



limerick youth service
Supporting Young People for 50 Years



RURAL YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Project Evaluation



"An Evaluation of Limerick Youth Service'
Be Well Rural Youth Mental Health Project"



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1. Introduction

The purpose of this evaluation is to outline the extent to which Limerick Youth Service (LYS)' rural youth mental health project achieved its objectives, and to identify the factors enabling the project's achievements. The evaluation will present LYS mission, aims and areas of work. It will introduce LYS' Be Well youth mental health programme, under which the rural youth mental health programme emerged. Evaluation methods are then presented, followed by a review of the literature on best practice in the delivery of youth mental health service and supports, and the relevance of youth work in this context. Evaluation findings are then identified, and recommendations made.

2. Background

Limerick Youth Service

Limerick Youth Service (LYS) was founded in 1973 and is a provider of youth work, education, training, and employability programmes to young people aged 10 to 25 years in Limerick City & County. LYS is a member of Youth Work Ireland and registered as a Scheme of Incorporation by the Commissioners of Charitable Donations & Bequests in Ireland, under Section 2 of the Charities Act 1973. LYS is governed by a Voluntary Board which is responsible for the overall governance of the Organisation.

LYS' Mission is:

'Connecting with young people and supporting them to reach their full potential'.

Its values are:

- Young People at the Centre of all that we do.
- Community based, integrated and collaborative.
- Learning, Creativity & Innovation.
- Equality, Inclusion & Diversity.

LYS priority areas of work are:

1. Youth work supports, services and programmes.
2. Education, training & employability opportunities & initiatives.
3. Volunteer opportunities & support.

LYS aims to deliver high quality youth work services and supports that foster meaningful outcomes for young people. It's youth work provision across Limerick City and County incorporates:

- Youth Diversion Projects
- Youth Mental Health & Wellbeing
- Youth and Family Support
- Youth Information
- International Youth Work
- Youth Cafes
- Volunteer - Led Youth Clubs
- Your Place Your Space (UBU) Targeted Youth Work Programmes
- Structured Youth Work Programmes/Workshops
- Youth Voice, Participation & Committees

LYS services and supports are delivered within the following dedicated, safe, accessible and youth friendly spaces across Limerick City & County:

- Limerick Youth Service Headquarters, Lwr. Glentworth St., Limerick
- Community Training Centre, Lwr. Glentworth St., Limerick
- The Factory, Southside Youth Space, Galvone Business Park, Limerick
- Northside Youth Space, Ballynanty, Limerick
- Rathkeale Youth Space, Rathkeale, Co. Limerick
- Nicholas St. Youth Space, Kings Island, Limerick
- East Limerick Youth Space, Castleconnell, Co. Limerick
- Garryowen Youth Together Project, Garryowen, Limerick
- Youth Diversion Project, John's Square, Limerick



YOUTH AND COVID-19 CONFERENCE

MAJAC

Elia



3. LYS' Be Well Programme

A key LYS youth work objective is to strengthen young people's mental health and social and emotional wellbeing. LYS' Be Well' Youth Mental Health Programme, established in 2016 and funded by the HSE, delivers services and supports to 14 - 25-year-olds across Limerick City and County.

Be Well Programme objectives are:

- To raise awareness and reduce stigma around youth mental health and wellbeing.
- To enhance the mental health and well-being of those young people engaged with the project.
- Strengthen young people's participation in youth mental health services and supports.

This service is especially relevant considering COVID's damaging impacts on youth mental health and wellbeing. Be Well activities include the delivery of one-to-one therapeutic counselling sessions and the provision of youth mental health supports including one to one mentoring and support, group work activities, advocacy, outreach, evidence-based educational programmes and large group events, delivered by youth mental health workers based in rural and urban locations.

4. Be Well Rural Youth Mental Health Project

In 2018, LYS facilitated the research report: 'A baseline study and needs analysis of young people aged 10-18 years in rural county Limerick', which identified the needs, interests, and concerns of young people relevant to their mental health and wellbeing; a priority identified in DCEDIY 2014 national policy framework for children and young people: Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020.

Based on findings such as increasing stress levels and reduced access in rural areas to youth mental health services and supports, in 2021 LYS successfully applied to the RTE Toy Show fund to develop the Be Well Rural Youth Mental Health Project, which engaged a rural youth mental health worker to deliver youth mental health programmes and supports to young people in rural Limerick communities from its base in rural LYS youth spaces.

