



# Promoting Positive Mental Health and Wellbeing in Young People

Insights from the NCB LINKS Programme

Delivered as part of The National Lottery Community Fund's Empowering Young People's Programme in Northern Ireland

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## **About Empowering Young People**

The Empowering Young People's Programme from the National Lottery Community Fund's (NLCF) Northern Ireland directorate was launched in March 2015 and is making £44.4 million available to fund activities in communities until 2027.

The aim of the EYP programme is to support projects that give young people in Northern Ireland aged 8-25 years the ability to cope with challenges in their lives.

This programme is all about putting young people in the lead. Projects need to involve young people in the planning and delivery, as well as their support networks and the communities which will help them to develop skills to cope with challenges in their lives.

The outcomes that are expected from supported projects include the following:

- Young people get the skills they need for their future
- Young people have better relationships with their support networks and communities
- Young people have improved health and wellbeing.

## **About the LINKS Support Network**

The LINKS Support Network is facilitated by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and is delivered to all of the 85 organisations grant aided by the NLCF under the Empowering Young People's (EYP) Programme.

The support provided by LINKS is delivered in a number of ways: workshops, on a variety of themes based on the issues facing young people (e.g. mental health and wellbeing) and those facing organisations (e.g. sustainability); cluster group meetings, which are informal geographically-based meetings and; tailored one-to-one support for individual organisations.

The aim of the LINKS programme is to facilitate shared learning, enhance practice and encourage the involvement of young people in all aspects of the projects.

This resource:

- Provides the local context in terms of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland

- Summarises the latest policy developments relating to mental health and wellbeing
- Explores definitions of mental health and wellbeing; identifies protective factors for mental health and wellbeing and programmes of work that seek to build mental health and wellbeing
- Examines some regional initiatives and local case study examples of practice from LINKS grant holders that aim to build positive mental health and wellbeing with young people
- Highlights key learning points
- Includes a reference and a resource list for further exploration into building mental health and wellbeing with young people in Appendix 1.

Given the mix of evidence and practice examples, this resource will be of interest to policymakers and commissioners in drawing upon what is working on the ground in Northern Ireland to support young people, as well as front-line practitioners.

# Introduction

Young people's mental health and wellbeing is a constant topic of discussion in the media. In recent times, the impact of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's mental health has received even greater focus, but many of the issues relating to mental health and wellbeing pre-date the arrival of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. These issues, and the lengthy waiting lists for treatment, are well documented (see for example NICCY, 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

Recent statistics from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB, 2020)<sup>2</sup> reveal some of the extent of the problem:

- One in ten children and young people experience anxiety and depression.
- Almost one in ten (9.4%) 11-19 year olds reported self-injurious behaviour and close to one in eight (12.1%) reported thinking about or attempting suicide.
- Nearly one in five (18.7%) adolescents reported six or more symptoms on a screening questionnaire for psychotic like experiences.
- 17% of young people felt traumatised due to witnessing violence.
- 16.8% of 11-19 year olds have experienced 'traditional' bullying and 14.9% have experienced cyberbullying.
- One in six young people (16.2%) engaged in a pattern of disordered eating and associated behaviours that might indicate the need for further clinical assessment.
- One in eight children and young people (12.6%) experienced emotional difficulties.
- One in eight young people (12.6%) met criteria for mood or anxiety disorders (e.g. panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder).
- Approximately 2 in 5 young people aged 16-19 years (40.9%) met the criteria for problematic drinking and one in ten 11-19 year olds have used illicit drugs.
- One in five (22%) parents or care-givers reported a previous diagnosis of any mental health disorder, such as anxiety and depression.
- Children whose parents had current mental health problems [as measured by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12)] were twice as likely to have an anxiety or depressive disorder themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> NICCY, 2018: Still Waiting

<sup>2</sup> HSCB, 2020: The Mental Health of Children and Parents in Northern Ireland

It is, therefore, now well recognised that it is not enough to simply treat mental ill-health, more must be done to **prevent** it in the first place and that is the focus of this insight report. One of the key outcomes of the EYP Programme is that young people will have improved health and wellbeing, including mental health and wellbeing. For some grant holders in the LINKS family, mental health and wellbeing is their primary purpose and specialism, while others have discovered that other needs cannot be met unless and until mental health and wellbeing needs are addressed first.

In policy terms, mental health received renewed focus in 2020 with the Department of Health's (DoH) Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 published in late June, 2021<sup>3</sup>. This strategy sets the future strategic direction of mental health services in Northern Ireland for the next decade. The strategy is person centred, takes a whole life approach and a whole system focus and the key aim is to ensure long term improved outcomes for people's mental health. It recognises that children and young people have unique mental health needs, is outcome focused and specifies a number of key actions to change and improve mental health services offered to young people. It also recognises that COVID-19 has had a major impact on the mental health of people and access to services.

In addition to the strategy, a Mental Health Action Plan has been published (which incorporates a COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan), which according to the Minister for Health "is designed to create a common direction and focus for mental health services in Northern Ireland... while also delivering key and essential improvements to service delivery in the short and medium term"<sup>4</sup>. The Mental Health Action plan has specific actions relating to children and young people (via CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) and is regarded by the Minister for Health as "the first in a series of steps" that will be taken to provide mental health services to those who need them.

A number of other existing policies and associated action plans, are also relevant in terms of the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (aged 8-25 years, the target group for NLCF funding) such as the following:

- ***Protect Life 2 2019-2024 (DoH, 2019)***

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Health, 2021: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health 2020: Mental Health Action Plan: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/mh-action-plan-plus-covid-response-plan.pdf>

Protect Life 2 2019-24 is a long-term strategy for reducing suicides and the incidence of self-harm with action delivered across a range of Government departments, agencies, and sectors.

- ***The Interdepartmental Action Plan (DoH, 2019) in response to 'Still Waiting' (NICCY, 2018)***

Still Waiting is a Rights Based Review of Mental Health Services and Support for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland published by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) on 27 September 2018.

The Department of Health (DoH) responded by setting up an Inter-Departmental Project Board, comprising representatives from Department of Education (DE), Department for Communities (DfC), Department of Justice (DoJ), the Health and Social Care Board, Education Authority, RQIA, Voluntary and Community Sector and chaired by DoH, to consider the recommendations, respond to NICCY and take forward an Action Plan for agreed recommendations.

- ***The Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029 (Department of Education (DE), 2019)***

The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 requires the Northern Ireland Executive to adopt a Children and Young People's Strategy. This cross-departmental Strategy was published to provide a strategic framework for improving the wellbeing of children and young people in this country.

