

# YMCA ST HELENS

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Early Intervention Youth Hub

Supporting Wellbeing Through Youth Work

A relational, youth led approach to emotional wellbeing



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## Rooted in St Helens A Trusted Anchor



Since 1887, YMCA St Helens has been embedded in the heart of the community - adapting to meet the changing needs. From housing and support for people experiencing homelessness, early years nursery, training and early intervention, to youth work YMCA St Helens has consistently been there when local people need it most.

Today, we support:

- over 250 people experiencing homelessness each year
- 150+ families and 575+ young people through community and youth services including:
  - A fully registered nursery “The Beacon Nursery”
  - Commissioned Family Hub and Youth Justice activities
  - Early Intervention Youth Hub, including Listening Service, Y Mentoring, and Youth Hub group activities.

We are a lead organisation in local strategy groups, helping to shape the future of St Helens’ CYP work and the voluntary and community sector as a whole, as well as working with the nine Children Service Directors to strengthen the early support available across the whole of Cheshire and Merseyside.

# Why We Focus on Wellbeing in Youth Work

Across our community we were seeing high concerns in children and young people around:

- Anxiety, being emotional overwhelmed, school avoidance
- Isolation, low confidence, fractured friendships
- Lack of safe spaces or people to talk to
- Long waits for statutory Mental Health support
- **Young people feeling rejected when they were told they were not “bad enough” to meet thresholds**

**Add to this the fact that St Helens is an area of high deprivation, and some of England’s highest mental health and self-harm rates among young people, as well as most other negative statistics. We worked to create a middle ground between traditional youth work and talking therapies - and developed “The Listening Service” which went on to grow into our Early Intervention Youth Hub.**

# The Listening Service: How It Started (in 2022)

## WHAT DOES THE LISTENING SERVICE DO?

We support 12-18 year olds with low level mental health concerns.

We aim to

- Give young people a greater awareness of mental health.
- Reduce isolation and promote healthy relationships.
- Support young people to become more emotionally aware and resilient.
- Help young people increase their self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Empower young people to take control of their mental health.
- Promote self-care and wellbeing.

## 1 TO 1 LISTENING SERVICE

An opportunity for young people to speak to a qualified/experienced "listener" either face to face, on the phone, or online.

These sessions provide opportunities to:

- Talk in a non-judgmental, compassion focussed, safe space
- Build Emotional Resilience
- Develop & strengthen problem Solving Skills and coping/wellbeing techniques
- Set personal SMART Goals and develop useable, personal wellbeing action plans



## GROUP ACTIVITIES

Bringing young people together to build a network of support, strengthen relationships and mental health related skills/knowledge.

The groups provide opportunities to:

- Learn new skills & develop new hobbies/interests
- Strengthen skills/knowledge around "Five Ways Of Wellbeing"
- Make new friends and build a compassion focused support network.
- Build Emotional Resilience
- Develop & strengthen problem solving skills and coping/wellbeing techniques
- Support others and be supported whilst increasing self-esteem, self-awareness and self-confidence.

*Thanks for Commissioning from ICB and National Lottery Reaching Communities funding it quickly moved from 1 month pilot to a 4 year funded project.*

*What young people told us:*

*"This feels safe"*

*"You actually listen"*

*"It's not like other services"*

# Why We Built an Early Intervention Youth Hub

Rather than a “service”, young people told us they wanted:

- High Quality spaces, with small groups not large numbers
- Somewhere they could just walk into
- Listeners and youth workers trained with time and space to listen
- Somewhere they could belong - be with other or be alone
- A mix of wellbeing, creativity, social connection, and fun
- A mixture of east access support (1:1 and groups)
- Support that feels human, relational and choice-led



In 2023/24 The Youth Investment Fund enabled us to transform and underused part of our building into a new Youth Hub, and at the same time we successfully tendored to be one of 22 DHSC Early Intervention Youth Hub Pilots across the country (originally 1 year, about to move into 3rd year funding) which meant we could fully launch our model of support.



# What the Hub Actually Looks Like (Youth Work in Action)



*A typical week includes:*

*Drop-in Youth Café*

*Creative groups  
(crafts, get-creative, baking)*

*Active sessions*

*(sports, parkour, dance)*

*Social sessions*

*(D&D, gaming, chill spaces)*

*Youth Voice/Leadership*

*Weekend Club*

*Quick-access 20-minute  
listening 1 to 1s*

*Listening Service (4 week wait)*

*Y Mentoring*

*Every element is grounded in  
youth work values, relationships,  
youth voice, and co-production.*

# How We Embed Wellbeing in Everyday Youth Work

## 1. Relational Practice First

- Consistency of workers leads to strong relationships and safety.
- Listening before problem-solving.
- Youth workers as “door-openers”, not gatekeepers.

## 2. Activity-Based Emotional Support

- We avoid clinical-style conversations.
- Instead: creative tasks, movement, games, sensory spaces.
- This lowers anxiety and increases trust.

