthen the mental health, resilience and wellbeing of those involved, improve self-belief, raise mental health awareness, assist personal development, and encourage inclusion and friendship.

According to project leads, the key aims of Lightpost Theatre were to:

- Help young men gain the skills and experience to pursue acting as a career
- Help them gain employment
- Build confidence and self-belief
- Provide the opportunity for regular self-expression.

For Lightpost Theatre Company, the project lead explained that it is about young men “having a place to express [themselves] and to tell stories of historical and social importance... a lot of the stuff we talk about, which the young men are going through, are issues with identity, pressure, and institutional racism, so we ended up making plays about these conversations”. Some of the young men keep coming back “because it’s the only thing that stimulates them in the week”.

Crucial to both Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre Company was creating a safe space where young men could feel free to speak about their feelings and any struggles they were facing. As one project lead put it:

*“Sometimes in life you can be with someone who is silently screaming... you can’t hear them, but they are crying out for help in their attitude or their behaviour, they are going through something that they are not able to articulate”.*

This could lead young people to be negatively labelled by different places, such as the schooling system. Growing up in a city with high deprivation can be toxic, and project leads wanted to take young people “out of that environment so they can drill down into understanding their own identity and masculinity” (Dear Youngers project lead).

This is where the culturally appropriate and safe spaces created by the projects are crucial. Young Black men need this support because:

*“We will face adversity in the Black community just [from] being born; you instantly got something that you... have to face if it’s primary school or secondary school, or in life – racism will be permanently there... you were just born into a life where people saw you as something different because you weren’t necessarily white. So, there is already adversity and a big challenge instantly when you are born.”* (Young man, Lightpost Theatre Company)

Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre Company both aimed to encourage young men to increase their self-belief and realise their inner potential to achieve their goals and be successful:

*“[Our participants] need to find out who they are, their true identity, their true purpose and what their skills and abilities are... It all stems down to belief: do you believe that you’re able to be successful, to have that opportunity that you deserve... the word education itself means to draw out that hidden potential... believe in that [potential] and then you can build resilience on top of that.”* (Dear Youngers project lead)

*“Society defines people in classes... I’m saying forget that, I’m saying to anyone I work with, be first class, make your own class system, mindset, attitude, belief... forget how society wants to define you – be first class.”* (Dear Youngers project lead)

Related to this programme aim was the drive to actively fight against negative stereotypes of young Black men. As one project lead put it:

*“I’m very firm with lateness, but when they come late and I can see there’s been effort, I always greet them because they’re not used to that... I want them to get rid... of labels that have been placed on them, I’m always talking to the boys about their idea of ‘Black man time’ [the stereotype of Black men or people always being late] – I say it’s not funny, the problem is we’ve made it funny, so people can use it against you as a joke... but people who tend to use it don’t look like us... let’s not accept these things that devalue us as a people or you as an individual, don’t let them expect you to be late, let’s change the narrative.”*

It was important to the project leads that Lightpost Theatre Company would not be labelled as doing shows ‘just for Black people’ but shared high quality, dramatic performances which told stories anyone could relate to. Lightpost Theatre Company is about “being able to share our perspective on things... I’m telling the story about me and my culture, not about my Blackness. My Blackness may be a part of it, but that’s not all of it. So, I think that’s what our... community kind of looks towards us for” (Project lead, Lightpost Theatre Company).

Related to this theme of challenging stereotypes, Dear Youngers will be working with the Commonwealth Games as partners to develop a scheme where young Black people will be exposed to a more diverse range of sports such as tennis or golf.

However, project leads perceived that at times social media could be a distraction for young people and did not provide genuine connections with people invested in their wellbeing:

*“Young people are looking up to social media and not having real tangible relationships, role models, mentors who you can ask ‘How did you do it, to get to where you are?... what did you have to sacrifice?’ and to get tips and advice on how to overcome hurdles.”* (Dear Youngers project lead)

*“Yo, in this life where social media is in your face and is telling you, you need to get the cars, you need to get the lifestyle now, we tell them [the young people] that you know what, you’ve got a choice, either you be controlled by the social media, or you can control the social media.”* (Dear Youngers project lead)

Therefore, connecting young men with relatable role models was key to the project’s methods and their success. It is an important way to build resilience in young Black men, through “showing them resilience and being honest and telling them stories of how people overcome and made it... it’s planting seeds into their heads.”

## Theory of Change

A theory of change describes a programme’s overall aims and intended outcomes. Our theory of change (see Figure 1 overleaf) has been used to support the planning and delivery of the programme and has guided the evaluation. It makes links between the target groups, activities, short- and longer-term outcomes. The original theory of change from the Up My Street pilot programme was developed and refined in collaboration with project partners, peer researchers and former participants of the project. This guided discussion was facilitated by Centre for Mental Health, and it was agreed that much of the original theory of change remained pertinent.

Figure 1: Theory of Change for Shifting the Dial



## Evaluation approach and method

The Shifting the Dial evaluation used a mixed methods approach combining process and impact evaluation to address the following research questions.

### Process evaluation

- What are the projects and how did they work?
- What factors impacted delivery? (e.g. pandemic, organisational changes)
- What have been the achievements during delivery?
- What have been the challenges of delivery?
- How well did the projects engage young people?
- How well did the projects support young people?

### Impact of programme on young Black men

- What did young men want from contact with the programme?
- What did young men value (or not value) about the Shifting the Dial programme?
- What improvements could be made to the Shifting the Dial programme?
- What outcomes did Shifting the Dial have for the young men involved?
- Did Shifting the Dial have an impact on the wider Black community in Birmingham?

### Impact on the wider system

- What does this look like and what do stakeholders want from it?
- To what extent are system change events successful and what are the areas for improvement?
- How much are young Black men driving system change?
- To what extent is activity linked into local strategic action?

## Working with peer researchers

Centre for Mental Health has been working with a group of peer researchers to capture evidence on how the programme is experienced and is working. Our peer researcher, Alex Augustine, is a core member of staff and worked extensively on the pilot programme, Up My Street. In addition, we worked with three Birmingham-based peer researchers and one London-based peer researcher aged 16-25. Peer researchers used their lived experience of being young Black men in a white-centric society, to:

- Provide advice to the Centre on the process of the research and help shape activity. This is important, because we know that the white researchers on this project and predominantly white organisations can unconsciously see things through a lens of white privilege
- Carry out interviews and focus groups, forming strong rapport with other young Black men and bringing their expert knowledge to ensure the right questions are asked
- Provide insight into the dynamics in the room via participant observation. Their sensitive perspectives reveal insights on cultural context, the role of gender, intergenerational dynamics, and issues of identity.

## Data collected

- 6 focus groups with young people
- 16 interviews with young people
- 21 interviews with project leads
- 16 events/sessions have been observed and analysed by at least one peer researcher (participant observation)
- 2 Fix It events observed and analysed by at least one peer researcher (participant observation)
- 6 interviews with community members
- Range of feedback sheets and informal conversations, notes from partnership and Fix It meetings.

Data was gathered between October 2018 and August 2021.

## Limitations

There are some limitations that impacted the research methodology. This includes:

**Quantitative data:** The short version of the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) was introduced as a tool to help track changes to young people’s wellbeing throughout the course of the programme. However, due to low completion rates, particularly on follow up surveys, the projects and the evaluators agreed to abandon the use of the survey after year one of the project as it would not yield robust or significant results. The small sample size also means that we are unable to extrapolate or directly attribute the SWEMWBS scores to the programme.

**The lack of a comparison group:** There was no comparison group, therefore we are unable to control for possible other factors that might be impacting on the young men’s wellbeing outside of their engagement with the project.

**Potential biases:** Research participants were engaged in the projects either as project participants or project staff therefore, there is a likely degree of response bias in the self-reported data.

The project leads were asked about some of the challenges observed in supporting the young men to complete the survey. They highlighted the following barriers:

*“Time taken away from rehearsal. Lack of understanding how the surveys related to the drama sessions.”* (Project lead)

*“Not knowing what the information was used for.”* (Project lead)

*“Quite negative language that may have been slightly triggering to some young men.”* (Project lead)

The project leads also shared potential solutions to these challenges:

*“Providing incentives motivates the young men to fill out the survey. Moreover, they engage in the survey process more when they are aware of what the feedback is used for. It will probably be good to host quarterly sessions to demonstrate how the survey answers are moulding new programmes etc.”* (Project lead)

*“Speaking generally [about any participatory project] monitoring is always a nightmare, but I've seen it work best where participants and evaluators co-design the method. I know the purpose here was to use an 'accredited' methodology (WEMWBS), but we could think about adaptations to... wording/language to make [it] more personal? For example, K had a system (describe which car you would be) – more playful/symbolic.”* (Project lead)

**The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:** The Covid-19 pandemic temporarily interrupted the delivery of the programme. The evaluation was paused for six months to accommodate a six-month extension of the programme, and project delivery shifted to remote provision during the lockdown periods. Further insight on the effects of this disruption is explored later in the report.