- ***Making Life Better: A Whole System Strategic Framework for Public Health (Public Health Agency, 2014)***

Making Life Better 2012–2023 is a ten-year public health strategic framework which provides direction for policies and actions to improve the health and wellbeing of people in Northern Ireland. It builds on the Investing for Health Strategy (2002–2012) and retains a focus on the broad range of social, economic and environmental factors which influence health and wellbeing. It brings together actions at government level and provides direction for implementation at regional and local level.

- ***An Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People in Education (Department of Education and Department of Health, 2021)***

The publication of an Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People in Education in Northern Ireland by the Department of

Education and Department of Health in February 2021<sup>5</sup> which aims to promote the emotional health and wellbeing of school-aged children.

- **Appointment of a Mental Health Champion**

The appointment in June 2020<sup>6</sup> of a Mental Health Champion by the Minister for Health. The overarching aim of the Mental Health Champion's Office is to advise and assist in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing through all policies and services, throughout the province. The purpose of the Mental Health Champion is to further the mental health agenda across all platforms and fora, to promote emotional health and wellbeing, access to evidence-based support and services, and recovery. Children and young people are a specific focus for the work of the Mental Health Champion.

The development of some of these policies pre-dates the COVID-19 outbreak but, as can be seen in the Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan, there is a commitment by government to address the impacts of COVID-19 on the mental health of young people as part of an overall recovery plan.

## **What is meant by mental health and wellbeing and what works to build it?**

This section of the insight report provides definitions of mental health and wellbeing. In order to keep the focus on positive mental health (as opposed to the treatment of mental *ill*-health), the term mental health and wellbeing is used throughout this report when referring to work in this area, after this section on definitions.

### **Definitions of mental health and wellbeing**

In reviewing the literature on mental health and wellbeing, a number of definitions are commonly quoted:

The World Health Organisation, (2003)<sup>7</sup> defines mental health as:

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<sup>5</sup> Dept of Education & Dept of Education 2021: Children & Young People's Emotional Health & Wellbeing in Education Framework. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/children-young-peoples-emotional-health-and-wellbeing-education-framework-final-version>

<sup>6</sup> Initially on an interim basis and confirmed in September 2021

<sup>7</sup> World Health Organisation, 2003: Investing in Mental Health

*'... a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community'.*

The Oxford English Dictionary<sup>8</sup> defines mental health as being *'a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being'*, while well-being is defined as *'The state of being comfortable, healthy or happy'*.

Mental health and wellbeing are, therefore, inextricably linked – it is not possible to have one without the other. Sometimes the phrase emotional wellbeing is used interchangeably with mental health and wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing has been described as a *'dynamic state in which the individual is able to develop to their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others and contribute to the community'* (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008, cited in The Sax Institute, 2019)<sup>9</sup>.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence or NICE (2018)<sup>10</sup> defines wellbeing as encompassing the following elements:

- emotional wellbeing – this includes being happy and confident and not anxious or depressed
- psychological wellbeing – this includes the ability to be autonomous, problem-solve, manage emotions, experience empathy, be resilient and attentive
- social wellbeing – a person has good relationships with others and does not have behavioural problems, that is, they are not disruptive, violent or a bully.

Similarly, the University of Warwick (2007)<sup>11</sup> distinguished between:

- Emotional wellbeing (including happiness and confidence, and the opposite of depression/anxiety)

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<sup>8</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, 2021: <https://www.lexico.com/>

<sup>9</sup> The Sax Institute, 2019: Evidence review of risk and protective factors

<sup>10</sup> NICE, 2018: <https://pathways.nice.org.uk/pathways/social-and-emotional-wellbeing-for-children-and-young-people#content=view-info-category%3Aview-about-menu>

<sup>11</sup> University of Warwick, 2007: Systematic review of the effectiveness of interventions to promote mental wellbeing in primary schools. Report 1: Universal approaches which do not focus on violence or bullying

- Psychological wellbeing (resilience, mastery, confidence, autonomy, attentiveness/involvement, conflict management and problem solving) and
- Social wellbeing (good relationships, the opposite of conduct disorder, delinquency, bullying behaviours).

The Department of Education (2009, cited in Connolly et al, 2011)<sup>12</sup> developed the following definition of pupils' emotional health and wellbeing:

- Being mentally and emotionally healthy means that we believe in ourselves and know our own worth. We set ourselves goals that we can achieve and can find support to do this.
- We are aware of our emotions and what we are feeling and can understand why we feel this way. We can cope with our changing emotions and we can speak about and manage our feelings.
- We understand what others may be feeling and know how to deal with their feelings. We also understand when to let go and not overreact. We know how to make friendships and relationships and how to cope with changes in them.
- We understand that everyone can be anxious, worried or sad sometimes. We know how to cope with, and bounce back from, changes or problems and can talk about them to someone we trust.

## **What works to promote positive mental health: messages from the literature**

Much of the literature emphasises that it is possible to teach children and young people how to become and stay mentally and/or emotionally healthy through social and emotional learning. For example, the Early Intervention Foundation (2017)<sup>13</sup> defines social and emotional learning as:

*'...the process by which children acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to understand and manage their emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and*

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<sup>12</sup> Connolly, P., Sibbett, C, Hanratty, J., Kerr, K., O'Hare, L. and Winter, K. (2011) Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing: A Review of Audit Tools and a Survey of Practice in Northern Ireland Post Primary Schools Belfast: Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University Belfast.

<sup>13</sup> Early Intervention Foundation (2017): Social and emotional learning: Supporting children and young people's mental health

*show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions'.*

In a rapid review of what works to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, Dorris et al (2019)<sup>14</sup> cite a range of contributors who have identified common key elements, skills and/or competencies that young people need in order to develop and sustain mental health and wellbeing. For example, Goleman (1995)<sup>15</sup> identifies five key elements which contribute to emotional wellbeing, including:

- self-awareness
- self-regulation
- motivation
- empathy and
- social skills.

Similarly, the Early Intervention Foundation (2015)<sup>16</sup> identified the following characteristics as relevant:

- self-perceptions and self-awareness
- motivation
- self-control and self-regulation
- social skills and
- resilience<sup>17</sup> and coping.

NCB (2015)<sup>18</sup> found that approaches to support emotional wellbeing generally focus on the following:

- self-awareness, self-efficacy and self-belief
- emotional literacy, including recognising and managing emotions
- motivation and associated factors such as problem solving, persistence, resilience and
- relationship building, empathy and compassion.

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<sup>14</sup> Dorris et al (2019): <https://www.ncb.org.uk/informingachildwellbeingframework>

<sup>15</sup> Goleman, D. (1995) Emotional Intelligence: why it can matter more than IQ

<sup>16</sup> Early Intervention Foundation (2015) Social and emotional skills in childhood and their long-term effects on adult life

<sup>17</sup> Building Resilience in Young People is the title of an earlier LINKS Insight report – see here:

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are/ncb-northern-ireland/northern-ireland-news-opinion/building-resilience-young>

<sup>18</sup> NCB (2015): What works in promoting social and emotional well-being and responding to mental health problems in schools?