The aim of the rural youth mental health project is to enhance the well-being, resilience and mental health of marginalised and vulnerable young people aged 14- 18 years in County Limerick. Its objectives align with the Be Well programme and since its establishment in 2020, its activities have included:

- Delivery of evidence-based youth mental health & well-being awareness programmes including Mind Out and the Be Well Anxiety Awareness Workshop in rural post-primary schools.
- Develop LYS employee skills & knowledge through the provision of training in the delivery of the Be Well anxiety workshop to young people.
- Delivery of mental health and wellbeing programme ‘Wellness Recovery Action Plan’ (WRAP) to more marginalised groups of young people.
- Establishing and mentoring a project Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) to enable a youth-led peer approach to youth mental health.
- One-to-one mentoring and support sessions with YAP members using the youth mental health outcomes star tool - ‘My Mind Star’.
- The delivery of informal educational workshops in areas including sexual health and wellbeing, peer-led methods, and podcasting techniques to YAP members.

5. Rural Youth Mental Health Project Evaluation

Evaluation Aim:

The aim of this evaluation is to outline the extent to which the Be Well Rural Youth Mental Health project achieved its aim and objectives, and to review project processes in terms of identifying best practice.

Evaluation methods were:

- A focus group discussion with six YAP members.
- An interview with LYS' rural youth mental health worker, and a structured discussion including the Be Well coordinator and the LYS Youth Work Manager.
- An interview with a representative from an organisation that collaborated with the project on the delivery of a youth mental health programme.
- Interviews with three teachers and one principal and written feedback from one teacher, representing three secondary schools where youth mental health programmes were delivered.
- A review of secondary documentation including interim and annual outcome reports.
- A review of the literature exploring best practice in the delivery of youth mental health services and supports, with a focus on youth work settings.

6. Literature Review - Best Practice in the Delivery of Youth Mental Health Services & Supports

This review will provide an overview of key issues in youth mental health. It will outline factors supporting the successful delivery of youth mental health services and supports, and the important role of youth work in enhancing positive youth mental health and wellbeing.

Youth Mental Health

Mental health is defined as:

‘a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to their own community’ [World Health Organisation, 2022](#)

Mental health is complex, determined by varied and interdependent individual, socio-cultural and environmental factors (WHO, 2022). The HSE’s Connecting for Life - Ireland’s National Strategy to Prevent Suicide 2015-2020 outlines that mental and behavioural disorders such as depression, substance use disorders and anxiety impact upon the mental well-being of young people. The individual, social, and emotional skills determining one’s mental health include resilience and determination, communication, managing relationships, emotional intelligence, confidence, planning, and problem solving, creativity and imagination. Youth is a critical period in the development of such social-emotional skills, in finding purpose, establishing personal and sexual identity, risk taking and experimentation, detaching from parental control, and finding a place within peer groups ([DCEDIY, 2014](#)). Social, economic, and environmental circumstances - including poverty, violence, inequality, and environmental deprivation also negatively impact upon mental health conditions (WHO, 2022).

My World Survey 2 The National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland outlines that youth mental health in Ireland deteriorated between 2019 and 2021 with respect to disorders such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders, and in terms of social and emotional skills including self-esteem, optimism, and resilience.

How's Your Head, A report of a national consultation with young people on mental health and wellbeing (DCEDIY, 2020) highlights that the COVID-19 crisis had negative effects on young people's health and wellbeing, especially amongst some marginalised groups. The most common negative effects related to the mental health of respondents, including overthinking, concern, worry, anxiety, and depression.

LYS' 2018 study identified the following key findings:

- Increasing stress levels amongst young people, particularly as they move into exam cycles; stresses that young people are finding very difficult to navigate.
- Young people struggle to communicate with their parents and teachers when trying to “offload” about difficulties they are experiencing. They do not feel their voice is always heard within their home, school, and community.
- Certain groups of young people face difficulties with respect to their health and wellbeing that their mainstream peers do not. Such minority groups include LGBTQ young people, those whose parents were not born in Ireland, ethnic and cultural minorities, and Traveller young people.
- A lack of rural transport limits access for young people to youth services & support including mental health services and supports. Accessing & engaging with young people at their place of education is a relevant method of reaching young people in rural areas.



Youth mental health service and support delivery

Youth voice and influence is widely recognised as essential to the design and delivery of youth mental health services that result in meaningful outcomes for young people ([UNICEF 2022](#)).

The Irish College of Psychiatry, 2013 advises that:

‘Paternalistic service-led approaches must give way to ones where young people themselves are included as respected equals in the process of designing and developing youth mental health services’.