## Implementation findings

This section sets out findings on the implementation of the projects between October 2018 and August 2021. This includes outcomes relating to participant access and engagement, community engagement, and digital and media engagement. This section also outlines how the projects were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Who was the Shifting the Dial programme aimed at?

Shifting the Dial was aimed at young African Caribbean men in Birmingham and its vicinity aged 16-25, as this was identified as a critical period of transition where the interventions and opportunities on offer would be most relevant.

### How did young people first access the projects?

#### Access to the Dear Youngers project

First Class Foundation (which hosts the Dear Youngers project) is a community-based grassroots organisation which has a historic track-record of working with the community and engaging young people and parents. Young men's main ways of hearing about Dear Youngers were through social media or word of mouth from friends or family. They were also linked up through outreach or meeting one of the project leads in the community – although this became less possible during the pandemic.

Young men's parents or family members ask them to attend, and in some cases even attend with them. Parents refer their sons because:

- They are worried their son is 'going down the wrong path', and are seeking some mentoring/one-to-one work (prevention and early intervention – for example, for young people getting involved in gangs or selling drugs)
- Their son has already gone through a process (e.g. prison) and parents want to 'keep them on a straight path'
- Their son is about to get sentenced, and they ask a Dear Youngers representative to come to the court and offer emotional support to the parents and the young person

– “they haven't been through it before, but we have experience and know step by step how it will go” (Project lead).

A lot of the project's reach to young people was made somewhat easier by the relationship and connection that it has with a local church, and the fact that some of their older peers and speakers at events also hold similar roles within the church. This goes on to form part of the project's culture of spirituality and prayer. However, it does not exclude young men who are not religious or from other faith backgrounds:

*“I'm not a believer; I'm sceptical, so when I heard about First Class Foundation from [friend from church], I thought I was going to be bombarded by people trying to convert me but that wasn't a big influence, especially at the Zooms I was at – it wasn't pivotal.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

*“Being on all the calls, religion was never the main focus – it was only ever someone's standpoint and people are welcomed to share their perspective and others are open to hearing it.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

#### Access to Lightpost Theatre Company

Members of Lightpost Theatre Company typically find out about opportunities to join the group and take part in productions through social media and word of mouth. Project leaders would have liked to also spread the word through local youth clubs, but “these have dramatically reduced as a result of austerity”, according to one project lead.

In the early stages of recruitment women and girls (specifically friends, girlfriends, and family members) played an important role in spreading the word to young men “because they want the ambitions and expectations of these guys to be raised”. The founder of Lightpost Theatre Company said this was key to the first cohort being formed. Also, a community gatekeeper did a social media post about Lightpost which went viral and led to a huge amount of interest – people wanted to find out what was going on and were surprised that something was going on for Black people at The Rep – which led to 40 men signing up.

## Challenges or barriers to engagement

Project leads identified some challenges and key barriers that impacted the young men's engagement with the projects.

One project lead from Lightpost Theatre Company noted that when the mental health benefits of joining were mentioned, some young people said 'no, leave me out of that' due to the stigma around the topic.

Another project lead for Dear Youngers explained how it can be challenging getting young people into the room in the first place:

"Because young people are distracted, there's other things to do. You know, as a young person, everyone's just on the hype. If we did a party and what we're saying was, come to this party, there's loads of girls, that's easy. But when you're talking about literature and get some knowledge and empowerment, sometimes it's hard until they come to this place and realise why this is really positive. But it's getting them in the room in the first place that's sometimes quite difficult." [Dear Youngers project lead]

## Attendance

Overall, the projects reported good levels of engagement with young African Caribbean men through sessions offered by Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre, and have overall surpassed the initial targets set. A total of 500 young men attended at least one Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre Company sessions, with 111 engaging in three or more sessions over the three year period.

In year one, the number of young men attending less than three sessions (41) is likely to be an underestimate, as the projects interacted with young people in other ways besides ongoing activities such as the Forum events and weekly sessions at Lightpost Theatre Company. In year two, the projects refined the definition of 'contact' to include one-to-one support and taster sessions in schools. Attendance was lowest in year one (42 young men), most of whom attended just one session.

In year two, five times as many young men attended (220 in total). Dear Youngers improved their ability to attract young men back to the project, although most young men attended once only, 70 attended two sessions and 52 attended three or more times.

In year three, attendance dropped from the second year, but was still higher than year one. As in previous years, most young men attended once only.

It should be noted that the pandemic and associated disruption negatively impacted attendance at points. However, once the Forums moved from face-to-face to digital sessions they were once again well attended.

While Shifting the Dial is primarily aimed at those aged 16 to 25, a small minority of boys and young men falling outside of that age bracket engaged in sessions, with majority attending the Dear Youngers project.

## Other ways young men engaged in the programme

### Peer mentors and youth leads

Young Black men were offered the opportunity to become peer mentors and youth leads once their engagement with the projects was completed, to provide participants with additional support and encouragement.

The mentors' role was to:



- Act as relatable role models – sharing their personal experiences (e.g. in the Forums and at the start of rehearsals where young people catch up about how their week is going – sharing things to celebrate and problems)
- Help with the handing out of surveys and attendance registers
- Help create strategies for ‘Fix It’ events (bi-annual events which bring together practitioners, commissioners and politicians to influence positive systems change for young Black men)
- Attend partnership meetings
- At Lightpost Theatre Company – mentors supported young people who have learning difficulties or less confident readers. If someone was finding the session overwhelming and needed time out, a mentor assisted them and listened to them
- At Dear Youngers – mentors were panel members at forum events to discuss topics such as LGBTQ+ identities and gang culture, to raise awareness of how these topics impact young people.

### **The NHS ‘Pathways and Bridges’ employment pathway**

The Shifting the Dial programme initially set out with an ambition to create an employment pathway to increase young Black men’s employment opportunities within NHS mental health services. However, this was not taken forward within the programme as a major area of work. Instead, young men were offered development and employment opportunities through the projects, as youth leads, mentors, project lead roles and through peer research opportunities as identified earlier in this chapter.

## **Wider engagement**

### **Community engagement in events**

The local community played a crucial role in the successful delivery of Shifting the Dial. Community members have engaged with the programme through events put on by Shifting the Dial projects, such as the theatre productions delivered by Lightpost Theatre Company.

A target of 3,000 attendees was set and agreed by the projects. In reality, 1,248 attendees attended Shifting the Dial events. This is partly due to community engagement with Shifting the Dial events being significantly hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, particularly theatre restrictions.

Dear Youngers has been instrumental in bringing the community together at times of crisis. For example, there was a fatal shooting of a young person in the Ladywood area of Birmingham in May 2019. First Class Foundation held a prayer vigil attended by over 80 young people and local community members the day after.

### **Media engagement (including social media)**

Shifting the Dial has had a significant reach on social media. We measure this by capturing levels of engagements and impressions.

In the first year, Shifting the Dial achieved 5,087 social media engagements or impressions, which is almost four times the amount aimed for in the bid across three years.

To date, media coverage of Shifting the Dial has included articles in newspapers, radio, and television.

## Shifting the Dial's impact on young Black men's wellbeing

*“As a Black person life is tough; it can be even tougher if you're not educated, if you're not qualified for things... you are always working, always trying everyday... the word ‘hustle’ is very much associated with Black culture... regardless of what line of work you're in, as a Black person you associate with that word because you're trying to build for yourself because the chances are that you're not going to inherit like most other cultures get to do. Every day is tough, it's a battle and it can be hard and exposing.*

*Then when you come to a space where you see other people who are like you and the vibe is made to be very comforting, like a big hug... those few hours that you're there is just a priceless feeling, an environment that you probably don't get anywhere else in your life... that's one of the reasons why spaces like that for Black people are so powerful, because of the uplift and belonging that it gives you during that time.*

*It affects you in all these spiritual and mental ways that you don't always have the words to articulate... you just feel great; you've heard from people, you've heard similar stories, similar struggles, you've heard people keeping it real: you locked eyes with someone and it's not negative because the whole vibe is different... those spaces are so valuable and powerful to us... It's like another form of the therapy that you never knew you needed.”*

**Alex Augustine, peer researcher**

This chapter sets out both quantitative and qualitative findings exploring the impact on young men's wellbeing. Overall, young men report positive outcomes and experiences about their engagement with the programme. They identified several factors that are vital in helping to promote their wellbeing and protect their mental health.