Emotional wellbeing is therefore a complex area, distinct from mental health yet inextricably linked, and encompassing a range of competencies, skills and knowledge. While definitions differ depending on the source, there are clearly common competencies which support mental health and wellbeing, such as resilience, self-regulation, motivation, self-awareness and problem-solving skills.

Such knowledge, skills and competencies are not innate. Depending on their circumstances and situation, some young people will have had less opportunity to develop these than others.

## Protective factors for young people's mental health and wellbeing

This sub-section of the report considers the protective factors that have been identified for young people's mental health and wellbeing in an evidence check of 92 systematic reviews of risk and protective factors for mental health and wellbeing. This type of meta review is the best standard of evidence to draw upon and its findings link to some of the local evidence referred to earlier.

The Sax Institute (2019)<sup>19</sup> identified a number of different protective factors for young people's mental health and wellbeing<sup>20</sup> such as the following:

- **Individual factors** such as resilience, self-esteem, physical activity and diet

High self-esteem has been identified as a protective factor for both younger children and teenagers, including for those who experienced adverse childhood experiences. High self-esteem can help build resilience and optimism, encourage the appropriate expression of emotions and reduce the likelihood of behaving aggressively.

Physical activity including moderate amounts of exercise such as walking, yoga, aerobic exercise and resistance training were shown to have positive impacts on mental health and well-being among young people. Exercise such as walking that is taken in outdoor environments, as opposed to gyms, was seen as particularly beneficial.

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<sup>19</sup> The Sax Institute, 2019: Mental Wellbeing: Risk and Protective Factors: <https://bit.ly/2Fv3hpV>

<sup>20</sup> The review also includes factors for adults of all ages, but for the purposes of this report the focus is on children, young people and young adults up to the age of 25 as is consistent with the EYP target group, unless family factors are impacted

A diet that has more fruit and vegetables has been shown to reduce the risk of depression while a (mainly parental, in this context) reduction in the consumption of alcohol is associated with adult mental health and wellbeing, thereby impacting on family factors.

- **Family factors** such as positive parent and family relationships and kinship care

Positive parent and family relationships include having support from immediate and extended family members, high family cohesion, a warm and positive family climate and parental involvement were found to be key contributing factors to children's and young people's wellbeing, including for those who had experienced adversity.

Positive habits such as eating meals together, the creation of an atmosphere of trust and fairness, the appropriate granting of autonomy and monitoring of young people's behaviour were also associated with mental health and wellbeing, as were parents being positive role models for their children.

Children placed in kinship care were also found to have fewer mental health problems than those placed in non-kinship care.

- **Social relationships** such as social support

High quality social relationships with both peers and with significant adults (e.g. teachers) were associated with higher levels of wellbeing. It is the *quality* of those relationships rather than the *quantity* of them that was most important.

High quality and diverse social networks were also found to be associated with lower levels of mental ill-health and contributed to feelings of belonging and safety. Social support that was availed of via online social networks also contributed to feelings of belonging and increased emotional support.

High levels of social support have also been found to be resilience-building and protective for young people who had experienced childhood adversity.

- **Work and school factors** such as employment, school involvement, school environment and school relationships

Employment has been shown to be a protective factor for mental health and wellbeing for those leaving school as well as adults. Experiencing supportive supervision at work was found to be associated with reductions in anxiety and depression, improvements in levels of wellbeing and contributing to feelings of autonomy.

Involvement in school has been shown to be a protective factor against depression for some minority ethnic groups. High quality school environments were associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety. Positive relationships with teachers and peers, positive perceptions of safety at school and feelings of belonging and connectedness through school were associated with mental wellbeing.

- **Cultural factors** such as ethnic density, belonging and identity

Living in a community with a high rate of own ethnic density has been found to be a protective factor against depression and anxiety. Being fostered by people from the same ethnic background has been associated with lower levels of depression among unaccompanied child refugees while having a positive attitude towards their own and the host culture was found to be associated with wellbeing and positive functioning for these children and young people.

Ethnic belonging and bi-cultural identity were also found to be associated with lower levels of depression among teenagers.

- **The living environment** such as the housing and residential environment

Both location and type of housing have been shown to influence symptoms of anxiety and depression. Those living in houses with entrances visible from the street/road are less likely to experience depression and anxiety than those living in apartment blocks where each front door opens onto a balcony (deck access).

Living with more green space nearby was associated with better mental health and lower rates of depression among children and teenagers, as was living near water.

- **Community factors** such as social capital

The term social capital includes social trust, a sense of belonging and social participation (i.e. participation in community, faith or other interest groups). High social capital has been associated with high levels of mental health and wellbeing.

Children and young people benefit in two ways from high social capital: firstly, they themselves have a wide social support network of peers, high quality social networks and high quality school and neighbourhood environments and secondly, they benefit from their parents having wide and good quality social support networks.

Regular attendance at religious services for children and teenagers has also been shown to be positively associated with better mental health while a sense of belonging and community support has also been shown to be a protective factor for refugee children.

## From research evidence to practice

Many of the protective factors identified by the Sax Institute are echoed in practice programmes that aim to build the positive mental health and wellbeing of the population. Some of these are at a regional level, operating across all of Northern Ireland, while others, such as those across the LINKS family, focus on young people living in local areas. The remainder of this section gives a flavour of just some of the preventative and responsive practice at a regional level before drilling down into specific examples of practice from LINKS groups.

### Regional level practice

At a regional and population level the Public Health Agency's **Take 5 Steps to Wellbeing** campaign<sup>21</sup> encourages people to do the following on a daily basis:

- **Connect:** Connect with the people around you: family, friends, colleagues and neighbours at home, work, school or in your local community. Think of these relationships as the cornerstones of your life and spend time developing them. Building these connections will support and enrich you every day.
- **Be active:** Go for a walk or run, cycle, play a game, garden or dance. Exercising makes you feel good. Most importantly, discover a physical activity that you enjoy; one that suits your level of mobility and fitness.

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<sup>21</sup> See here for more: <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/take-5-steps-wellbeing-english-and-11-translations>

- **Take notice:** Stop, pause, or take a moment to look around you. What can you see, feel, smell or even taste? Look for beautiful, new, unusual or extraordinary things in your everyday life and think about how that makes you feel.
- **Keep learning:** Don't be afraid to try something new, rediscover an old hobby or sign up for a course. Take on a different responsibility, fix a bike, learn to play an instrument or how to cook your favourite food. Set a challenge you will enjoy. Learning new things will make you more confident, as well as being fun to do.
- **Give:** Do something nice for a friend or stranger, thank someone, smile, volunteer your time or consider joining a community group. Look out as well as in. Seeing yourself and your happiness linked to the wider community can be incredibly rewarding and will create connections with the people around you.