Similarly, youth mental health services and supports must respond to the strengths as well as the needs of young people. A strengths-based approach requires a focus on the young person’s own knowledge and capacity to protect their mental health and wellbeing without disregarding real difficulties. Strategies and tools that empower the young person to identify their strengths and how to mobilise them in reaching their goals are essential in implementing this approach ([Jigsaw, 2021](#)).

LYS’ 2018 study identified poor access to youth mental health services and supports in rural areas due to inadequate transport. In response, the report recommended the delivery of youth mental health initiatives at places of education as a method of reaching young people in widely dispersed rural areas. Furthermore, young people in rural areas are concerned about anonymity when accessing services relating to mental health, substance use, sexual health, and sexual identity.

Young people are keenly aware that their communities are close-knit and that they, and their families, may be unfairly judged if they are seen to seek help locally. The delivery of services in accessible community and non-stigmatising spaces and using varied methods such as online delivery and phone messaging is therefore essential.

The Irish College of Psychiatry, 2013 p6 notes the lack of comprehensive, specialist youth mental health services that provide continuous care through the adolescent and emerging adult years. Youth mental health services require the integration of additional supports such as engagement with the wider community and informal community; non-formal learning and youth work; involvement in arts, sports and cultural activities and positive school experiences, to ensure a holistic service. Connecting young people with more specialised services when required is also necessary in ensuring a comprehensive service as is the provision of continuous support over a long-term period. Youth Work Ireland's Integrated Youth Services Model Evidence Review states how an integrated youth service meets the needs of the 'whole' young person and requires collaboration within and across local, regional, and national community, voluntary and statutory groups, and organisations.

In addition to open access youth mental health services for all young people, targeted services for more vulnerable young people are necessary in ensuring equity and inclusion. LYS' 2018 study outlined that certain groups of young people in rural County Limerick face mental health and wellbeing difficulties that their mainstream peers do not. Such groups include LGBTQ young people, those whose parents were not born in Ireland, ethnic and cultural minorities, and Traveller young people. There are children and young people who are not enjoying their educational experience, some who do not feel very well cared for at home and some whose families cannot afford to provide them with everything they need to participate fully at school. Such young people could also be considered marginalised and vulnerable.

Youth Mental Health & Youth Work

In Ireland, youth work is defined and guided by the Youth Work Act, 2001, as:

“A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.”

Youth work’s unique role in supporting young people’s mental health and wellbeing is increasingly recognised. Youth work facilitates empowering relationships with caring adults including youth workers, mentors, or coaches, which are important for adolescent development (DCEIDY, 2014). My World Survey 1 & 2 emphasise ‘One Good Adult’ that a young person can turn to for support, if needed. The relationship between the youth worker and young person is empowering rather than dependent, with trust built over time. Furthermore, youth workers often work with young people in relaxed, safe and youth friendly settings, which are not medicalised. Young people feel safe to talk and reflect if they need to and because of the trust built, feel comfortable confiding something in that youth worker they wouldn’t tell a parent or sibling ([Jigsaw, 2023](#)).

Recent research has found that everyday youth work activities are ‘proven to improve young people’s mental wellbeing’ (Culleton, L. R. & Robbins, M. 2022. Measuring outcomes in youth work: The efficacy of positive psychology, Methodological approaches to research in youth work: Changing the paradigm, Youth Voice Journal, pp. 64-81). The study highlights that after engaging in youth work, 68% of young people reported experiencing positive emotions in their daily lives and two in three young people experienced a sense of accomplishment and meaning in their daily lives. Smith (2023) also recognises the role of youth services in fostering self-esteem in young people (Limerick Youth Service Conference March 2023. Presentation Disrupted transitions? Young adults and the covid-19 pandemic)

However, Culleton (2022) notes further that capturing mental health and wellbeing outcomes in youth work settings is neglected and so prioritises demonstrating impact.

Smith (2023) promotes the role of youth services in early intervention. BOBF identifies early intervention and prevention as a key policy goal, particularly in relation to youth mental health. As stated, trusting youth worker relationships provide opportunities for youth workers to see signs that a young person may be struggling with their mental health and provide and/or enable access to further services and supports (Jigsaw, 2023). Early intervention is particularly relevant to those most marginalised of young people, at a high risk of poor mental health.

Youth work methods such as group work and large group events provide opportunities for peer support, whereby young people get together and build supportive connections and friendships, particularly powerful for groups of young people known to be at higher risk of developing mental health problems (Paul Hamlyn Foundation 2023). Youth work also enables the delivery of flexible one to one to supports, in tandem with peer-led group work, advocacy, outreach and in/formal educational workshops. Smith (2023) highlights youth works' important role in health promotion activities in areas such as substance misuse, sexual health and wellbeing and managing anxiety.