### Wellbeing scores

The chosen measure was the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) because of its positive phrasing, which project leads felt was in keeping with their encouraging tone at the projects. The 7-item version was perceived as quick and easy to complete. Also, its status as a validated clinical measure was appealing, as it would form more robust evidence for the projects, which could support their future funding bids. Ongoing catch ups to problem solve implementation problems were carried out.

The young people surveyed at the start of this study reported similar mental wellbeing across all organisations and this remained stable across the second, third, and last surveys. No differences in mental wellbeing were found between organisations and no significant differences in mental wellbeing were found between age groups, ethnic groups, or mentor groups.

The use of quantitative wellbeing measures in projects working with young people presents significant challenges. While numerical data is preferred by commissioners, funders and policymakers as a way of showing impact, it is often not possible to collect in practice and can give only a partial or even inaccurate picture of what they have achieved.

## Qualitative analysis: data from young people

### What does it feel like to be part of Dear Youngers?

Dear Youngers uses comfortable surroundings, Caribbean food, and creates a non-judgemental atmosphere. The atmosphere of Dear Youngers' forum events was described by one project lead:

*“They [young people] really enjoy it because of the environment we create. It’s very family-orientated so when they come in it’s so laid back; its chilled, sitting on sofas ... laughing and joking, talking about real issues and topics which they can actually engage in because it’s relatable ... the role models we bring into the space are relatable too, so they can connect very quickly and very easily. We do*

*icebreakers – we don’t have to build rapport and relationships drastically – it just happens naturally, it’s very organic...*

*We have cultural food in there – rice and chicken and fried dumplings, and they love that... it’s judgment free, no-one is going to get shut down – everyone is very transparent... we show our scars, our hurt, our pain, our experiences and give them [an] opportunity to talk about their experiences because they feel comfortable.”* [Project lead]

*“We’re like a flood defence system ... we’re trying to stop the attack of negativity, negative mindsets.”* [Project lead]

Many of these themes are mirrored in a peer researcher’s participant observation journal, which vividly describes the atmosphere of the Forums:

### Peer researcher participation observation journal

“The concept behind the Dear Youngers Forum is to provide a safe but familiar environment for young men to confront issues that are prevalent yet unaddressed. In every culture there are certain staple acts that are at the heart of that culture, for example, those who subscribe to Black culture grew up listening to certain songs, ate certain foods, heard certain phrases, entered certain environments etc, so when the term ‘familiar’ is used, it is these things that are being referenced. The event began with attendees walking into a room that was intentionally arranged to recreate the feeling of being in ‘Nan’s House’. In Black culture many are familiar with the tradition of going to ‘Nan’s house’ for dinner. This was a regular weekly visit and the house acted as a hub for many friends and family, who would share in laughter, love, food, etc. This tradition has been lost over the years but still stands as a place of happy memories for many...”

“Each question sparked a tsunami of discussion between attendees... For example, when asked “who teaches you to be a man?”, once the discussion amongst attendees ceased [the project lead] replied with the question “why did nobody say their own father?” In this seemingly simple question, [the project lead] uncovered the reality of the relationship between all those in attendance and their respective fathers. The fact that nobody in the room spoke of their father, but listed other things such as experience, environment, media, trauma, even mothers, as their source for manhood training, displays the clear need for an event like the Dear Youngers Forum to exist as many are expected to be men when they never had an ideal role model of manhood in their peripheral.”

“The atmosphere in the room was charged with love that enabled walls in the hearts of those in attendance to come down. Putting up a guard protects an individual from the short term pain that comes from confronting deep-rooted issues. Many fear this pain so much that they try to live their life ignoring/ coping with these issues, however it usually manifests itself in another way... In addressing these deep issues firmly but in love, the programme was able to fill the room with many gasps of astonishment followed by relief as the realisation hit home that all in the room were in the same boat. This is counselling without being labelled as counselling, which removes the stigma behind seeking help.”

## Fellowship and brotherhood

The sense of fellowship, community, and brotherhood at Dear Youngers events and Forums was a prominent theme. It emerged from our qualitative data as the main reason young men attended sessions. Young men and leaders in the group commonly used the language of ‘family’ and ‘brotherhood’, and felt part of a close, tight-knit group. There was some concern from young men that if more young men joined the group it could lead to a decline in the cohesion and trust of the group.

A space was created where young men felt they could be open and discuss issues they may not feel comfortable speaking about to others: “[I go to DY] to talk to men and boys about things I can’t speak about with my mum”. The topics covered by the Forums included racism, identity, hopes and dreams, finances, nutrition, sports, wellbeing, the media, and masculinity.

When asked what young men not attending Dear Youngers were missing out on (if anything), one young man said:

*“They’re missing out on knowledge and wisdom, a kind of brotherhood as well. Because we are Black in England, we’re essentially lone wolves. So, they’re missing out on that fellowship and community.”*  
(Young man, Dear Youngers)

There was a sense that the benefits young men gained from attending Dear Youngers exceeded their expectations. Some thought it might be boring but went because their friends did and were intrigued.

*“I didn’t know what it [Dear Youngers] was at the start, but I enjoyed the brotherhood and community... and meeting new people and connecting with them”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

## Feeling motivated and inspired to pursue goals by relatable role models

Frequently at the Dear Youngers Forum events, role models who had been successful in their careers shared their journeys with the young men. This played a huge part in motivating young people to believe they could build their own successful future. The Forums helped to

broaden young men’s outlook, encouraged their ambitions, and put them in contact with people they may not have met otherwise:

*“The most interesting thing is with First Class is you end up getting guidance from people that have different views of the world ... Without Dear Youngers, a few of us might have chosen a very different path”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

At Dear Youngers, young men reflected on their life goals and aspirations, and offered encouragement and support to one another. One young man explained that he really valued being part of “a group of like-minded individuals coming together and sharing each other’s opinions on different topics and each other’s professions; feeling productive, and reflecting on your life and situation, which enables you to progress”.

One example of these Forums was described by a peer researcher’s participant observation:

*“The participants were surprised to learn that Jay [Williams, founder of Hoodrich] was from Birmingham, Newtown, and that he was so young when he started the brand at 21 (he is now 26). Jay started the brand with £200 selling t-shirts saved from his 9-5 job and birthday money until he could afford a supplier and a team. He went on to advise participants that they need to have a good mindset... He summarized with ‘switch [off] the XBOX and invest in yourself and your future’.”*

Such sessions were highly valued by young men:

*“It’s really engaging to listen to other Black people’s dreams and aspirations and the things that they’re doing... [you get] this motivation... from people like you.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

*“[I’ve learnt] the importance of having role models; Black men to look up to. It taught me there’s actually a lot more successful Black people to look up to.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

The small group size was appreciated as it meant they could speak to the mentors personally, whereas “in other projects, you may have an unmanageable number of people so there is not that intimacy” (Young man, Dear Youngers).

## Dear Youngers' impact on the community

Having relatable role models in the community, including ones who had turned their lives around for the better, was seen as very important:

*“One thing our community lacks is role models, ones we can relate to – like [the project founder] being on road but turned his life around, keeping it raw and real... showing us a different perspective on life”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

The qualitative data indicated that the knowledge learnt at the Forum events and support given could spread to the wider community of family and friends:

*“The community's better for one person helping another because that ripples out and spreads across.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

*“They're [Dear Youngers] not just scratching the surface, they're going deep on topics like manhood... I can utilise this knowledge and also spread it to the community”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

Social media content was seen as a key way to spread positivity to the community, particularly in times of hardship, such as when young people in the community were victims of violence:

*“I see [the Dear Youngers founder] on social media supporting families; he even provided support to the family of a victim in Birmingham and spoke at the event. The victim's young friends would have heard and benefitted from his message and potentially changed their minds for the better.”* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

## Lightpost Theatre Company's impact on the community

Community members who attended sell-out shows by Lightpost made many positive comments, picking up on the importance of the group in promoting the personal development and potential of young people:

*“They are a theatre group that benefit the community and young men in this world. [It] gives them somewhere to be, do and express themselves.”* (Community member)

*“This performance has shown me that there is so much talent within young people that tends to get overlooked.”* (Community member)

It was also clear that Lightpost Theatre Company were a “confident group of young men and a group with a strong bond. They all seemed to be really enjoying themselves too. [They had] self-awareness and recognition of [their] strengths, weaknesses and emotions” (Community member).

As one community member put it, these benefits to young people meant that “Lightpost needs to be introduced to more cities” (Community member).

## What changes have young men seen in themselves from attending Dear Youngers?

A key aspect of the Shifting the Dial programme was to build emotional resilience in young men. Young men perceived resilience as the following:

- Faith to believe in what you've been given
- Being intentional to pursue your goals
- Moving towards stability
- Vision
- Being in tune with your purpose.