Another regional programme, aimed specifically at young people, that is being rolled out through the youth work workforce across Northern Ireland by YouthAction NI, is the **LIFEMAPS**<sup>22</sup> model. LIFEMAPS is based on positive psychology and promotes positive mental health and wellbeing through a series of interlinked concepts that describe a holistic approach to developing mental health. LIFEMAPS is an acronym for these eight concepts, which, in summary are:

- **Learning:** Accepting that failure is a necessary part of learning, rather than a negative consequence, which enables us to find the courage to try new things, build resilience and approach challenges without the fear of failure.
- **Intrinsic Motivation:** Finding activities that we really enjoy and are interested in, and have an internal motivation to pursue, because they bring us a sense of personal reward and pride and contribute positively to our mental wellbeing.
- **Flow:** Finding activities that fully immerse and engross us, causing us to lose ourselves in the moment, which can give us a break from negative emotions and build positive feelings of achievement in their place.
- **Emotions:** Balancing out negative emotions with positive ones, not by forcing positivity but by being open to new experiences, people and ideas to help us build a wider range of positive emotions such as joy, inspiration, hope, awe and serenity.

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<sup>22</sup> McArdle & Ward, 2015: <https://www.youthaction.org/lifemaps>

- **Mindfulness:** Promoting a positive outlook by taking time to notice small, everyday moments that bring us pleasure in order to bring balance to our minds and counteract the negative moments.
- **Accomplishments:** Building self-esteem through accomplishing personal goals and realising that life is not about winning or losing, but more about learning and growing, and that small milestones pave the way to big successes.
- **Purpose:** Finding a sense of meaning in the world outside yourself by finding ways to help others, through small acts of kindness to your friends and family, volunteering or joining a cause you are passionate about.
- **Social Connections:** Building our sense of belonging and community by building strong connections with others through work, school, family and friends. This satisfies our desire to be valued, cherished and listened to, which is critical to mental health.

The FLARE (Facilitating Life and Resilience Education)<sup>23</sup> programme is part of the Education Authority's Youth Service, developed in partnership with the Public Health Agency. FLARE offers, through youth work, a social inclusion model of practice to engage young people aged 11-25 years with moderate mental health needs or risks. It seeks to support young people to build the internal reserves of confidence, resilience and positive aspirations in order to promote mental wellbeing and to provide the best foundation for enabling young people to thrive. FLARE operates under a model of youth work practice and all staff are qualified youth workers with specific training and experience within the mental health and wellbeing landscape. It combines one-to-one work with groupwork and capacity building.

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<sup>23</sup> FLARE: <http://www.cypsp.hscni.net/flare-project-18may/>

# Case Studies: Examples of Local Practice from LINKS

Several different approaches to promoting mental health and wellbeing with young people are being used by the LINKS organisations. Each organisation shares the overarching aim of enabling young people to overcome the challenges that they face, but each one does this in a slightly different way, e.g. working on a one-to-one basis, working with small groups, using a combination of individual and group work, working with both young people and parents/carers and school-based work, as the case study examples outlined below illustrate. Each case study details the project overview and impact provided by grant holders for this resource, as well as contact details for each organisation.

## Case studies involving one-to-one work

### Re:Source: Action Mental Health New Life Counselling



AMH New Life Counselling is a professionally accredited counselling service and part of Action Mental Health. AMH

New Life Counselling is committed to supporting the emotional health and wellbeing needs of its clients through the provision of counselling, providing friendly and professional counselling services for children, young people, adults and families.

#### Project Overview

The Re:Source Project aims to assess children and young people, aged 8-17 years, impacted by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and offer creative therapy (art, music, play etc.) as an early intervention. To date 66 children and young people have engaged with the service.

Activities include:

- Weekly one-to-one child and youth creative therapy sessions using qualified registered and/or accredited art, music and play therapists.

- The creative therapists using knowledge and training on ACEs and trauma informed practice to put bespoke early interventions into place for each young person.
- During COVID-19 there was no break in service as the organisation linked in with regulating bodies for updated guidance, upskilled the team and offered creative therapy online to ensure accessibility at a time of increased youth mental health concerns due to social isolation and global anxiety.

### **Impact**

An independent evaluation carried out by Queen's University Belfast using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs) indicated promising interim results with **clinically significant evidence** that Creative Therapy helps children and young people's mental health improve as demonstrated by the following:

- A **significant decrease** in Total SDQ scores (i.e. indicating improvements overall)
- A **significant decrease** in the total impact
- A **significant decrease** in the emotion, peer, hyperactivity and conduct domains of the SDQ
- A **significant decrease** in internalising and externalising behaviours (i.e. more positive behaviours)
- A **significant increase** in the prosocial domain
- A **significant decrease** in the domains of distress, home difficulties, friendship difficulties and classroom difficulties.

Children and young people stated the following regarding how the counselling had helped them:

*"It has helped by not making me think about my anxieties and learning the strategies to help has been useful, as I can use these. I am not reacting as much as before." (Young person)*

*"Everything, helped me with my anger and fears. Play calmed me down. Helping me get rid of a fear." (Child)*

Parents too testified to the impact of the counselling on their children:

*"Counselling has helped with my little one's anxiety issues. She is calmer and her self-esteem is slowly being restored. She is feeling more positive and not as easily overwhelmed. She really enjoys the sessions, she says like she 'feels she can finally see out from a dark tunnel'. She was very sad on the last session as she wished for*

*them to continue as she says they help her feel so much better. Her counsellor has been amazing and my little one's face glows when she speaks of her - a little girl who is usually hard to get out of bed, jumps out on the morning of her sessions."*  
(Parent)

For more information on the Re:Source project see website below.

Website: [www.amh.org.uk](http://www.amh.org.uk)

## **Youth Befriending: Oasis Caring in Action (Antrim)**



### **Project Overview**

Oasis Caring in Action is a community organisation which works to 'Transform Lives, Transform Communities' through the provision of childcare, training, and befriending services.

The Youth Befriending Project aims to help improve mood, confidence and wellbeing of physical and/or mental health of young people aged 12-17 years. It focuses on working with young people who may be feeling low, anxious or angry, or who are low in confidence and are having issues within their school or daily life. Outcomes are personalised for each individual through goal setting and must include an aspect of mental health and wellbeing improvement such as improving sleeping patterns, controlling anger or building confidence.

