

Response to MK Council's Budget Proposal 2021/22

This response covers the following Council priorities:

- Supporting the most vulnerable - including long term goals to reduce inequality and tackle child poverty;
- Getting the basics right - by continuing to invest in communities to tackle issues such as graffiti, fly-tipping, crime and homelessness;
- Supporting jobs and green economic recovery - by supporting business and making sure young people and those made unemployed can train or get a job;
- Continuing Covid-19 support – the support and services needed to manage and support local people due to the impact of the pandemic will be essential for some time.

Response summary

As a local MK based charity with years of experience in delivering high quality mental health support to young people in the community, we would like to offer the following comments and observations about the unprecedented impact that the COVI-19 pandemic is having on mental health provision and needs. This reinforces how essential it is for Milton Keynes Council to continue to prioritise mental health for children and young people in its 2021-22 Budget.

It also provides an important moment for reflection and planning for future need. The pressures and learnings from the current pandemic (which we set out below from both a national and local context) must be taken on board if we are to develop an inclusive Community led approach to supporting young people's mental health and the legacy of Covid which will continue for many years to come.

YiS would welcome any opportunity to continue to play its part in delivering positive and effective mental health support to young people in MK, and we set out some suggestions below on possible future initiatives.

Reflections from the past year

The last year has been one of incredible change, it has highlighted inequalities and placed unprecedented pressure on individuals, families, communities and businesses across the board. The Government, NHS, Thames Valley Police, MK Council, MK Community Foundation, Community Action: MK and many, many others have provided quick, appropriate and much needed practical and financial support to help charities such as YiS rise to the challenges of the pandemic. Parish councils, schools, food banks and many council departments have been a key part in supporting communities in ways that have never been needed more. People have come together to look after and look out for each other in situations that are ever changing, difficult and increasingly necessary. There is a lot of momentum that we believe needs to keep going through the pandemic, the recovery from the pandemic and beyond.

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In the past YiS has received vital funding from MK Council to enable us to develop our services to meet local needs, support statutory youth provision and keep our counselling service free to all young people in MK. Since 2013 we have been able to increase the number of young people we see each year whilst providing quality, accredited services that consistently receive good feedback. In that time, we have brought around £250,000 of investment into mental health support from sources outside of Milton Keynes and over £100,000 from people and organisations within MK. We hope to be able to continue this work but our response to the budget proposal is to highlight some wider issues young people are facing and the need to look at how all of us can better support young people's mental health and wellbeing. We don't have guaranteed solutions, but we have some ideas that we would be very keen to work with others on to provide a better, more coordinated experience of support where young voices are able to influence the services on offer and feedback on what works well and what doesn't.

We are in the process of collating feedback from local young people thanks to some Big Lottery funded work and will publish the results of that along with our yearly review later this year. Initial findings are that the needs of our users have increased considerably and there is an incredible disparity of support experiences received prior to coming to us. Talking to our networks and researching relevant studies and reports, we can say that what is happening nationally is reflected locally. We have included some of our initial draft findings at the end of this response.

National research findings reflects the local MK experience

In January the **Social Mobility Foundation (SMF)** published the results of a survey¹ of 863 young people aged between 16-18 which looked at the wide-ranging impact of school closures and exam cancellations on disadvantaged young people. Their key points are

- 73% of young people are anxious about exam cancellations
- 64% say school closures have negatively impacted their mental health
- 73% are worried about being able to study enough in lockdown
- Over a third (38%) of participants have not been contacted by their school or college about their tech needs

Also in January the **Education Policy Institute (EPI)** and youth charity **The Prince's Trust** published a major study on the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Generation Z². It shows that, "while the wellbeing of all young people declines by the end of their teenage years, there is a strong gender divide within this: girls see far lower levels of wellbeing and self-esteem than boys – driven by a sharp fall of both during mid-adolescence. The study found that:

- The wellbeing and self-esteem of all young people drops as they move into secondary school and continues to fall as they grow older, but girls see a far greater decline than boys.

¹

www.socialmobility.org.uk/2021/01/the-mental-health-impact-of-cancelled-exams-and-school-closures-on-young-people/

²

https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/EPI-PT_Young-people%E2%80%99s-wellbeing_Jan2021.pdf

- Girls see a significant drop in their wellbeing at age 14 and once again at age 17. Their self-esteem also drops sharply at age 14, before stabilising at age 17.
- Depressive symptoms rise among both boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 17 but they increase more markedly for girls.
- While the majority of young people remain happy with their lives as they enter secondary school, the proportion of girls who are unhappy rises.
- This fall in happiness is particularly stark in relation to their personal appearance: between the ages of 11 and 14, the proportion of girls that feel unhappy about their appearance almost doubles from around 1 in 7 (15%) to around one in three (29%)”.