There was qualitative evidence that these aspects were built by Dear Youngers. The following details the key changes young men saw in themselves since coming to the Dear Youngers project.

### Greater awareness of the options available to progress

Since attending Dear Youngers, young men reported feeling more connected with their purpose in life, and had a “craving to develop [themselves] more”. Spiritual awareness and growth were commonly spoken about by the young men at these events and these topics inspired and motivated them to realise their purpose.

They reported becoming more aware about the different options available to them to progress their goals and lives in a positive way:

*“In our community, people make it seem like the only way to make it in life is to become a footballer, rapper, or drug dealer, when there’s more avenues to make something of yourself. And money isn’t the end goal, one of the key messages of the Dear Youngers project is purpose.”*

It was seen as a unique project bringing together young Black men to “learn and communicate and bounce off one another”. Dear Youngers was seen as an important space where deep conversations about one’s future and goals could take place.

*“Our community needs this kind of project more than other communities; having young Black men come together outside of parties, sports, and music.”*

The young men noted that they have built tighter bonds with friends met at Dear Youngers and developed permission to hold each other accountable. The ‘networking and the connections’ formed at Forums created bonds and helped them focus on reaching their personal development and career goals. For example, a couple of young men started their own businesses after attending Dear Youngers. Without this focus, young men felt it “could mean doing negative things or doing nothing with your life”.

A few young people reported learning the power of goal-setting in order to achieve their ambitions “...which I knew before, but it’s to a next level now. [I’ve been] applying the things I learned. I didn’t have a graduate position but after learning certain strategies at Dear Youngers, I’ve gotten one. I’m also more conscious of who I’m around.”

### **Opportunities for progression and leadership**

Dear Youngers also benefitted the young people who attended Forums, by identifying those who showed high skills and potential in an area and promoting them to be mentors or employees. Two young men became leaders of the Dear Youngers project, and one young woman supports the project, as employees of First Class Foundation.

One peer researcher reported that this change led to more regular contact with participants of Dear Youngers, encouraging them to come to Forums, and signposting them to employment and other opportunities.

### **Greater emotional wellbeing**

One peer researcher reported that the mental health aspect of Dear Youngers tended to be implicit, through conversations about areas connected to mental health such as sleep, exercise and sports, nutrition, Black identity, masculinity and understanding who you are.

The peer researcher observed that young men preferred to do an activity first, such as playing badminton, which then made them feel more relaxed to open up about their wellbeing and any issues they faced.

Young men mentioned learning from the project:

*“To not bottle up my emotions as it harms mental health”*

*“Being able to reflect on what to be grateful for and reflecting on my week and month.”*

*“[Being] more aware of my mental health which allows me to reflect, look at my surroundings and make realisations about who I’m hanging out with or what my purpose is.”*

One young person reported feeling more comfortable in his own skin. When at Dear Youngers, he feels “I’m going to unapologetically be me... stay grounded... and understand my value.” He “used to try and downsize [himself] to fit in” by acting or speaking in a way to please the people around him. Having a safe space where young men feel they can truly be their authentic selves was valued.

### **What does it feel like to be part of Lightpost Theatre Company?**

An extract from a peer researcher’s participant observation journal vividly illustrates the atmosphere of the Lightpost Theatre Company sessions, capturing themes including self-expression, feeling welcome, energetic, and developing natural connections and fellowship between young men:

## Peer researcher participation observation journal

“The concept behind Lightpost Theatre is to provide a space for young Black men to confront issues that are prevalent yet unaddressed through the arts. Some people have talents lying dormant in them due to being subjected to the demands of society e.g ‘get a normal job’. This, in addition to the bombardment of negativity a young Black male faces on a daily basis, many have a lot of built up emotion, similar to a shaken Coke bottle, that they are unable to express without being labelled as a threat. Lightpost Theatre enables the freedom to release this expression through stories that include narratives that young Black men are familiar with...

The rehearsal began with the project lead... checking in with each individual and having light hearted banter through recent affairs (the release of the latest Avengers film). Although on the surface it seems like fruitless conversation, there was a clear difference between the minimal conversation that occurred on the way to the rehearsal room, and the life that burst into the room the moment we entered. Through laughter, energy, excitement, fellowship, the atmosphere was immediately changed and this is important because it displays the shedding of negativity, it shows that the space allows them to ‘let their hair down’ and enjoy being themselves without pressure of having to be something or someone else...

[Lightpost Theatre Company is] a family environment but it is also there to act as a tool to help those involved develop to the best of their ability; therefore, when it is time to work it should be taken seriously, which was the case here. From here members went on to work their way through the script, listening to and also offering suggestions of improvement in order to get the most out of what is written in the script.”  
(Peer researcher, participant observation journal)

“The session started off with a check in, this is where they talk about any updates and talk about how they’re feeling, there’s a natural connection with the lads, a sense of respect and mutual support and a big sense of opening up to each other, of this being a “safe space”. No one interrupts the other excepts for claps and exclamations of support when someone gives good news.”

### Experiencing belonging as though part of a family

Important components of this were that young men were in a group who all looked like them and shared a common interest – theatre making.

Many young men described having a strong sense of belonging to the group, and that the atmosphere was friendly and non-judgemental:

*“I never used to have a lot of friends that were passionate about what I was passionate about until I met these guys [at Lightpost Theatre Company]... I never spoke about how my day went, what we love and what our goals are. I love being here and talking to everyone. They are so welcoming and everyone’s equal here.”*

This was particularly important for young men who didn’t have many Black or Black mixed race people in their area:

*“Being with people who can relate to your experiences... seeing people from 50 miles away being like, ‘Yeah, I face the same problems that you face’... it’s nice to know I’m not the only one.”*

Young men experienced a sense of unity and satisfaction through working together on a show, performing it together and seeing the positive audience reaction:

*“[Other] theatre companies are just theatre companies whereas us, we are a family – like our whole Constructed [play] season we were close-knitted together... we was all emotional together after we finished it and that’s what Lightpost stands for... Brotherhood and doing what we all love doing which is acting, performing and putting a smile on people’s faces.”*

The strength of the bonds formed between young men is illustrated by the determination with which they attend sessions:

*“I’ve had people coming who have absolutely no money... to Lightpost Theatre Company, they don’t want to miss the week’s rehearsals or being with their friends... the amount of guys I see completely drenched in sweat because they’ve run from the station because they didn’t want to be late.”* (Project lead)

A peer researcher observed that at the start of the project, the group tended to be larger (around 20 young people), and that this was a more transient group. More recently it has become a smaller, more consistent group. Young men valued the smaller group size, and felt they could build even stronger connections because of this.

### **Being in a relaxing safe space to escape daily stresses and pressures**

Young men described the positive atmosphere at sessions as an energising and welcome break from their daily routines:

*“Coming here is like a breath of fresh air because everyone loves what they are doing and you are around positive people, no matter what you are going through you are free to talk to [the project leads] about it and you know that they will help you.”*

*“The camaraderie, the stress relief, that’s why I first came and why I’m still here.”*

Being at Lightpost Theatre Company freed young men from work stresses. It also made them feel relief from the pressure ‘to put that mask on’ to obscure their real selves, as a result of living in a mainly white society:

*“I come here... to escape from reality... my work causes me a lot of stress... when I come here, it just feels like freedom, it’s a good bunch of people, they listen and understand how you feel when the world gets to ya... You can express yourself and don’t get judged, whereas out there in society you... have to put that mask on, and that’s damaging, you shouldn’t have to do that.”*

Young men received encouragement to thrive in a joyful space where many felt they could finally vent the struggles they faced as young Black men, with peers and projects leads who understood their experience.

*“I want you to understand the kind of vulnerable position I was in; as a Black man there was never a space for me to share my feelings or speak about my troubles and this kind of pain is one I grew with and it grew with me, holding me in a vice. My experience is not just my own but emblematic of the kind of people that Lightpost tries to – and does – help... I had never been in a space before where this many Black men were being encouraged to thrive, where we were allowed to be as loud as we wanted, and where there was so much joy.”*

### **What changes have young men seen in themselves from attending Lightpost Theatre Company?**

#### **Greater confidence in themselves and their abilities**

Many young men reported feeling more optimistic and more confident in their ambitions and abilities, as a result of attending Lightpost Theatre Company:

*“I’m more out of my shell and free with what I say, I’m less trapped.”*

*“[I have a] higher sense of pride in my work, because other people can do it for me, but it won’t feel the same.”*

*“I’m figuring myself out more, and what I want to do.”*

#### **Improving access to the drama industry for young Black men and encouraging them to pursue their ambitions**

Young men commented that there are notable barriers for Black students who want to go to drama school: either financial costs, or an impression that the school itself awards very few places to Black students. Some young men felt that being from Birmingham was another barrier to making it as an actor:



*“You feel like you haven't got a chance ... no one's looking for Brummies [for acting roles] and especially for people of colour, you're even lower down on the line.”*

One young man described that being with everyone in the group started ‘a fire’ within him to be an actor, and that he had ups and downs pursuing his ambition:

*“In the week I can be topsy turvy, one day I can't be arsed, I'm not getting out of bed today and feel low, and then I'll come in here and be like ‘this is for me, this is the platform for me and what I'm supposed to be doing’... and the only way I'm going to bring Lightpost Theatre Company up is by making this thing better and bigger, feeding each other's energy.”*

Another young man reported being “more optimistic and confident and my love for theatre has grown” since attending the group.