Finally, youth work settings strengthen equal and inclusive access. As outlined, youth spaces are not traditional 'Mental Health Services'¹⁸ set in a medicalised setting. The delivery of varied youth clubs, cafes and groups facilitates anonymity, whereby young people may be attending a club. This anonymity is particularly important in rural areas. Youth work services and supports are also experienced in accessing those most marginalised of young people and their families in a community-based setting.



7. Evaluation Findings- Outcomes

Evaluation findings relating to project outcomes will be presented in line with the objectives of the rural youth mental health project:

- To raise awareness of and reduce stigma around youth mental health and well being.
- To enhance the mental health and well-being of those young people engaged with the project.
- Strengthen young people's participation in youth mental health services and supports.

Raise awareness of youth mental health and well-being and reduce stigma around mental health amongst young people.

A review of the project's secondary documentation including interim and annual reports identify the following outputs delivered under this objective:

- Relationships established with 4 post primary schools in County Limerick and calendar of workshops and programme delivery developed collaboratively.
- 34 X Be Well Anxiety Awareness Programme 90-minute workshops delivered to 740 young people in rural Limerick secondary schools (Appendix 1).
- 2 X Be Well Anxiety Awareness 90-minute workshops X 13 young people, accessing LYS services and supports, during Limerick Mental Health (LMH) week 2022.
- Delivered 1 X extended Be Well Awareness/positive mental health workshop over two 2.5 hours sessions to a group of X 3 young traveler girls from a rural secondary school.
- Delivered 2 X 6-week Mind Out programmes to 21 X fifth years and Leaving Cert Applied (LCA) students across two rural post-primary schools (Appendix 2).
- Delivered Be Well Anxiety Awareness capacity development sessions to 31 staff.
- Facilitated youth mental health 'Care Fair', 2022 in LYS attended by 100 YP (Appendix 3).

- Developed and disseminated a video promoting LYS digital wellness hubs in Rathkeale and Castleconnell Youth Spaces, County Limerick Wellness Hubs

In terms of outcomes for young people, the project's delivery of universal, short, evidence-based mental health & well-being programmes in schools have had a positive impact on young people's understanding and awareness. Over 80% of young people who completed an evaluation survey strongly agreed, and agreed, that 'I have a greater understanding and awareness of the issues discussed'.

Similar figures responded to the statement 'I have more knowledge and skills because of my participation' and almost 70% indicated same in terms of feeling 'more comfortable speaking about the issues discussed'. 100% of young people who completed the Mind Out programme agreed that 'I have a greater understanding and awareness of the issues discussed'. 20% strongly agree and 60% agree that 'I have more knowledge and skills after my involvement in this programme/event/talk', with 20% strongly agree and 80% agree that they 'Feel more comfortable speaking about the issues discussed'.

Interview & focus group feedback highlights a better knowledge and understanding of what anxiety is, good and bad anxiety and how to manage it. A more open attitude towards talking about it, and the positive feeling that comes with knowing they are not alone in what they may be experiencing was also identified:

'.....it gave them a chance to talk about it, and to talk about it with their peers in groups....that they could see they are not alone....they are all experiencing the same thing.....important to talk about it, helps with exam pressure'. (School 1)

'It also improved the student's confidence in talking about Mental Health. It improved their knowledge about mental health issues....There are tools that can help if you are feeling for example breathing exercises if you are anxious'. (School 4)

‘The skills that young people take from these programmes are skills for life.....strategies for coping, for functioning, they are real skills’.

(LYS Staff 1)

Young people also became aware of the additional services and supports available to them, within the school and through LYS. School staff became aware of LYS and the services and supports that it offers:

‘The programme highlighted supports currently available in the school, [youth worker] was adamant that we do this, some of these supports can be passed by, they hear a teacher telling them at the start of the year and then they forget....can go over their heads.....They didn’t know that a counselling service was available in LYS’. (School 2).

Young people also highlighted how learning they gained through programmes and workshops, enabled them to better understand and support their peers who may be experiencing difficulties and have not access any supports:

‘When you have this understanding, you can also help other, you can identify the signs when it is happening to someone’. (YP 2)

Over 93% of staff ‘strongly agreed’ that Be Well Anxiety Workshops were participatory and interactive. 57% of staff ‘strongly agreed’ and 38% ‘agreed’ that they are more confident in their understanding of anxiety, with almost 90% ‘strongly agreeing’ that participation in the training will be useful to their work.