Activities include the following:

- One-to-one meetings with a befriender for usually 8-12 weeks (though the time can be longer or shorter depending on the needs of the individual.)
- The completion of a 'My Journey' document by the young person at the beginning, middle and end of the programme in which they score themselves from 1-5 on confidence, communication, working with others, setting and achieving goals, managing feelings and reliability.
- Reviewing 2-4 mental health and well-being goals weekly and progressing these.
- Accompanying young people to their doctors so that a referral to CAMHs can be made (when necessary).

## Impact

- 94% of young people completed the befriending service and stated that they found it a **positive and rewarding** scheme to be a part of.
- There was an **increase** in overall mental health and wellbeing scores for all of the participants who completed the befriending project.
- Teachers from the local school, from which many referrals were received, praised the befriending service for helping with the mental health and wellbeing of their young people and there have been requests for further work in some of the schools.
- **Improvements** in attitudes, routines and school attendance (feedback from parents).
- **Improvements** in the life choices made by young people, e.g. some have joined other projects within Oasis, such as Gaming in Action.
- An **increase** in the number of young people gaining employment: 6 young people have got part-time jobs as a result of increased confidence and mental wellbeing.
- An **increase** in the ability of young people to deal with mental health and wellbeing issues as they have learnt new and more positive coping mechanisms as a result of the project, thereby feeling stronger.

For more information about the Youth Befriending Project at Oasis contact Jennifer Todd.

Email: [Jennifer.todd@oasis-ni.org](mailto:Jennifer.todd@oasis-ni.org)

Website: <https://www.oasisantrim.org/>

## Case studies involving Group Work

### Young People's Mental Health: Oasis Caring in Action (Antrim)



#### Project Overview

Ten young people aged 14-16 years participated in this project which aimed to engage the young people in positive activities highlighting the importance of mental

health within their age group. The Take 5 for Mental Health and Wellbeing model was used to design the sessions and activities that were offered.

Activities included the following:

- Weekly group work sessions for 10 weeks covering areas around mental health, wellbeing and therapeutic sessions as well as substance misuse and its relationship to mental health.
- Specialist input from Aware on Mood Matters and the FLARE Project on Suicide Awareness.
- Three activities aimed at highlighting the importance of socialising, making positive choices and undertaking new hobbies, e.g. fun activities, mural creation and graffiti boards.

### Impact

- An **increase** in confidence as half of the group have progressed onto the Oasis Advisory Group and have been trained as young leaders/mentors.
- An **increase** in communication and research skills as these young people assisted the organisation to conduct its research into young people's views on mental health provision in Antrim for young people, which involved interviewing their peers and completing questionnaires.

For more information about Oasis' work on mental health and wellbeing contact Hugo Armstrong.

Email: [hugo.armstrong@oasis-ni.org](mailto:hugo.armstrong@oasis-ni.org)

Website: <https://www.oasisantrim.org/>

## Together We Can, Together We Will: Headliners

### Project Overview

Headliners gives young people a voice by using journalism and media as a tool for learning, exploring issues and campaigning for change in their communities. The Together We Can, Together We Will project aims to improve the wellbeing of young people who are socially isolated in the Belfast and Derry/Londonderry areas by supporting them to develop the skills and confidence to have an influential voice,



widen their social circles and help them to overcome barriers to independence and employment.

Activities undertaken to promote mental health and wellbeing include:

- Young people using journalism skills such as writing, recording, filming and editing to make their voices heard on the topic of mental health and wellbeing.
- Young people producing a number of pieces focusing on this topic and how it has affected them, in particular during the COVID-19 lockdown. See this link for podcasts where young people discuss, firstly, the impact of lockdown on mental health <https://www.headliners.org/community-in-lockdown> and secondly, their thoughts on coming out of lockdown: <https://www.headliners.org/returning-to-real-life>
- Headliners has also been able to put on its social media platforms several public health posts and ways in which to take care of yourself, especially in relation to Mental Health Week which happened during this time. This is one example: <https://twitter.com/HeadlinersNI/status/1263479823936172038>

### Impact

- A **reduction** in social isolation: giving young people the chance to talk to other young people in this situation was found to be beneficial, being able to know that others were in a similar situation and the ability to air their issues gave young people a freedom.
- An **increase** in growth opportunities: giving the young people freedom to talk and make mistakes provided them with the opportunity to grow, to continue their projects and to seek support from their peers and others.

To find out more about the Together We Can, Together We Will project contact Gareth Doherty at Headliners.

Email: [Gareth.doherty@headliners.org](mailto:Gareth.doherty@headliners.org)

Website: <https://www.headliners.org/>

## Case studies involving a combination of individual and group work

### Wellbeing Support Service: MACS NI

MACS NI works with children and young people (aged 6-25) who have not had a fair deal. They may be experiencing homelessness, substance abuse, self-harm, mental health issues, leaving care or they are generally at risk.



The Wellbeing Support Service is aimed at 11-25 year olds to help improve their mental health so they can live, dream and succeed. Over 80 young people are active in this project at any time.

#### Project Overview

The project enables young people to better manage their mental health and wellbeing, to increase confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

Activities include:

- One-to-one meetings between a young person and their wellbeing worker every fortnight
- Group sessions 2-4 times per month, which are either socially based or personal development/growth focused
- Weekly meetings with a mentor
- Celebratory events
- Volunteer opportunities such as the Muddy Paws (dog sitting and grooming) social enterprise.

#### Impact

Young people have returned to education, found employment, become volunteers, joined external groups in relation to hobbies, were enabled to take public transport, reduced self-harming and kept themselves safe, maintained family relationships and found alternative housing.

Over the last year there has been:

- An **increase** in young people's living standards with 91% achieving economic wellbeing.

- An **increase** in young people's ability to enjoy learning and achieve with 78% gaining qualifications.
- An **increase** in young people's ability to be healthy with 82% reporting this.
- An **increase** in young people's ability to stay safe with 96% indicating this was the case.
- An **increase** in life-satisfaction with 91% reporting that they made a positive contribution to themselves.

For more information about The Wellbeing Support Service contact Bronagh McErlean.

Email: [bronaghmcerlean@macsni.org](mailto:bronaghmcerlean@macsni.org)

Website: [www.macsni.org](http://www.macsni.org)

## Young Women's Diversity Group: Oasis Caring in Action (Antrim)



### Project Overview

Eight young women participated in this group which was initially designed to engage with them regarding their feelings about the changing dynamic of society in Antrim town. Subsequently, during the COVID-19 lockdown, the project then also served to reduce young women's social isolation and meet mental health and wellbeing needs.