They also found the following:

- **There is an association between family income and young people’s mental health:** those from low-income families are more likely to have lower levels of wellbeing and self-esteem, and more depressive symptoms. There is also evidence that the pandemic has exacerbated existing social inequalities, putting additional pressure on young people’s mental health.
- **Heavy use of social media is shown to negatively affect girls’ wellbeing and self-esteem** at ages 14 and 17, regardless of pre-existing levels. It also negatively affects boys’ wellbeing at age 14, also regardless of their previous state of mental health.
- **Being bullied in childhood has strong and enduring effects on both boys’ and girls’ mental and emotional health** into their teenage years. This is particularly the case for wellbeing: the more often a child was bullied in childhood, the higher their risk of low wellbeing by age 14.
- **Frequent physical exercise plays a positive role in young people’s wellbeing and self-esteem** and in limiting depressive symptoms especially for boys at age 14. At age 17, frequency of exercise had a positive impact on both boys and girls. Participation in activities and sports will have fallen considerably due to school closures and lockdown, likely adversely affecting mental health and wellbeing.
- **Frequent arguing with parents is linked to lower wellbeing** at age 17, while at age 14 it is associated with both worse wellbeing and an increase in depressive symptoms.
- **Being placed in the bottom stream in primary school is associated with lower self-esteem** for boys later on at age 14, supporting existing evidence of the stigmatising effect of being placed in low performance streams.
- **Poor maternal health leads to lower wellbeing and self-esteem** and an increase in depressive symptoms in both girls and boys at age 14. Maternal depression in infancy is associated with a rise in depressive symptoms in girls at age 17.
- Across all ages of adolescence, **girls who feel unsafe in their neighbourhood are at increased risk of worse wellbeing** and having more depressive symptoms.

The Prince’s Trust in association with **Tesco** also recently published their **2021 Youth Index**³, which “warns of the “devastating toll” on young people’s mental wellbeing as a result of the pandemic. The research indicates the experience of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) is more negative than those in work and training. They have urged the Government, employers and charities not to give up on young people and to provide support, guidance and

³ <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/news-views/tesco-youth-index-2021>

opportunities to those most in need. The research, conducted by YouGov, surveyed 2,180 16-to-25-year-olds across the UK.

- One in four young people (26%) admit they feel "unable to cope with life" since the start of the pandemic
- This increases to 40% among those not in work, education or training (NEETs)
- Half of 16 to 25-year-olds (50%) say their mental health has worsened since the start of the pandemic
- More than half of young people (56%) "always" or "often" feel anxious
- This rises to 64% for NEET young people
- Almost a quarter of young people (23%) do not feel confident about their future work
- More than half (54%) say it is harder to ask for employment help as "everyone needs it at the moment"
- For NEET young people, almost half (48%) say they "can't see an end" to their unemployment
- 65% of NEET young people agree that the longer they are jobless, the worse they feel about themselves"

Emerging evidence from the **Mental Health Foundation's** Mental Health in the Pandemic study⁴ also indicates that "potentially a higher proportion of the BAME population is experiencing financial concerns, fear and anxiety than the non-BAME population. It is important to recognise that people from BAME communities are more likely to be in precarious work such as in small businesses, taxis, and restaurants where furloughing may not have been offered.

Further, due to the disproportionate number of deaths in these communities, more people from BAME communities will be experiencing bereavement.

However, the picture is likely to be complex. Before the pandemic, the prevalence of mental health difficulties varied between different BAME communities and this is still likely to be the case during the pandemic and recovery periods".

Barnado's has found⁵ that "for some LGBTQ+ people - particularly young people, and especially of colour - the same stress and worry around finances and work, housing and food experienced by others comes with added hardships. Non-acceptance or violence within their family home, not being out while being stuck living with their family, a loss of the support networks of their chosen families, as well as being more susceptible to mental health issues due to discrimination all add up to a more challenging experience. For many young LGBTQ+ people, the COVID-19 lockdown has meant that they no longer have the respite of their friends, communities and partners. Parents who either do not know their sexuality, or who disapprove, can restrict their contact with the outside world. LGBTQ+ people with BAME backgrounds, who face disproportionate levels of homelessness, are living with a heightened risk of safety issues.

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<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/MHF%20Mental%20Health%20in%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.pdf>

5

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/blog/how-coronavirus-has-affected-lgbt-community>

The Albert Kennedy Trust recommended that young people to “press pause” on coming out until they had their support networks in place. Essentially, living their normal lives has become at best a difficulty, and at worst actively dangerous”.