The ‘Care Fair - Youth Mental Health Marque Event’ created an awareness of youth mental health services and supports in areas such as substance misuse, sexual health, physical health to approximately 100 young people. Evaluation survey statements included:

‘It had a very positive impact on me... gave me a better understanding about my mental health’. (YP 1)

To enhance the psychological, social, and emotional well-being of engaged young people.

The following activities were delivered under this objective.

- 2 X 5-week Wellness Recovery Action Planning (WRAP) programmes to 21 Young People in rural post-primary schools. (Appendix 4)
- Facilitated regular 'My Mind Star' one to one session with 9 YAP members. (Appendix 5)
- In collaboration with the Community Substance Misuse Team (CSMT), designed & delivered the programme 'How to Navigate Life as a Young Person', as 6 X 2-hour sessions to 10 X Transition Year/Rural Youth Cafe members. (Appendix 6)

As opposed to the Be Well Anxiety 90-minute workshops, The WRAP programme was delivered over a longer-time period and to a more targeted cohort of young people, with a stronger focus on social and emotional wellbeing outcomes. Traveller girls aged 13-15 years participated in the programme through the Traveller Educational Unit of a rural secondary school. A respondent from this school noted outcomes for young people in terms of increased awareness, positive attitudes, group bonding and the development of practical skills.

'.....They felt they can now notice their triggers how to cope and felt they really got close to the group as a result of the WRAP Programme.....[young people] would have thought that mental health and wellbeing is a very big thing to overcome, its challenges are big, what this programme thought them is that there are small things that we can do....it is not so big and unmanageable...if you feel anxious, there are small things that you can do, and everyone can do them, they are not beyond us'. (School 3)

One to one social & emotional wellbeing support sessions have been delivered to 14 YAP members using the My Mind Star tool. In terms of key need areas, the majority at 14.28% feel stuck or starting to talk about it as regards their Self-Esteem, and 7.14% are starting to talk about: Healthy Lifestyle, Friends & Relationships, School, Training & Work and How you Use your Time.

The majority, at 64% feel that they are managing well in terms of Friends & Relationships, followed by 43% for Where you Live and for How you use your Time. 85% of young people completing the My Mind star are making progress in at least 1 outcome area, 62% in 2+ outcome areas, and 46% in 3+ outcome areas. Most progress is being made in 'Healthy Lifestyle' and 'Self Esteem', with young people dropping back in 'Feelings & Emotions', and 'Friends & Relationships', which could indicate an increased awareness of emotions and relationships.

A focus group discussion with YAP members also identified impacts with respect to their social and emotional wellbeing. They valued having the space to talk with their use worker and the My Mind tool enabled to identify the areas that they are finding difficult, and to express their thoughts and feelings as to why and possible solutions:

'The one to ones are excellent - really support my wellbeing... If we ever need anyone to talk to/support we can talk to [youth worker]'. (YP 3)

'Gives them a sense of belonging [YAP], some young people may be bullied, have no friends in school, they are isolated, gives them a place to come where they are welcome, they have friends, they meet friends, its consistent'. [LYS Staff 2]

A pre and post evaluation of the Be Well/CSMT programme highlights that 100% of young people have identified positive change in 'I know how to manage my emotions'; 87.5% improving in 'I know how to manage stress', 'I know how to manage anxiety', and 'I know how to ask for support when I feel stressed or anxious' and 62.5% improved in 'I feel confident to say no when I don't feel comfortable doing something' and 'I know where to find information on drugs and alcohol'.

Strengthen young people's participation in youth mental health services and supports.

A key activity under this objective was the establishment and mentoring of the YAP. There are currently seven young members on the YAP and throughout the project, once-weekly YAP group work sessions have been delivered both online & in-person. These group work sessions have focused on areas of work such as the identification of needs and strengths and team building.

The YAP has been mentored to:

- Develop and co-facilitate the 'Care Fair' event.
- Collaborate with Be Well's urban YAP to organise an information stand distributing merchandise and Be Well information leaflets/signposts during LMH Week.
- Create a piece of music in collaboration with Music Generation, Limerick.
- Deliver a youth mental health group presentation as part of LYS Erasmus+ Exchange. 1 YAP member's participation in an Erasmus+ international youth exchange with partners in Hungary; covering themes relating to disability, mental health and participation.
- Collaborate with Narrative 4 in Limerick City (Appendix 7).
- Participation in the design and delivery of 'Youth and Covid 19 Conference - Response, recovery, and resilience. Building better practice through learning and experience' Thomond Park, Limerick, April 2023. This included individual presentations by 2 rural YAP members of their experience of COVID and its impacts on their lives. (Appendix 8).
- Develop a youth-led mental health podcast including the identification of guest speakers and the delivery of staff podcast training with Kinia, specialists in Creative Technology Training for youth groups and schools.
- 9 X YAP members also attended a sexual orientation and gender workshop in a rural Youth Space, Co. Limerick, delivered by Limerick organisation Gender Orientation Sexual Health HIV (GOSHH).