### Activities

- Group work was designed to be delivered for 10 weeks, initially face to face and then during lockdown, remotely. However, this was extended due to the needs of the group and tended to focus on fun activities such as games, hobbies, make-up and hair tips and future plans as well as the completion of an OCN Level 1 course in Diversity.
- Individual support meetings provided by a female member of staff to any worries and concerns they had during this period.
- Four group members were leaving education in June and had some anxiety around their future places in further education college or school. These young women were supported by staff and assured that they could still avail of the support from Oasis wherever they found themselves in September.

## Impact

- An **increase** in attainment: all 8 group members have gained an OCN Level 1 Diversity qualification.
- A **reduction** in the social isolation of the young women.
- An **increase** in the participation of some of the young women in other projects within Oasis.
- An **increase** in the support organisations available to the young women through Oasis and other local community-based organisations in the Antrim area.

For more information on Oasis' Young Women's Diversity Group contact Jennifer Todd.

Email: [Jennifer.todd@oasis-ni.org](mailto:Jennifer.todd@oasis-ni.org)

Website: <https://www.oasisantrim.org/>

## Case studies involving work with young people and parents/ carers

### FACT (Families Achieving Change Together): Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum



#### Project Overview

The FACT project originally grew from the idea that the community group, Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum (BBHF), wanted to help support the emotional needs and wellbeing of the young people, aged 11-18 years, in local high schools.

The project has the following aims:

1. To **support the young person and family** as a whole – by the one-to-one work in schools with the young person, to home visits with the family and then developing programmes to cater to their specific needs.
2. To **create a supportive community** that the young person feels a sense of belonging to and to **empower the young person** to have their voice heard and

in turn help other young people with issues around wellbeing and mental health.

BBHF aims to have a whole family, whole systems, approach in meeting the needs of the young person. It incorporates the 5 Steps to Wellbeing (mentioned above) as indicators to support young people and their families, usually for up to 12 weeks (though this may be extended if necessary).

A toolkit of resources and skills are used by the project staff and activities undertaken to promote positive mental health and wellbeing include:

- One-to-one work with young people and their families to work in a solution-focused manner to help provide positive outcomes, using the Outcomes Star<sup>24</sup> to identify priority needs
- Home visits
- Group work in schools via the Well Connected groups
- Equine Assisted Growth and Learning<sup>25</sup>
- Anti-bullying workshops
- Transition programmes (from primary to secondary school)
- School workshops with 30 - 100 young people at one time, e.g. during Mental Health Awareness Week
- CBT based workshops on positive mental health (Parent Plus) and
- Parenting programmes (to equip parents of young people in supporting their needs).

Motivational interview skills are used with the young person and existing in-house support services are identified, along with what might be offered by other referral agencies and they will work together to support the young person's needs.

Workers are aware that both environmental and psychological factors can impact on both the needs of the young person and that of their family which is evident more now than ever.

The Well Connected groups meet once a week over lunch time in their school to talk about wellbeing and the different factors which influence this. The young people in these groups are Well-Being Ambassadors in their schools. These Well Connected groups have, with the PHA, written their own wellbeing programme which will be delivered to their peers in schools via Zoom (due to lockdown).

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<sup>24</sup> The Outcomes Star is an evidence-based tool for supporting and measuring change when working with people, including young people. There are several Stars which can be used for different purposes and with different age groups, e.g. The Teen Star. See here for more: <https://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/>

<sup>25</sup> The EAGALA (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association) model is delivered by Equine Enrichment to support young people with mental health issues. This model is key in promotion of positive mental health see <https://eagalaequinecareer.com/equine-enrichment-in-northern-ireland-spotlight>

## Impact

- An **improvement** in young people's behaviour, school work and general mood (feedback from teachers).
- A **growth** in confidence among the Well-Being Ambassadors, from being quiet individuals to talking in front of the whole school about the programmes they are involved in (observed by the project staff).

This testimony from Grace (aged 16), a Well Connected member, shows the impact of the project's services during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*"I am feeling very conflicted during this time as in a way it is great: I don't have to go to school and the stress of having to take my final GCSE exams has been lifted - but then again I am worried to see what is going to happen. How will I get into tech and will our predicted grades be enough?"*

*I miss my friends so much and am so upset that our summer is looking very bleak and boring. I find this time good for me in a way, being able to relax and not having the everyday worry and stress of life get to me as it did before this, but I am constantly bored and don't know what to do with myself. I'm very restless as I have been in my house for around 2 months.*

*BBHF have been so helpful so far with anything they can think of and they check up on us constantly which is so thoughtful and nice during this time. They have been giving us things to do e.g. scavenger hunts and meditation classes as well as giving us packs and any links to do anything we suggest like working out and our sleeping schedules.*

*Being part of Well Connected helps in so many ways as I have people who I can talk to if I need help and people who are there for me and will help me with anything I need to the best of their ability which is a very secure feeling for me."*

For more information on the FACT project contact Kayleigh or Michaela at the Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum.

Email: [kayleigh@bbhealthforum.org](mailto:kayleigh@bbhealthforum.org); [michaela@bbhealthforum.org](mailto:michaela@bbhealthforum.org)

Website: [www.bbhealthforum.org](http://www.bbhealthforum.org)

## The Base: Tobin Youth Centre



The Tobin Centre acts as a resource for young people by providing advice, assistance and support and organising programmes of physical, educational and other activities. This enables young people to develop their skills, capacities and capabilities, empowering them to participate in society as independent, mature and responsible individuals, and to improve their conditions of life.

The Base Project provides a range of youth activities for families in the Mid-Ulster area, some of which have additional needs. The project ensures that children and young people up to the age of 16 with additional needs can be included in a youth centre environment. Parents and siblings can join the young people in weekly activities so they can experience family time outside the home in a suitable environment.

### **Project Overview**

A total of 112 children and young people participated in this project, which aims to improve their health and wellbeing, initially through face-to-face sessions and subsequently online as lockdown occurred.

Activities included:

- Online sessions in Yoga, Jo Jingles, Core NI Fun Fitness, Jump Jiggle Jive, Fun with Drums, Cooking, Art, Live Music, Family Quizzes, Storytelling and Dance Classes.
- Fortnightly Virtual Coffee and a Catch-Up using Zoom with parents supporting them in dealing with some of the challenges of lockdown, such as problems with sleep, anxiety and boredom for the children and stress, anxiety and self-care needs for the parents/carers.
- To coincide with Mental Health Awareness Week, each family received a delivery of a 'Calming and Mood Boosting Box', which included Essential Oils 'Air Blend' Pillow Spray to aid sleep and Essential Oils 'Balance Blend' Pulse Point Roller Ball to calm an overactive nervous system, settle energy and restore balance. Links to videos explaining how to use the essential oils were also included.
- The box contained a 'Little Bag of Gratitude' to encourage the children and their families to focus on gratitude practice and all that they are thankful for at this time.