The encouragement from project leads and peers in the group fostered a sense of self-belief among the young men that could sustain them through the tribulations of trying to make it as a young Black actor. Having all Black creatives leading the group enabled young men to see themselves in similar roles in the future. This highlights the importance of representational role modelling, and the idea that ‘you have to see it to be it’. As one project lead put it:

*“It's the Black male encounter... it's a room full of ‘us’, from the creative teams who come to visit to the mentors – it just makes them think ‘I can do it too’... They see me and the mentors... and the idea of them being leaders doesn't feel so alien anymore, because the point is, the place we have come from – that was the same place [they're at]... Everyone deserves the chance to be taught and to be shown... we all have it in us.”*

One young man shared that because of the freelance jobs and chances to “network with people I otherwise wouldn't have had access to” he didn't give up on his dream of working in the theatre industry. Another commented, “I was quite anxious about leading directing, now my self-confidence has improved, and I believe in myself”.

## Greater opportunities for skills development and work

Young men appreciated that going to Lightpost Theatre Company connected them with auditions and opportunities for paid work. One young man explained how being part of Lightpost “enhanced [his] CV” and another reported it had “given [him] a foot in the door to be considered for opportunities to act, produce or make stuff”.

Young people were aware of the prestige associated with The Rep (which hosts Lightpost), which gave them valuable experience as young actors: “[Lightpost Theatre Company has] given me an opportunity to do stuff that I would have never imagined to. It's allowed me to work on one of the biggest stages of my life.”

## Improved wellbeing and happiness

Young people commonly described how happy the project made them feel:

*“Coming here makes me happier, even when I get home for 10pm. I'm not tired and my mum asks me why I am smiling, where I have been and I say ‘I'm just happy’.”*

*“Here isn't a club, like an activity at school, it's something more than that and it brings me happiness, in a way I can't contain. It really changes my mood.”*

One peer researcher observed that ‘Lightpost Theatre Company... was never about sitting in a circle and singing kumbaya, talking about your feelings’. Rather, its focus was young men doing enjoyable drama activities and games with other young men they feel a close connection with. As a result of this meaningful activity with like-minded individuals, “just naturally, your mental health gets better, and you feel a lot happier when you leave” [Peer researcher].

He added that it can be uncomfortable for young Black men to sit in a room and just talk about their feelings. Having the emphasis on drama activities and games encouraged bonding which could then open up the way for conversations about wellbeing and mental health. Project

leads' role modelling helped young people feel they could be open and honest in the group check-ins during each session. One young person mentioned learning lessons by "just observing some of the leaders of Lightpost and seeing how they deal with stresses".

*"[Now] I am able to understand how to let go [of worries], understand how to let someone in, trust somebody – it's that, really, and how to be big again instead of being small."*

Project leads were open about their own personal struggles, which helped foster an environment where it was okay to be vulnerable. For example, one project lead said: "I've told [the participants] I've had nowhere to live before. And they're like, yeah me too... In my young life, I've still seen a lot and it relates to them, I'm not coming from an angle of privilege".

### **Improved understanding of mental health and how to boost it**

Mental health was always embedded in Lightpost Theatre Company by project leads uplifting young men in a safe space and having a wellbeing check in at the start of every session.

In addition, in its early stages there had been a number of community performances focused on themes of mental health. One peer researcher

reported that the mental health element of Lightpost Theatre Company became more overt since March 2020 when new project leads came on board; an extra group check-in was added at the end of each session, which made it more explicit that Lightpost Theatre Company is a mental health project at its core.

One young person commented that attending the group made him "understand mental health more as a spectrum... over my time here I have seen that there's levels to it. Some members will be genuinely happy on that day and will come to Lightpost just for that extra mental health boost to their wellbeing... There are some people who are sort of like masking, and you can subtly tell that they are not having a good day... So yeah, it's a spectrum".

A project lead described that when the group is together, "they feel a collective responsibility to have a more open view of mental health... they want to be ambassadors for the area they come from and leaders spreading the word, to change expectations of mental health."

An important way they do this is through a number of their productions exploring themes of mental health and identity. Young men mentioned that doing research and discussing together how to develop characters with mental health difficulties helped them understand mental health struggles better.

### **The Light Bearers project**

As an offshoot of Lightpost Theatre Company, project leads developed the Light Bearers project with its own website to update young men on any employment opportunities. This initiative will train young men as mentors and facilitators of drama workshops in schools. It will also include support to create digital content for young men to showcase their work with support from project leads.

The Light Bearers haven't started going into schools yet as there was no dedicated budget included within the original Shifting the Dial funding. There are plans for running drama workshops with young Black men, and supporting teachers with how to enable young Black men's learning. Light Bearers is due to commence later in 2022.

## The impact of the pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement

2020 was a year that shocked the world with the emergence of Covid-19 and the murder of George Floyd which sparked a new, global wave of the Black Lives Matter movement. An output of the Shifting the Dial programme was a briefing on young Black men's mental health during the pandemic, which highlighted the compounding effects these events were having on this group (Abdinasir and Carty, 2021).

The pandemic had a widespread negative impact on young Black men, who were among the hardest hit by job losses, and were disproportionately affected by Covid-19 enforcement and policing (ibid).

Like many projects supporting Black communities during this time, the pandemic greatly affected both project participants and project leads. Sessions became less varied and dynamic but overall provided a safe space and focus for young men.

### How did the pandemic impact young people at Dear Youngers from project leads' perspective?

As a result of the pandemic, the Forums moved from monthly in person to weekly online, there was an increase in help-seeking and a focus on employability because of the disproportionate rates of unemployment.

During the lockdown, the Forum events became weekly online sessions because "there was such a demand and a need to mentally support the guys through this time". There was an increase in help-seeking with young people who suffered with anxiety from before the pandemic being more vocal about their worries in the online Forums: "they're reaching out to us like, 'Yo, I need some type of support'". Issues included boredom, low motivation, and loneliness.

The increased help-seeking was seen positively by project leads, as the pandemic "pushed these young men to say, I need to use the support that's there rather than hide [that

I need] it". Project leads and youth leads provided pastoral support by 'calling members without an agenda... phone a man, because in these times, people are going to appreciate those phone calls".

Online sessions had a different atmosphere to the face-to-face Forums. As one project lead put it, "that brotherhood, that energy and that spirit [which] would manifest when we physically meet – we've had some of those moments online but it's very hard to translate some of the affection that comes with the greetings and hugs".

Nonetheless, the project saw a rise in attendance due to:

- Relatable, inspiring speakers who boosted young men's mood and inspired them to focus on their own career aspirations
- Identifying and focusing on issues and topics that were relevant to their lives – for example, entrepreneurial skills
- The project expanding their presence on popular social media sites, such as Instagram and TikTok
- The ease of joining a Zoom meeting
- Word of mouth.

### What did young men think of the support from Dear Youngers during the pandemic?

Young men noted that overall, it is easier to connect in person because Zoom can restrict open interactions, for example through people having their cameras off. Also, everyone is held in one conversation which can't break naturally into chats between smaller groups or pairs. One young man commented that "it could take a few [Zoom] sessions for people to become comfortable".

*"Zoom has its benefits but it's nice to meet people in real life to form better connections, for example... you can't speak individually to people on Zoom."* (Young man, Dear Youngers)

*“[As young men] can turn off their cameras it’s a lot more challenging to gauge their feelings and reactions. The impersonal nature of online... can hinder the establishment of ‘brotherhood’, in other words it’s missing the natural world environment that made Dear Youngers a unique experience.”* (Peer researcher, participant observation journal)

Nonetheless, the discussions and talks which took place were described as “intellectually stimulating”. It was common for some young men to have their cameras off at the start of the session, and to turn them on as the session progressed, which is testament to the speakers’ ability to put them at ease and engage them.

In nearly all sessions, peer researchers observed most participants rated the session as ‘excellent’ at the end. Typically, young men responded to the session with lots of positive affirmations, such as “swear down”, “that’s major still” and the ‘okay’ and ‘100’ emojis.