The YAP, particularly their participation at the Youth & COVID 19 Conference, has been successful in strengthening the voice and influence of young people in service delivery. Participation in the Narrative Story Exchange initiative mentored YAP members to listen to and share each other's stories. These stories formed the basis of their presentations at the Youth & COVID 19 Conference. This experience empowered young people to share their 'lived experience' and express their vulnerability in a very safe and professional environment. It also enhanced their sense of empathy towards the experiences of others in the YAP and strengthened listening skills.

Feedback from conference attendees on what they liked most about the event identified the voice and participation of young people as especially strong:

'That young people's voices where to the centre of the event and it was so brilliant to hear their stories and get their view on the impact of Covid on their lives'. (Conference Participant).

'The workshops and that is was youth led'. (Conference Participant).

A discussion with YAP members on their experience of the conference highlighted impacts such as increased self-esteem due to telling their stories, which was a difficult thing to do, and in having their stories responded to in such an affirming and positive way:

'people coming up afterwards and complimenting, gives you confidence..... It has opened doors, for eg a guidance counsellor from a secondary school was at the conference and they asked me give a talk in the school about my experience... built connections and networks....it was great to network'.

(YP 2).

‘after conference felt that I could clearly speak and speak confidently.....more confident in my public speaking ability’. (YP 3)

Regular YAP group work sessions including varied and creative activities have built strong peer relationships between the seven young people in the group, strengthened communication skills, enhanced creativity and problem solving.

‘we each take responsibility for writing up the meeting notes - and also makes it okay to miss the occasional meeting and makes it easy to catch up.’ (YP 1)

8. Evaluation Findings - Best Practice

The following will outline findings with respect to best practice in achieving objectives.

Young People at the Centre

This project has placed young people at the heart of its design, delivery, and review. The project was evidence-based, primarily informed by LYS research on the strengths and needs of young people in rural County Limerick. Workshop and programme content was also informed by many years of LYS and Be Well youth mental health knowledge and experience including learning gained from data gathered in Be Well’s CORE Outcome Measurement tool (Appendix 9), which collates and analyses the presenting needs and challenges for young people accessing therapy.

Workshops and programmes were delivered using youth centred and participatory methodologies:

‘Very appropriate.....explored anxiety and the effect it has physically, how it shows in the body....they did a body map, and talked about physical signs....sweaty hands, cramps in tummy, headaches’. (School 1)

‘The programme’s content was very hands on, visual, really good sections using art work’. (School 3)

The project prioritised a strength's-based approach to social and emotional wellbeing as opposed to emphasising deficiencies. The My Mind Star tool has been particularly useful in bringing strengths to the forefront:

'I really want to emphasise that our service is strengths based, rather than young people needing to change....we look at what they are doing right and build on that.... YP are creators of their own destiny, they are resilient, resourceful....we build on this when promoting participation'. (LYS Staff 1)

'[My Mind Star] helps to talk about areas of life that we may not normally talk about, areas that young people really like to talk about!.....their family, relationships, they really enjoy that'. (LYS Staff 2)

YAP group work activities adopt participatory, and youth led approaches:

*'most of us are vocal but one member maybe quiet, that's ok if they are quiet, when they have an opinion they can say it - everyone can speak.....We lead the meetings and for eg the podcast work - we designed the layout'.
(YP 2)*

Empowering and supportive relationships between the youth worker and young people are especially apparent in this project:

'We are keen to learn from the young people, the youth worker relationship is empowering, trusting, collaborative, not expert-led'. (LYS Staff 3)

'[youth worker] knows us and understands how we may be feeling, when we need space, when we need to be alone, or talk.... can read our emotions'. (YP 4)

'Feel like equals not being talked down to.... 'level playing field' [youth worker] is very focused and really organised and plans'. (YP 3)

‘Not facilitating them too much... more at the beginning and then passing responsibility and ownership over to them over time... empower them to make choices... ensure they know that their opinions matter (LYS Staff 3)

Ensuring positive difference in the lives of young people is also relevant in placing young people at the centre. Clear objectives noted in interim reports with related activities, outcomes, challenges, and opportunities ensured a focus on meaningful outcomes for young people, on activities as they lead to positive change and that positive change is captured. Interim reports also demonstrate a strong focus on the evaluation of activities by young people.