- Parents/carers received 'Self Care Permission Bookmarks' reminding them of the importance of nourishing themselves in order to care for their children.
- The children and young people also received packs with art and craft materials, journals, shakers and kazoos for vibration and sound stimulation and blow baskets for controlled breathing techniques.

### Impact

- An **increase** in the levels of support available for children, parents and families:  
*"I genuinely can't believe the kindness you have shown in the beautiful parcel we received today. Everyone gathered around and we got so much joy looking through the wonderful treasures. It was a lovely ray of sunshine to us and we are so grateful. You are a great bunch and I'm delighted to be a part of your community. Thank you so much."* (Parent)
- An **increase** in children engaging in creative activities:  
*"He isn't one for colouring in but he got into the colouring book right after he investigated everything."* (Parent)
- An **improvement** in children's bedtime routines and sleep:  
*"...she loves it, she goes into it daily and especially at night for the spray. It has helped us so much because she never stays in her own bed. She sprays it on her pillow, falls asleep alone and stays in her own bed."* (Parent)
- An **increase** in children's ability to identify and show emotions:  
*"She draws a picture in the book of how she is feeling happy/sad. It was a win-win in our house."* (Parent)

For more information on The Base Project contact Loretta Daly.

Email: [loretta@tobincentre.com](mailto:loretta@tobincentre.com)

Website: <http://tobinyouthcentre.weebly.com/>

## Case studies involving school-based work

### Empowering Young Minds: The Niamh Louise Foundation

### The Niamh Louise Foundation

SUICIDE - WE HAVE BEEN THERE. SUPPORT, HOPE & UNDERSTANDING. A SHARED JOURNEY TO RECOVERY.

The Niamh Louise Foundation runs the Empowering Young Minds Project which is a tailored care-package to support young people aged 8 – 25 years. This case study is focused on a group of 19 Year 7 children, aged 10-11 years old, from Aughnacloy Primary School, Co. Tyrone. This was the first primary school which completed the Empowering Young Minds programme, with all sessions previously having been completed within secondary schools, with older teenagers, through community groups or within the Niamh Louise Foundation itself. This primary school group highlighted the importance of sharing this information with people from a young age.

#### Project Overview

The Empowering Young Minds programme focuses on the mental health and emotional well-being of children and young people. It is focused on those in emotional distress, those with thoughts of suicide and or self-harm, or those who have been bereaved by suicide. It helps them to heal and recover while developing life skills and building self-esteem and resilience, as well as working within school environments to educate on these topics in their prevention. The target of this group was to improve their education in relation to mental health and mental ill-health and to help them with coping skills and resilience for the future, particularly as they were preparing to leave primary school and begin secondary school.

Activities included:

- Group work discussions lasting one hour for six weeks
- Individual worksheets
- Art work

Topics covered included the following:

- education on emotions
- managing emotions, including managing anger
- learning about mental health
- anxiety and how to manage it
- the human mind

- the impact that social media and the internet can have on our emotions. How best to manage the internet and reduce possible harm caused by social media
- suicide and self-harm which were addressed in an age-appropriate manner

### Impact

- An **increase** in young people receiving education on mental health and wellbeing topics: almost three-quarters (74%) indicated they had never received education on these topics before.
- An **increase** in what the terms mental health and wellbeing are and being able to differentiate between mental health and mental ill-health:  
*"It is when you have a healthy mind...it helps us to feel good"*  
*"Mental health is the health of our brains and it helps us to feel good"*
- An **increase** in confidence to talk about these issues and topics with their classmates.
- An **increase** in young people understanding the importance of learning about mental health, and the risk of self-harm and suicide from a young age:  
*"I think it's important because then people can be more aware it can happen"*  
*"I think it is important to let people talk about their feelings so they don't feel sad and they can get their emotions out"*

For more information on the Empowering Young Minds project contact Catherine McBennett.

Email: [info@niamhlouisefoundation.com](mailto:info@niamhlouisefoundation.com)

Website: [www.niamhlouisefoundation.com](http://www.niamhlouisefoundation.com)

### Uberheroes®: Hope 4 Life NI

Hope 4 Life NI believes that everyone has a basic right to good mental health with the emphasis on prevention.

Uberheroes® is an early intervention and prevention programme that uses superhero themed comics and an interactive website to tackle the subjects of social, emotional and mental health issues within schools and community groups. These mental health issues are represented by their Villains covering topics like cyber-bullying, self-harm, fear, drugs, abuse, isolation,



depression, anxiety, grief and suicide. The Uberheroes® represent the characteristics we want the pupils to emulate in their own lives such as Resilience, Hope, Strength, Truth, Intelligence, Diversity and Social Inclusion.

### **Project Overview**

In the past 2 academic years over 13,500 children and young people aged 9-16 years in over 200 schools, have participated in the Uberheroes® Project, which aims to:

- Develop and grow young people's awareness of the triggers and early warning signs of poor mental health
- Help develop resilience
- Empower children and young people to speak out, to ensure that they understand the importance of speaking to someone they trust about how they feel and to do this as early as possible
- Know and understand that the way they feel is not unique to them, that others have felt the same way and to understand that people won't laugh or minimise how they feel
- Learn that the young people who have told us their stories want others to learn from their poor choices and to help young people make better choices than they did
- Learn how to assess circumstances and situations, to analyse these and to be able to come up with practical solutions to overcome these
- Know that with the right help you can and will improve and feel well again

### **Activities**

School visits for approximately 1 hour 45 minutes, which involve:

- An introduction to the work, how the programme was designed by young people, how other children and young people contribute and how their continued involvement moulds and designs the Uberheroes® programme.
- Who are the Uberheroes® and what they represent: Strength, Hope, Truth, Resilience, Intelligence, Diversity & Social Inclusion.
- Children and young people volunteering to read the comics, playing the lead characters, to their peers.
- Small group discussion where pupils are comfortable to review the circumstances the lead character is facing, identifying the issues that they have had to cope with, come up with the solutions and ultimately decide on a plan that offers practical outcomes for the lead character in the comics.

### **Impact**

- An **increase** in knowledge of where to get help: 91% indicated they have a much better idea where to get practical help to deal with self-harming behaviours. 96% of pupils have greater understanding where they need to go to get the help and support they need to stop an abuser.
- An **increase** in knowledge about how they, themselves can help others: 96% have a better idea how to help someone who is marginalised because they are

seen as being 'different'. 89% have a better understanding of how to offer practical help and support to a friend dealing with an eating disorder.

- An **increase** in understanding of motivation for bullying behaviour: 95% state that they have a better understanding of the motives of people who bully and cyber-bully.
- An **increase** in knowledge of the impact of bullying: 94% have a greater appreciation of the impact of cyber-bullying on those who are bullied.
- Alfie (9) said *"I have been feeling really down because I am being bullied and this has made me feel that if Jill in the story can get help then so can I, I now know what I need to do and who I need to turn to for support."*
- An **increase** in knowledge about abuse: 98% have greater knowledge on the issue of abuse and a better idea as to how they could help others who have shared their abuse with them.