Young men really appreciated being able to contact the speakers afterwards for more personal support and to ask any questions. A peer researcher captured an example of the dynamic in the digital sessions:

*“When a participant asked, ‘How do you stop yourself from becoming overwhelmed and letting running a business break you?’, Jay from Hoodrich [entrepreneur] replied with ‘Do each day at a time and make some form of progress – an email, a phone call etc’. Some of the participants nodded animatedly and smiled and one said in the comments, ‘that’s real still’ – I would take that as a united agreement... The session finished with a poll: 95% said excellent and 5% said it was lit [better than excellent].”*

## How did the pandemic impact Lightpost Theatre Company from project leads’ perspective?

The pandemic brought much uncertainty to many sectors including theatres, and 40% of The Rep’s staff were made redundant during this time. Lightpost Theatre Company was initially allowed to continue meeting in person during

the lockdown, because creative learning was the only department that was permitted to stay open, as the young men worked on a developing play called Constructed. Young men followed social distancing with grids on the ground and wore gloves and masks during rehearsals.

Due to lockdown restrictions, rehearsals moved online and Constructed was postponed three times. Project leads reported it was hard to keep young people’s motivation up because sessions were less engaging than in person, where they could move around and interact freely. Yet focusing on preparing for the show gave young men a clear end goal in mind. Also, project leads thought the digital sessions were appreciated more by young people, as there were so few options for activities during lockdown. Project leads shared that young people mentioned to them how much they look forward to the online sessions and “being a part of something”.

One project lead mentioned that an element of the culture Lightpost Theatre Company worked so hard to create, that of getting them known by the rest of The Rep including Stagedoor (the reception area of the Theatre for staff), may have been eroded by the pandemic. This is because after lockdown when young men could re-enter the theatre, “it became about whether they had done a PCR test, if they were wearing a mask”, which was a less welcoming experience than previously.

Project leads faced their own struggles and uncertainty on account of the pandemic which made their roles more challenging:

*“You have to be the face of encouragement... project positivity, and sometimes that is difficult... but I try my best to keep positive and reassure them that they’re valued, and the show is going ahead.”*

A greater need for employment support was apparent during the pandemic. As one project lead explained:

*“Pre pandemic I think it was more about getting into drama schools, things like auditions. And now it’s been more focused on employment, obviously the pandemic put a lot of people out of work.”*

During the pandemic, one Lightpost Theatre Company member became a member of staff working at Stagedoor and on set.

## What did young men think of the support from Lightpost Theatre Company during the pandemic?

Most young men preferred face-to-face sessions. They felt it was hard to do rehearsals on Zoom and missed the positive feeling of brotherhood from collaborating in person. It was also challenging to not be in a private space for the sessions, as one young person reported:

*“If lockdown happens again, I’m not going on Zoom because I like working with people in person, because I don’t want people to see or hear what’s going on in the privacy of my home.”* (Young man, Lightpost Theatre Company)

In addition to the rehearsals not being as enjoyable as when they were in person, young men felt frustrated by the cancellations of their Constructed show on account of the pandemic.

*“It felt like, will this play happen? Because of all these delays I felt like it was rocky, and the rehearsals weren’t quite the same.”* (Young man, Lightpost Theatre Company)

Despite these setbacks, the young men found the digital sessions to be a crucial form of social and emotional support and belonging, at a time when many young men felt lonely and worried about the pandemic:

*“Being involved with something like Lightpost can be life changing because right now many will have been starved from human interaction... you need a certain amount of human interaction to remain the same during these times, especially because it gets tough.”*

In this challenging situation, young men felt the digital sessions gave them “an environment where you’re encouraged to be yourself, to be confident and come out of your shell and just be part of something” (Young man, Lightpost Theatre Company). Therefore the sessions were a helpful distraction which enabled young men

to ‘feel like themselves’ despite the significant disruption to normal life at school and/or work.

Young men commented that the project leads must have had their own stresses and pressures during the pandemic, and valued their commitment in keeping the sessions running digitally and trying to keep them engaging. One young man praised the way project leads kept a conversational flow going in digital sessions:

*“Things that we used to have [before Covid] in a session, such as catching up and having a mental health check in... they did a really good job of keeping that up.”*

Project leads’ genuine care for young men and availability if they needed to talk was also praised:

*“They... made it known that they were there, if you ever wanted to speak about anything. It just goes to show that it’s not just about a show or acting or whatever, it’s deeper than that. It’s like they genuinely care about you... that was good, man.”*

Young men reported that project leads responded to a dip in motivation from young men by engaging famous Birmingham-born Black actors:

*“They got Lenny Henry on the call, they got Adrian Lester on the call!”*

Another young man described this as, “big proper opportunities for us!... [Lenny and Adrian] gave us very good advice and that really motivated and lifted our spirits... advice we could take throughout our career... [The project leads told us] ‘We still got opportunities for you guys, we ain’t gonna give up’”.

## How did the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement impact young people?

In the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, some Black project leads told us that they got ‘an influx of emails’ and requests asking them for support and input on issues surrounding racism: “Can you come into our zoom meeting to discuss this? Can you come and help us with

this? We'd love to ask you a few questions on this". The requests came from people who previously had not broached the topic, which made it feel inauthentic and tokenistic.

Moreover, it significantly impacted the wellbeing of Black project leads by making them feel 'burdened to speak', as if they were 'the spokesperson for every Black person' about a deeply upsetting and triggering topic. In addition, it was felt that these requests should have been accompanied by payment ("it's taken a lot of my time") and because of the emotional toll involved in discussing racism.

*"We're going through it... we're seeing this on the news daily... someone who we recognise as being just like us, basically being killed outright on the street by someone who's supposed to protect us."*

From project leads' point of view, the murder of George Floyd and ongoing Black Lives Matter movement "caused a lot of discussion... about self-worth and how society doesn't value Black men and we just created that space for men to just talk how they felt about it."

A project lead reported that the main response from young men at Dear Youngers project was hurt and fear: "They were telling me, 'I'm scared. We're getting killed off'".

Regarding the impact of traumatic images and videos of Black people facing racism on social and traditional media, one project lead felt that young people were already very familiar with seeing such distressing and upsetting material:

*"Every time we pick up Facebook, every time you go on Instagram, every time you go on Twitter, that's all you see, and that can have a damaging effect, especially if you're locked within your house and the only external outlet is social media, and all over the internet... you're just seeing the same traumatic thing. It can have a lasting effect. But having those Lightpost sessions over Zoom during the lockdown helped quite a lot of them be able to separate themselves from that and just have some time... to focus on something else."*  
[Project lead, Lightpost Theatre Company]

## Views from young men from Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre Company

Many of the young people who took part in focus groups felt that the Black Lives Matter movement was sidelined because of the pandemic. They perceived the summer of 2020 to have brought a lot of performative 'action' from white people, which was both triggering and upsetting.

Some young people described witnessing a lot of people revealing their 'true colours', for example by posting 'all lives matter' on social media and saying George Floyd's murder wasn't a race issue. There was a sense that many white people saw Black Lives Matter as a trend, which was demeaning given that such incidents had taken place long before George Floyd's murder.

One young man expressed that, because of this hypocrisy, he didn't feel like his own life mattered to his white peers:

*"I already wasn't happy at the time, not necessarily because of George Floyd but with the pandemic and school... I kind of felt a bit depressed... When the Black Lives Matter stuff happened, I felt like people were being hypocritical."*

Another young man recalled a time a student threw water at him at secondary school while saying to him, "Here you go African boy, drink some water", but was now posting links to Black Lives Matter donation points and judging people for not posting about the movement. The young man said he found it odd that someone who was racist towards him was doing this and that it was completely performative.

*"The movement and what people perceive it to be can put a lot of pressure on young people in how they view their relationships with people who aren't Black and their relationships with themselves."* [Young man, Lightpost Theatre Company]

One participant expressed a need to try to protect their own mental health and wellbeing:

*“I didn’t really attach my emotions to the whole situation... because I knew the news feeds off of people’s emotions... if I did become fully invested in it, it would tear me up inside and I don’t want that, I want my wellbeing to be fine. [It’s] not that I don’t care but I don’t want to follow a trend, that doesn’t apply to me because I know in a few years it won’t mean anything to anyone. I gotta figure stuff out for my own life, before I can even take on the weight of all that. I was only 17 back when it happened [George Floyd’s murder] and taking on all of that emotionally would probably make me bitter and I don’t want that, just for my own wellbeing.”*

### **The importance of identity and self-perception**

As part of the focus group conversation about Black Lives Matter, young men also raised some points about how racism and stereotypes impact their own self-identity.