Integrated & Collaborative

LYS integrated service provision has enabled the project to meet the needs of the whole young person. Several members of the YAP became involved in the project through their engagement with other LYS services and supports including the Be Well counselling service and with LYS youth clubs and groups in East and West County Limerick. Since the project’s inception, an increase in young people from rural Limerick accessing Be Well’s counselling service has been identified on Be Well profile data. An additional benefit to an integrated youth service with varied provision such as open access social clubs, cafes, is the anonymity that this provides to young people in rural areas:

‘Youth spaces address the challenge of stigma, you could be having a game of pool or going to a counsellor, that is a key benefit’. (LYS Staff 1).

In addition to providing an integrated service, findings from the focus group discussion with young people highlight a need to communicate the integrated nature of LYS services and supports in addition to the general promotion of LYS and what it does:

‘Social media is essential, that is where young people find their information...’

‘We didn’t know that LYS is offering these services, I just thought it was a youth café...

‘In rural areas, there is nothing, LYS could stand as a beacon for young people in rural areas....just need to get the word out...it is hidden....there is nothing in rural towns’

The benefits of an integrated youth service are also apparent in the case of young girls from the traveller community who completed the WRAP programme, going on to engage with a youth worker in establishing a social group for themselves, outside of school and meeting once weekly in the local youth space in a rural community:

‘Another outcome is that the girls who have completed this programme will be more confident in approaching youth services/LYS, as they have already engaged with them and built those relationships...for eg they are now happy to approach [youth worker] about creating a group.....This provides them with a much needed alternative to activities outside of school and the home.....’. (School 1)

The care fair event, the collaborative design and delivery of the ‘Be Well/CSMT Mental Health and Substance Use Programme’ and relationship building with local rural schools are key examples of the project’s emphasis on collaboration with local voluntary and statutory groups:

‘The two of us worked well together, the themes blended well... substance misuse plays a huge role in youth mental health....[youth worker] had a lot of experience in group work and in the delivery of youth mental health programmes like MindOut.... whereas as I had more 1:1 experience in the area of substance misuse....I slotted in my piece on substance misuse “everything fit together’ (Collaborating Organisation)



Learning, Creativity & Innovation

The types of youth work methods adopted with the YAP were primarily structured small group sessions facilitated weekly in a safe, secure and youth friendly youth space in rural County Limerick:

‘there is an energy, enthusiasm in our spaces’. (LYS Staff 3)

Regular group work sessions supported young people to build positive relationships with each other and so to provide peer support. As outlined, both YAP sessions and mental health workshops and programmes adopted participatory and youth centred methodologies.

‘During sessions we do a world café type discussion/paper on tables, given a pen and told to Brainstorm/right what went well for you this week/what stressed you out/what made you anxious.’ (YP 5)

Learning from the evolution of youth work group practice over a long period of time was also highlighted, particularly in relation to the successful development of a rural YAP:

‘The reason the rural YAP works so well is due to the evolution of the urban yap, and the experiences from that’. (LYS Staff 1)

One to one sessions were conducted with individual YAP members, which allowed the youth worker to gain a more in-depth understanding of the young people and so ensure their meaningful participation in group sessions:

‘Also one to one interventions are especially useful in helping me to understand their needs, their strengths, and based on this I can facilitate the group in a way which builds on this....I know where to support them and where they need less support....’

....for example, I found out that one young person liked music and so in groups sometimes I would encourage [them] to play the guitar, then we actually recorded a song with the group with the young person playing the guitar’.

(LYS Staff 3)

Equality, Inclusion, Diversity

A key aim of this project has been accessing rurally isolated young people, and in this context, the inclusion of more marginalised groups of young people such as Traveller Youth and LGBTQ groups. As outlined in LYS research (2018) young people who are not enjoying their educational experience, those who do not feel very well cared for at home and some whose families cannot afford to provide them with everything they need to participate fully at school, should also be considered minority groups.

Through collaborating and building relationships with rural secondary schools, this project has been extremely successful in creating awareness and reducing stigma amongst large numbers of young people in rural areas:

‘it has been amazing that we have been able to reach over 600 young people....to create this awareness amongst so many young people....’