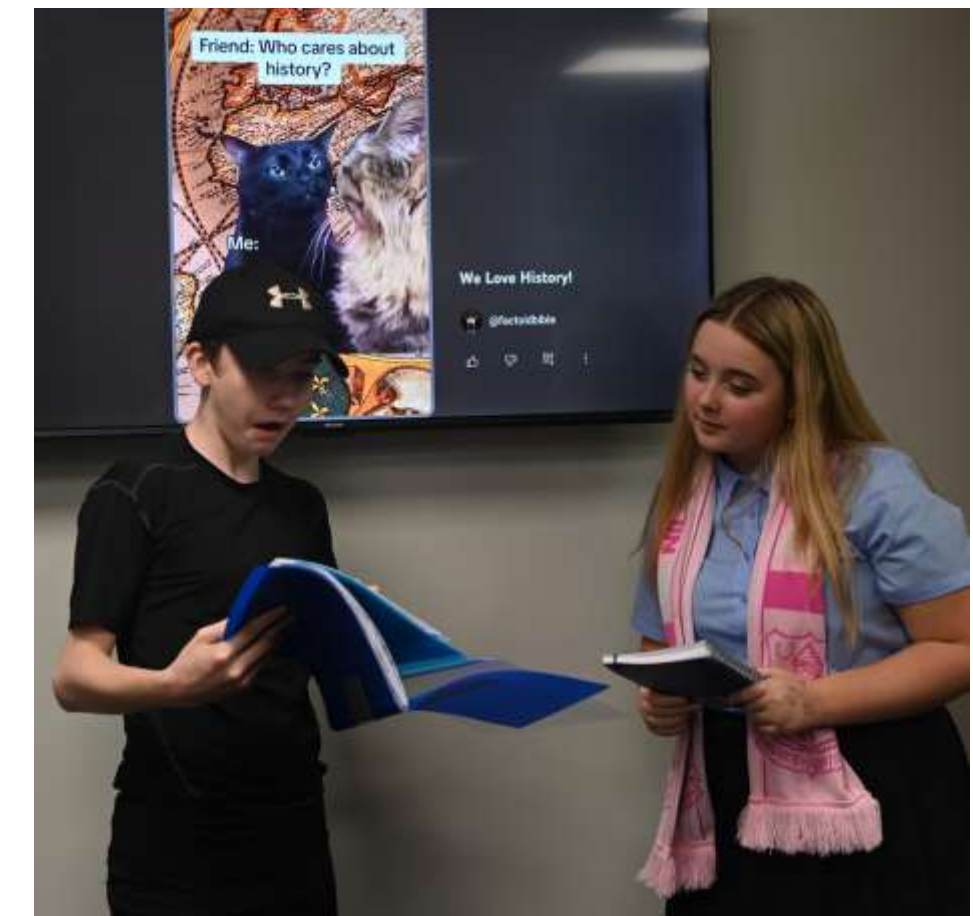
## 3. Reframing Help-Seeking

- Young people choose: when, how, with who.

## 4. Small Groups

- Especially for neurodiverse young people or those new to groups.

This approach has been central to our outcomes.



# What a year looked like

## In 12 months

The Listening Service and Early Intervention Youth Hub delivered:

- 3,104 one to one Listening Service support sessions
- 559 group activities

## with

- 374 young people supported via one to ones
- 231 young people engaged in group activities in the Hub
- 174 completed positively completing their Listening Service Support

# What makes it work

- Open-access, some referral - but no one turned away: Staff adjust support according to YPs needs.
- Trusted adults are the intervention, not the room/tools with the “relationship” as the mechanism of change.
- Creative, flexible youth led practices work better than traditional sit down talking/listening sessions
- Predictability reduces anxiety - Same Listeners/Youth workers, same days, same environment.
- Youth voice shapes everything - In control of their one to ones, involved in designing sessions, planning menus, shaping rules, co-running groups - working towards the Lundy Model of Participation.
- Non-clinical spaces leads to higher engagement - Young people repeatedly tell us the Listening Service and Youth Hub “doesn’t feel like a service”.



# What Young People Tell Us

# Parents

say:

“Helped me go back to school.”

“This helped me understand myself.”

“You don’t judge me.”

“I’m more confident now.”

“I could talk about anything.”

“The pressure lifted.”

“She’s more herself again.”

“Short waits made all the difference.”



# Practical Advice

- *Start with what you already have.*
- *You don't need clinical staff to begin - you need consistent adults trained to listen.*
- *Keep processes simple*
- *Keep groups small and sensory-aware (don't number chase) - be focussed on the outcomes not the numbers*
- *Use creativity and activity as tools to facilitate talking - "normalise talking about MH"*
- *Build a culture, not a programme.*
- *How young people feel when they walk in matters more than any activity.*
- *Listen more than you structure.*
- *Young people tell us what they need if we give them space.*



## Challenges We're Navigating (Honest Reflections)

- *Demand continues to outpace capacity*
- *Workforce wellbeing matters as much as YP wellbeing*
- *Balancing open-access with complexity - you don't want to number chase, but you do want numbers*
- *Sustaining funding for relational youth work*
- *Maintaining quality and standards when scaling up*
- *Ensuring good quality outcome evidencing, that is simple and consistent for the different types of work*



# What's Next for Our Youth Work Approach

- Weekend Hub going from pilot project to full 7 day service
- Stronger Youth Voice (including involvement in staff recruitment)
- Continued focus on SEND-inclusive practice
- Increased Marketing of Youth Hub
- Home School project development
- Data dashboard + SROI for understanding youth work impact
- Ongoing workforce development

Youth work is early intervention.

It builds confidence, reduces isolation, and gives young people the trusted adults they need long before crisis.

If we get youth work right, we prevent a lot of pain later.

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