One young man mentioned that Black people can get pressure from other Black people to act ‘a certain type of Black’. He explained that if they don’t follow certain stereotypes, they would not be perceived as Black nor as a man. He felt this pressure from both Black and white peers, which led to him questioning his identity. He observed that this experience could be different based on how light or dark someone’s skin complexion is (colourism).

Peer researchers shared their views on this topic:

*“I think there’s a lot of self-hate in the Black man and we project that self-hate onto other Black men because they look like us.”*

*“There needs to be a distinction made between Black African and Black Caribbean... People underestimate how much confidence you can have when you know where you’re from. People who are descendants of enslaved Africans had their histories erased... The only points of reference we’ve heard are America and Europe to formulate our identities... That can play into the self-hate, of not knowing where you originally come from, and then you’re told by the media that you’ve only been a slave and not contributed anything to civilisation.”*

On the other hand, “A lot of Black British people don’t necessarily know a lot about their African history and culture on account of the drive of their parents/grandparents to assimilate British white-centric culture, and not make too much of their African identities”.

Peer researchers also discussed some issues facing Black people of African descent:

*“Self-hate can also be present through Africa being presented in a derogatory way by media”*

*“A lot of African people have been socialised to have a middle-class mindset, come to the UK with degrees but do not get access to the opportunities they deserve due to systematic racism”*

*“People who have experienced colonisation back home have been humiliated e.g. through segregation”*

*“Language difficulties – can have problems connecting with home and your own parents.”*

## The role and impact of being a peer researcher

Being a peer researcher provided the young men involved with opportunities to develop research skills and knowledge, as well as other transferable skills.

Peer researchers:

- Completed training about informed consent, research ethics, confidentiality, and anonymity
- Co-produced the peer researcher training
- Co-produced topic guides for interviews and focus groups
- Carried out participant observations at sessions run by Lightpost Theatre Company or Dear Youngers and completed a debrief and reflective journals after each event to capture their key findings, and any personal worries or concerns
- Interviewed young men about their experience of Shifting the Dial
- Co-facilitated and later led focus groups, both in person and online
- Co-authored Centre for Mental Health briefings and presented key findings
- Advised the team on how to best engage young Black men in our research
- Helped the team solve challenges and dilemmas faced in the research.

Positive feedback was shared with peer researchers on their progress, to ensure they felt valued and could move forward in their development of skills. The peer researchers were each asked to set three goals for their personal development and to rate their progress towards these at the start and end of the project. Three peer researchers who completed the Goal Based Outcomes (see Law and Jacob, 2015) to monitor their progress had increases in their ratings by the end of the project.

When asked what they valued most about their experience of peer research, they commented:

- “My work contributed to a greater purpose and [I] got published and acknowledged”
- “Supportive and accommodating team”
- “The support I was given to learn a lot on the job.”

Peer researchers believed they gained the following skills as a result of their experience:

- Greater analytical skills
- More self-confidence
- Better written skills
- Listening skills
- Analysis and summary skills
- A critical eye – when writing reports, analysing data.

Peer researchers suggested improvements could be made to their role; for instance, rather than having just one main training day at the beginning, they suggested having more regular ‘top up’ training sessions to boost knowledge over time. This would be helpful as the nature of sessional work means there are often time gaps between tasks. They also suggested the role would benefit from having a “clearer presentation on what it means to be a peer researcher and how our work fits into the wider project”. Finally, peer researchers argued that in person (as opposed to online) interviews would be less awkward and make it easier to understand participants’ reactions, to find out where to probe more or if a topic makes them uncomfortable.



## Shifting the Dial's impact on the wider system

The Shifting the Dial programme set out with an ambition to influence and participate in system change at the local and national level. Project partners have been engaging system representatives such as the police, health and justice commissioners, mental health service providers and practitioners, public health and local authority staff and councillors, philanthropic funders, youth and leisure providers, probation services, and youth justice managers. Projects have also been seeking to influence national policy through engagement with key parliamentarians and civil servants.

The programme sought to influence system change through a variety of activities, such as:

- Bi-annual 'Fix It' events
- Speaking at external conferences
- Practical tools and resources, such as the **This is Me** guide for schools (Harris and Whittle, 2019)
- Rapid research, such as our briefing on **young Black men's mental health** during Covid-19 (Abdinasir and Carty, 2021)
- Local and national government and parliamentary engagement, including engagement in a recent roundtable on Black people's mental health organised by the Shadow Mental Health Minister, Dr Rosena Allin-Khan.

Project leads shared their long-term vision for system change. This included:

- Mental health services to be commissioned differently to become more culturally sensitive, particularly towards young Black men
- Commissioners and funders to value grassroots practitioners more and listen to what they have to say
- A GP to socially prescribe time at Dear Youngers or Lightpost Theatre to young Black men, and for these services to become mainstream.

### To what extent are system change events successful and what are the areas for improvement?

To address the disconnection between the needs of young African Caribbean men and mainstream services, the programme delivered a total of six 'Fix It' events across the three years. These events brought together young men from the projects with stakeholders and people from the wider community to share learning, and to problem-solve barriers to progress as the programme moved forward.

The 'Fix It' events focused on a range of themes, including:

- Education
- Public health approaches to serious youth violence
- Black Lives Matter and the impact of the pandemic
- Employment.

## Fix It - Improving attainment and wellbeing for African and Caribbean young people

The first Fix It event took place in March 2019. This was a free educational event led by the Shifting the Dial partnership, and supported by Birmingham Education Partnership and Titan Partnership. It was aimed at school leaders and teaching staff.

This innovative event took a creative approach to sharing strategies on how to help young Black men to thrive – leading an open, solutions-focused conversation between school leaders and young people. The format included theatre from young people at the Lightpost Theatre group and a presentation from First Class Foundation.

A Centre for Mental Health researcher and peer researcher carried out participant observation, recruited teachers for interview after the event, and collected feedback cards asking: ‘What is the key thing you took from today? What challenged you? Is there anything you would consider doing differently?’

We received positive feedback from young people and staff members alike, including:

*“[I took from today]... the powerful statement from the young men: ‘we are told we are born broken’; how do we reverse this? It was refreshing to hear from schools their hunger to do more.”*

There was also evidence of attendees’ shifting their perspective on the topic of the day. When asked what challenged them the most, they commented:

*“The legacy of the damage I had experienced and partly led to this cohort of young people. As people discussed on the day, what has previously been regarded as good practice in schools actually did not help certain groups of young people and one would be Black boys! It's all about learning and I'm doing that along with others.”* (Former headteacher)

*“I think there was an element of discomfort and shame for me as a white woman and wanting to make sure that I can support young Black people in education and needing to know more.”*

In 2019, Centre for Mental Health launched its Commission for Equality in Mental Health to bring together evidence about a range of mental health inequalities. Nathan Dennis, founder of First Class Foundation and project lead for Dear Youngers, was appointed as a member of the Commission to share insights from the programme and ensure the Commission’s recommendations responded to the experiences of young Black men. A series of recommendations were developed and outlined in *Mental health for all?*, the final report of the Commission for Equality in Mental Health (Centre for Mental Health, 2020).

### How much are young Black men driving system change?

Young Black men have been involved in driving system change in several ways. This includes co-designing and presenting at Fix It events, speaking at external conferences (such as a digital mental health conference) and being interviewed by media.

Peer researchers were connected to the following opportunities:

- Two peer researchers were interviewed for a book written by Stacey Dooley on young people's mental health
- One peer researcher became Writer in Residence at Centre for Mental Health

- Peer researchers worked on other research projects with Centre for Mental Health, focusing on issues such as social media use and on racial inequalities in young people’s mental health
- One peer researcher contributed to a policy briefing focusing on young Black men’s mental health during the Covid-19 pandemic and presented findings at a Fix It event
- One peer researcher co-authored the *This Is Me* guide to help young Black men thrive in education.

## To what extent is activity linked into local strategic action?

Projects engaged in several system change activities that sought to directly shape and inform local action and decision-making.

For example, one project lead believes that in terms of health and policing, the situation is becoming more positive. During a recent radio programme, he was able to bring local police and young people into the call to discuss the law, stop and search, and the effect it has on young people in the community:

*“West Midlands Police were sharing the law around stop and search and the young people were saying ‘this is the impact’... We now have a working group... with the young people, with the West Midlands Police, who are now co-designing and co-delivering a programme, which we will put on digital platforms, where we start to share the issues around stop and search.”*

Following on from the Fix It event on the Black Lives Matter movement, a senior leader from a local Multi-Academy Trust has pledged to engage the programme in work with their local schools through the Light Bearers project that is in development.