Niamh (13) was upset as the storyline was very close to what she was going through, she was crying and when asked by our facilitator if she wanted to step out, said *"definitely not, this is far too important to me, I need to stay to hear what's being discussed and said and if possible to help others."*

Testimonies from pupils and teachers also reflect the impact that the programme has on young people:

Amy (13) said *"I love that this comic is something I could use with my sisters and Mum to talk about my fears and feelings."*

Jo (14) said *"I love that you have learning with fun, love this as a concept for young people to learn how to overcome mental health issues."*

Sean Murphy, English Teacher at Erne Integrated College, Enniskillen, remarked:

*"Uberheroes...is a unique and innovative idea which foregrounds the problems that young people face. They tackle the taboo aspect of these issues head-on. Our Year 9 students were thrilled with the idea of using "superheroes" to personify the challenges that our young people face and the creative element of the work carries real cultural currency which resonates with our students. By "outing" the problems that young people face, students are much freer to express themselves, to ask for help or simply see that their problems are problems that are faced by many of their peers – they are not alone."*

Martin Houlahan of All Children's Integrated School, Newcastle wrote *"Children don't normally get the opportunity to engage in discussions such as these difficult mental health issues, however, the way the facilitators delivered the programme was excellent from the point of having difficult conversations in a safe environment."*

For more information on the Uberheroes® Project contact Dee Nixon.

Email: [dee@hope4lifeni.org.uk](mailto:dee@hope4lifeni.org.uk)

Website: [www.uberheroes.co.uk](http://www.uberheroes.co.uk) & [www.hope4lifeni.org.uk](http://www.hope4lifeni.org.uk)

## Key Learning Points to Inform Practice and Policy

The organisations in the LINKS family are all different, working in different ways with different groups of young people. All of the case studies, though, demonstrate that they are working with young people to contribute to addressing many of the elements of positive mental health and wellbeing identified in the presented literature, such as the following:

- Building self esteem
- Providing support networks
- Facilitating access to existing community-based supports
- Encouraging healthy life choices in terms of diet and physical exercise
- Supporting parents so that they too can contribute to their children's positive mental health and wellbeing

In doing so they are contributing to meeting the overall aim of the Empowering Young People's programme: enabling young people to cope with challenges in their lives.

The case studies of practice identify common elements that projects are using in their work on the ground in promoting positive mental health with young people, which are:

**Knowledge transfer:** knowledge about what the terms mental health and wellbeing mean; knowledge about emotions and how to identify them; knowledge about where and how to get help when necessary; providing opportunities to learn and continue learning both academically and otherwise.

**Skills development:** such as managing emotions and responses to potential triggers (self-awareness and self-regulation skills); developing healthy coping skills; life skills such as building healthy relationships and friendships and sustaining these; meal planning, cooking and managing money; developing healthy habits in relation to diet, exercise and hobbies.

**Building social capacity:** such as building networks of support within local communities that young people can avail of; providing opportunities to contribute and give back to the community; personal development which is helping to build confidence in meeting smaller challenges so that the young person can then overcome bigger challenges later.

There are several reasons why the projects featured in this resource were effective in building positive mental health and wellbeing:

- Several start from where the young people 'are at'. For example, with assistance from staff, young people identify their own needs/topics and choose how these might be addressed, e.g. Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum; Headliners; Uberheroes®.
- Utilising novel and creative ways to engage young people has been shown to be effective for many of the grant holders, e.g. making comics and website pages at Uberheroes®; using multi-media at Headliners.
- Many projects often address basic needs (i.e. safety, security, food, self-esteem, self-confidence) first, before more complex needs are addressed (i.e. accredited training, employment skills, anxiety, negative coping strategies) e.g. The Base @Tobin; Headliners; MACS; Oasis Caring in Action.
- Several projects address young people's needs in a holistic manner, often working with other key services/people in a child's life (e.g. schools, parents), emphasising the need for partnership and collaboration, e.g. Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum; The Base @Tobin; The Niamh Louise Foundation.
- Others use methods that have been shown to be effective in clinical practice, in order to meet specific mental health difficulties, e.g. Creative Arts Therapy at AMH.
- Some recognise that certain groups of young people, such as those who are care experienced and lacking family support, have particular needs, are more prone to social isolation and therefore, may require more intensive work, e.g. MACS.
- Others understand the need for all young people to have more and better social connections and therefore, use a befriending model to create these connections, e.g. Oasis Befriending Project.
- Some have adopted learning from working with adults, such as the women's sector to work with young people, e.g. the Oasis Women's Diversity project.
- For all projects, building and maintaining positive relationships between the staff/volunteers and young people has been key. Without a relationship built on trust and unconditional positive regard for the young person, no work will be effective. The crucial 'instruments' grant holders have therefore, are the staff and volunteers who work directly with the young people.

The case studies included in this insight report demonstrate that the promotion of mental health and wellbeing is not the preserve of the health and education authorities or services alone. Often in media discussions about school age children

and mental health and wellbeing there is a tendency to place the responsibility for addressing this solely with schools. However, just as positive mental health and wellbeing are multi-faceted concepts, so too do all organisations have a valuable contribution to make to ensure young people's mental health and wellbeing are built in small, everyday ways.

This work does not always require specialist training. It needs an ongoing commitment to build young people's emotional and mental strength so that there is less likelihood that they will need mental health services later in life.

Commissioners and funders also have a key role to play in ensuring that programmes of work are sustainable and have a lasting legacy for all young people to benefit from. This means that there is a need for long-term, rather than short-term funding, such as the NLCF's Empowering Young People programme, to enable practice to develop and expertise to be embedded in communities in Northern Ireland.

The Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 recognises that it is not enough to simply wait until people are experiencing mental ill-health to act. One of the key actions of the strategy is the promotion of positive mental health and wellbeing. This is not just a duty for those in the health service. It is a responsibility for all of us. As the strategy recognises, the voluntary and community sector has a key role to play in the promotion of positive mental health among children and young people. The examples from the LINKS grant holders have demonstrated the expertise of the sector in this resource which, if harnessed effectively, could result in positive mental health, not only for this generation of young people, but those who come after them too – it is a virtuous circle that will benefit the whole of society eventually.

## Appendix 1: References and Resources

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The Outcomes Star is an evidence-based tool for supporting and measuring change when working with people, including young people. There are several Stars which can be used for different purposes and with different age groups, e.g. The Teen Star. See here for more: <https://www.outcomesstar.org.uk>

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