Proposal for local action

The national data and polling outlined above, matters locally too. **YiS proposes that a local task force or commission is set up in MK to look at what we can do across sectors and agencies to prevent things from getting worse and to ensure that young people’s voices are included in the decisions that affect them.** We want to explore a network of young people in schools that can provide appropriate peer support and signposting, feedback on what young people in their year are going through and act as advisory conduits for mental health services and wellbeing initiatives across the board. We want to take advantage of the momentum the pandemic has ignited to make Milton Keynes a better place where we can collectively and collaboratively work for our young people to:

- Support the most vulnerable - including our long term goals to reduce inequality and tackle child poverty which causes or exacerbates poor mental health and wellbeing;
- Get the basics right - by continuing to invest in our communities to tackle issues such as graffiti, fly-tipping, crime and homelessness; all of which have a basis in, and require an understanding of, individual and collective mental health and wellbeing.
- Support jobs and green economic recovery - by supporting business and making sure our young people and those made unemployed can train or get a job; which requires them to have good mental health and wellbeing to thrive and succeed.
- Continue Covid-19 support – the support and services needed to manage the impact of the pandemic and support people will be with us all for some time and requires coordination, infrastructure and some innovative ways of working, thinking and connecting.

We know funding is scarce, and to do this will require some investment, but **our focus is calling for better use of existing resources for coordination, linking existing initiatives and developing a cohesive strategy to ensure young people in Milton Keynes are happy, healthy and free from harm.** We see the passion and dedication of people working in statutory, voluntary and business sectors to make Milton Keynes a beacon of good practice in young people’s mental health. We think the council is in a fantastic position to help facilitate and empower this work. We see parishes and schools as key partners in supporting young people. There are charities and community organisations of all sizes and types that could benefit from being more linked in and joined up. We know there are businesses and professionals willing to connect into wider mental health services and embed mental health support into all types of work and support some of the great projects already happening as well as offer more services to support the local community.

The challenges and uncertainty within the voluntary and charity sector in MK finds many organisations continuing to worry about their future viability, at a time when the focus should be spent on their beneficiaries. Now more than ever, support for effective collaboration and investment in the infrastructure needed to underpin it is critical so that MK can truly establish itself as an area that delivers high quality support for its young people, their families and those that support them.

About Us:

YiS is a long running community-led charity that works with young people in Milton Keynes and those that support them to improve mental health and wellbeing. We provide counselling, education, training, wellbeing support and more. We have 6 part-time members of staff and over 30 volunteers who help us deliver on our charitable objectives and are dedicated to helping young people improve their lives or help them find ways of moving on from trauma. Our volunteers include qualified counsellors, trainee counsellors, young wellbeing champions and trustees to provide governance and oversight. We belong to several local and national boards, partnerships as well as formal and informal networks where we work alongside people and organisations dedicated to improving young lives in Milton Keynes. We are members of NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisation), the Association of Mental Health Providers, BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy), BAATN (the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network) and other organisations that links us to the latest research, good practice and community information. To find out more, please visit www.mkyis.org.uk.

Initial Feedback from YIS project on young people's Mental Health Support Experience in Milton Keynes.

The following insights and data captured by this project is in draft and has not been properly verified as yet. Although this doesn't represent every young person's experience of mental health support in MK, it does highlight that some people are not getting the support they deserve and need. These experiences are collected at the point of referral into our counselling service. The responses are shared with Healthwatch MK to assist their work as well as with agencies across the city. Specific agency names have been edited out for the purposes of this response document.

- 25/02/20: i've always bottled things up and school hasn't helped much as they don't have the experience and don't know how to help with things like self esteem and stuff. for all my stress about school and stuff they said they'll get the academic mentor to come speak to me but she hasn't. i don't like talking to people i know about my problems because they can never help and never understand how i feel. sometimes i don't even know how i feel myself
- 02/03/20 I was supporting a close friend during a difficult time and encouraged them to speak to the doctor. We visited [LOCAL GP] was really kind and patient and showed genuine interest in helping my friend. After a couple of visits it was decided that medication would be helpful in the short term with a referral to OH via work. Our only comment would be that there should be more notices up in the GP about mental health and the services available.
- 02/03/20 - It's not about myself but a friend of mine, she had a girlfriend who passed away a couple of years back and had depression, anxiety and was feeling suicidal. She knew she had to get help and so she went to go and get it, she was told that she's too old for CAMHS but was too young for an adult referral and so she had to wait to be seen. It has now been 3 years since she was told that. As her friend it frustrates me because her mental health has essentially worsened before it could get better and no one should have to go through that. The stigma around mental health for everyone is this bad idea and that no one should talk about their feelings. It should be done that regardless of who you are, however old you are, you have that choice to see someone regarding about your mental health. And that's what I think Milton Keynes needs to improve on, to help these people who need to be seen quick enough before it gets worse.
- 23/04/20 - Difficult to get access to mental health