Projects have also been influencing change within their own institutions. For example, the programme has positively impacted Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, enabling the Trust to strengthen its relationship with the community and young Black men in particular through joint events

with project partners. The Elders event is one such initiative, which involved young Black men from Lightpost Theatre performing to a group of patients on the mental health ward. This was delivered as part of The Elders Project which is hosted by the trust and involves volunteer ‘Elders’ from the African-Caribbean community supporting and mentoring young Black patients during their recovery.

Project leads have also been engaging in local consultation processes; for example, participating in a ‘Mentally Healthy City’ workshop where they shared learning from the programme to feed into a public health approach to mental health and wellbeing in the city of Birmingham. Project leads also engaged in a local inquiry into young people’s mental health led by Preet Kaur Gill, MP for Birmingham Edgbaston.

## The impact of system change activities

Overall, project leads felt it was hard to quantify to what extent systems change had occurred, but felt strongly that “it’s about making our demands clear”.

The following were seen as encouraging signs and indications of change in systems:

Ongoing engagement with high profile decision-makers such as a local MP and a public health leader, who were initially invited as speakers and later went on to act as champions of the programme. One project lead noted that there are “Shifting the Dial advocates within the systems they work in with our objectives in mind”.

One outcome of the Fix It events is that “it’s engaged an external partner in a new project, to ensure that targeted change is happening as part of the education system”.

Reflecting on the pace of change, one project lead noted that:

*“We’re definitely speaking to people who have the ability to make a change... and it’s an ongoing thing. It is not something that just gets solved in one conference, but also, there is only so much that we can do at the end of the day. It’s up to them to... decide on making those shifts in social changes within their companies and within their organisations...”*

## Key learning for the partnership

The learning captured from the evaluation demonstrates the programme's journey over the last three years, and this section distils key learnings for the partnership and individual projects. The successes and challenges identified can be used to inform the design and delivery of similar projects.

Shifting the Dial has brought together four organisations which each offer unique expertise and perspectives. This has facilitated the successful delivery of the programme. Project leads are united in their passion and goals to improve the mental health of young Black men:

*“What everyone has in common is the passion for the purpose of it, the reason why they’re doing it [working on Shifting the Dial].”*

(Project lead)

*“It’s working very well, it’s a new approach, everyone targeting the same objectives together... through coming together, we’re stronger and can have a greater impact.”*

(Project lead)

Project leads across the partnership generally adopted a solutions-focused approach when faced with both sudden change and challenges. One project lead noted:

*“I think it’s gone through its challenges at times because we’re all coming from different spaces, but one of the things I salute the partnership for is that we’ve never given up and we’re always trying to find solutions, even when it’s been hard.”* (Project lead)

Project leads checked in with each other regularly and created a safe and informal space to listen and support each other throughout the delivery of the programme. This was particularly critical during difficult and uncertain periods resulting from the pandemic and the recent wave of the Black Lives Matter movement.

## Challenges for the partnership

### The impact of the pandemic on project delivery:

Overall, the most significant challenge reported by project leads affecting delivery was the pandemic, which has been highlighted earlier in the report.

### Impact on staff wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic:

One project lead mentioned that, as a Black parent of a son, when working on Shifting the Dial they can't just 'close the laptop and forget about it' at the end of the day because racism and racial inequalities affect their everyday life.

In person meetings and sessions could be a release but the move to “doing everything from this desk [at home], it's like you're not seeing the Black joy – the whole job has become about Black trauma”.

*“[It is] a heavy role trying to home school your Black son and at the same time write a report about how much he’s going to be impacted by the education system – all of that together turns it into a very different job and your head’s in a different place”.*

However, it was noted The Rep had been good at supporting flexible working.

### Sustaining funding opportunities (First Class Foundation):

One project lead shared how difficult it is for a Black-led charity “to battle for bids to help Black people” with majority white, middle class charities. He commented on how the latter “have a fundraising team, that know how to pattern their bids, and put resources into their bids to make them look a certain way, it’s hard to compete against them... the grant making world is white and middle class”.

**The lack of funding to pay young people for their time (Lightpost Theatre Company):**

One Lightpost Theatre Company project lead commented on the barrier of not having funds to pay the young men in Lightpost: “I could send them to so many schools [for drama workshops] but I need to give them money, because some of these guys call off work to do our shows... I can’t tell you how many enquiries I’ve had about Lightpost Theatre Company, but I can’t entertain the conversation until there’s money”.

**Different organisational cultures:** Differences in organisational cultures have been difficult for the partnership to navigate. These differences range from ways of working through to organisational values. For example, one project lead suggested: “There are different ways of communicating with each partner that works for them and you have to code switch I guess”. Differences in organisational culture have driven many of the challenges identified in this section.



*Lightpost Theatre Company. Photo credit: Armir Trota*

## Conclusions

The Shifting the Dial evaluation aimed to understand the impact of the programme on the young Black men involved and the ways in which it benefitted them. The evaluation also aimed to explore the process of developing such a partnership, and the strengths and challenges of delivering a modified Up My Street model at scale.

A strength of this evaluation is its peer research methodology which ensured that data was collected in an engaging and trusting way between people with shared lived experience. It also meant the interpretation and analysis of data was guided by cultural understanding. The strongest insights can be taken from our qualitative data collected over three years in focus groups, interviews, and participant observation.

From the data it emerged that Dear Youngers and Lightpost Theatre fostered a strong sense of brotherhood and belonging for young Black men. In these safe spaces, young men felt they could express their feelings, struggles and ambitions. These projects were a place young Black men felt joy and freedom in escaping the numerous struggles they can face in society, underpinned by structural racism. They took part in deep conversations about their purpose, identity and how they are impacted by living in a mainly white society.

Young men saw numerous positive changes in themselves as a result of attending these projects, including: a greater sense of purpose and drive to pursue their goals, more self-belief and confidence, and trusting relationships with peers and relatable role models. Attendance of the projects generally grew over the three years, although there was a decline after the disruption caused by the Covid pandemic. Nonetheless, the projects continued to be highly valued by young men during the prolonged uncertainty of the pandemic.

The programme has been making inroads with key national and local decision-makers to influence systems change through its series of Fix It events. A number of pledges have been made by leaders and the programme must work with them to continue to embed and implement positive changes.

The quantitative data from the SWEMWBS provides some provisional insights of benefits to young men's wellbeing. However, this was collected from a very small and inconsistent sample, partly explained by only a minority of the total group attending every session. Future research should explore how to better capture quantitative data on the impact of projects on young men's wellbeing.



*Dear Youngers. Photo credit: First Class Foundation*

## Recommendations and implications

The following set of recommendations emerging from this evaluation are aimed at both policymakers and funders. These are important steps that need to be taken to create an equitable mental health system for young Black men and Black communities more broadly.

This section also identifies implications for projects seeking to promote young Black men's mental health and improve their outcomes.

### Recommendations

#### For policymakers

1. The Government should seek to address the causes of poor mental health among young Black men as part of the forthcoming cross-government Mental Health Plan. The Department for Health and Social Care should find opportunities to meaningfully engage young Black men in the development of the plan.
2. NHS England should invest in and design dedicated and tailored mental health support for young Black men as part of the second phase of the NHS Long Term Plan.
3. The Government must commit to tackling all forms of racism, discrimination and exclusion. This should include action to address the specific injustices faced by young Black men across health, education, employment and criminal justice systems. The Government should be led by robust evidence across these areas and not follow the conclusions reached by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.
4. Organisations seeking to work in partnership with Black communities should invest time and effort in developing trusting relationships when working 'arm in arm'. And larger scale organisations working with smaller racialised groups should actively involve them in planning, decision-making and review processes.
5. NHS England and professional membership bodies should work together to ensure the mental health workforce reflects the communities they serve and that values of anti-racism, diversity and inclusion are actively promoted.

6. NHS England should ensure the unique experiences and engagement preferences of young Black men are considered as part of the development of the Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF) and the implementation of the NHS Advancing Mental Health Equalities Strategy.

#### For funders

Ensure Black-led charities are able to equitably access funding and support, particularly funding and programmes aimed at improving the mental health of Black and racialised communities.

#### Key implications for projects arising from the evaluation

1. For projects working with young Black men under 25, ensure projects are located in a neutral area where there aren't gang or postcode rivalries so that young men feel safe to attend.
2. Projects for young Black men must have a clear end goal, a plan of how to give the young person the tools to get on and do – otherwise it can breed reliance on the project and be detrimental to the young person's future development.
3. Projects should build trust with young people through people they already trust in their local area. For young men, trust is vital: there are few people they trust, and if they vouch for a service, it will enable them to engage other young men. Projects should use spaces they already use, like the gym, to promote their service.
4. The youth mental health workforce should reflect the communities they serve and ensure values of anti-racism, diversity and inclusion are promoted across all sectors, including health, education, and the voluntary and community sector.

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