- 27/04/20 - The support network for young minds, in [LOCAL SCHOOL] school specifically, has been incredible. The only issue I have is a lack of information regarding learning difficulties, getting support for high functioning students is extremely difficult and testing is expensive and should be available for all children at any time, funded by the government.
- 24/07/20 Previous experience of mental health support is negative, not a good experience with services.
- 27/07/20 My GP tried to refer me to CAMHS because of my self-harm but I wasn't ready to talk about what I was going through yet so they dropped my case since I was deemed "Not of high-risk".
- 04/08/20 I had support from a teacher at school, but then lockdown happened and that support was no longer available. The support was good because there was someone to listen, I had no support once lockdown took place, now I am seeking counselling from YIS.
- 10/08/20 GP surgery, put me on a waiting list for 9 months the day after my suicide attempt and said there's not much they can do but give me medication which in turn made my mood worse and more suicidal. When I made them aware of this no communication was made.
- 17/08/20 I have previously spoken with GPs about mental health. I did not find this experience great however this could be because I had a barrier. Nothing was ever followed up. I need support and was not mentally prepared to do this alone and felt GPs offered tablets but no support.
- 18/09/20 [LOCAL SCHOOL] have failed to offer any pastoral care despite repeated requests. Was told someone would 'keep an eye on her'. Attendance continued to decline to the point of court threats and was still not offered any support.
- 20/09/20 The support so far has been pretty rubbish. [My daughter] was referred to Camhs previously, she was only seen once and tried to be put towards [LOCAL AGENCY] in Milton Keynes which was not the right service for [my daughter] or what she needed. I'm concerned the lack of care is going to lead to a more serious outcome. She needs the right guidance and the right support to help her through this tough time she is going through.
- 28.09.20 Mum of 14year old was advised to call YIS to access counselling for her daughter who is experiencing low mood and anger problems. Mum feels that a lot of this is related to her daughter's current medical condition "precocious puberty" which is not suitable for YIS. The daughter is under the care of Great Ormond street. Advised to speak to GP and Hospital in the first instance.
- 5/10/20: Didn't get the correct help I needed at the right time, If there was one thing I could change would change the time length it took to try get help
- 13/10/20: The school [Lord Gray] system thus far have been amazing in getting to the bottom of what is bothering [the client].
- 14/10/20 School support is awful. They don't care.
- 16/11/20 I have had no support so far, as I have been unable to find a service that is available.
- 2020/21 - After a suicide attempt, [my daughter] was seen in A&E Milton Keynes, the AMH worker who spoke with her quickly decided that [my daughter's] action was an over reaction and tried to get her to agree that, then started suggesting that she get in to some volunteering. The advice was so narrow minded and I as mum became very frustrated, having worked as an OT assistant in a mental health hospital for several years. I left the room. [My daughter] stated that the lady was a bit helpful after I left and listened more about what was going on for her. She was then referred to crisis team Northants due to our postcode. She was seen by a psychiatrist who suggested medication and talk therapy. He made several promises about how crisis team would support her with sleep hygiene and

mood management work. [My daughter] said she liked him and felt heard by him and felt really hopeful about the outcome. As it turned out crisis visited once or twice, did no work with her and then discharged her with no other support. So, at 18years old, she was put on medication and left alone. We contacted Northants AMH and asked about the talk therapy and they said she had to self refer to IAPT. This is not what she was told. I was furious. We then contacted the GP to ask about letters from AMH services and there was a letter saying she would benefit from CBT. But that was all. There was no follow up. We made an appointment with GP. A doctor called her and listened and was very supportive however then told her to refer to The Lowdown in northampton but when we tried this we couldnt because of our postcode! A self referral to IAPT has been made with my support but the wait for services is so long. Essentially, the short version is that my daughter attempted suicide, was referred for help, put on meds and then left to fend for herself. At just 18 years old, after serious physical illness. The lack of intervention and concern for her wellbeing was disgusting. And the CQC gave Northants AMH outstanding two years in a row!?? [My daughter] wasnt eligible for service in MK because of our postcode, was told to refer to a service we cant access because of our postcode and, after feeling so supported and understood by the psychiatrist who saw her in the crisis team, she then suffered with a huge knock to her self esteem as she realised that the help just wasnt there at all ad all she had was a low dose of anti-depressant and no way of processing or working though her thoughts and distress. The way in which she has been treated from both a medical and humanistic view, is appalling. There have been people who have given her hope and she has felt heard but the system as a whole has then taken that away. She feels abandoned by services, at a time when she is at rock bottom and in need of real intervention and support to keep her alive, all she had in the end was a tablet to take that masks he underlying issues. Epic fail as far as the NHS mental health service fo young people is concerned.