(LYS Staff 1)

There have been challenges in terms of engaging smaller groups of rurally isolated young people in the YAP, particularly enabling their attendance at weekly meetings. While this has been achieved, it is costly and time consuming. Specialised supports such as transport costs are a necessity in rural areas.

While the Be Well Anxiety Awareness programme was successfully delivered to young traveller girls, the project found it challenging to access and engage more Traveller youth, and other more vulnerable, marginalised and excluded young people such as ethnic minorities. A recommendation was made for the project to collaborate with support organisation such as Traveller support groups in engaging this cohort:

'Would like to strengthen collaboration with more support organisations, for e.g., traveller orgs, disability orgs to understand more of the needs of young people from these groups, to be able to access and engage these young people'. (LYS Staff 1)

The wider delivery of the Be Well Anxiety Awareness programme to over 600 young people was also identified as very useful in identifying those young people with further support needs, for example those who are being bullied or not enjoying or isolated from their school experience, to complete longer terms programmes such as the CSMT/Youth Mental Health Programme and the WRAP programme, and also to join the YAP. Another factor which has supported the engagement of marginalised young people is LYS experience in working with such young people.

9. Recommendations

Based on these findings and the literature review, this evaluation makes the following recommendations:

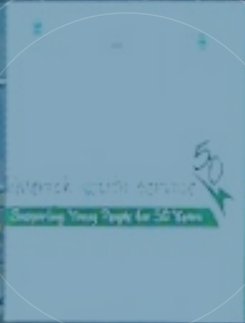
- Young people's voices must be placed at the centre of any youth mental health project. Youth voice is enabled through adopting strength's-based approach and fostering independent and empowering youth worker and young people relationships.
- An emphasis must be placed on positive change for young people and on capturing this change. Clear objectives, linked to activities, keep the focus on meaningful outcomes. Evidence-based tools for supporting, measuring, and documenting change are relevant in facilitating a strengths-based approach and collaborative youth worker and young people relationships, in identifying areas for change, capturing this change, and evidencing the development of future initiatives.

- A lack of rural transport limits access for young people to youth mental health services and supports, therefore, transport costs must be considered. Accessing and engaging with young people at their place of education is a relevant method of reaching large groups of young people in rural areas, and in identifying those young people who may need more targeted supports.
- Integrated youth work provision addresses not only the mental health and wellbeing of young people, but also contributes to their physical, learning, welfare, and civic engagement needs. The integrated and varied services provided by LYS must be communicated to young people, with an emphasis on the use of social media.
- Collaborative work with other organisations is successful when based on shared goals, expertise, and benefits. In reaching those more marginalised groups, youth work organisations should partner with organisations representing such young people such as Traveller, Disability and Migrant organisations.
- Youth work methods such as group work and formal and informal educational programmes should embed practical and theoretical foundations and adopt creative, active, and participatory methodologies.
- Local, community-based youth work services underpinned by relationships built over long periods of time and delivered in relaxed, safe and youth friendly settings, facilitate early intervention, accessibility, and anonymity.



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EXIT →

Appendices

Appendix 1: Be Well Anxiety Awareness Workshop

The aim of the Be Well Awareness workshop is to raise awareness of anxiety and is specifically designed for young people between the ages of 15-18 years. Young people learn what anxiety is, about cognitive, physical, and behavioural signs and symptoms, and have open group discussions about their opinions on anxiety in young people. At the end of the workshop, information on internal (within the school) and external (outside organisations/services) mental health support is highlighted which they can avail of if they feel concerned about anxiety afterwards.

Appendix 2: Mind Out Youth Mental Health Programme

‘Mind Out’ is a widely used mental health programme that supports and develops young people’s social, emotional, and mental wellbeing. Social and emotional wellbeing has been shown to contribute to young people’s academic outcomes, their social development, their capacity to contribute to the community, and their ability to secure employment in adulthood. Mind Out was developed by University of Galway and HSE Health and Wellbeing Division with support from National Youth Council of Ireland, giving it a strong research/evidence base. Mind Out focuses on the development of 5 core competencies for social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and responsible decision-making. These competencies are targeted through interactive and individual activities, such as, debates, individual reflective exercises, group discussions, and dissemination of evidence-based information. Signposting to relevant organisations is also a key element of the programme.

Appendix 3: The Care Fair - Youth Mental Health Marque Event

The aim of the Care Fair was to raise awareness of, and reduce the stigma surrounding, youth mental health. It also tied in with the aims of the YAP as they worked together as a group to organise the event; developed for youth by youth. The rural YAP collaborated with the city YAP to organise the theme of the event, what services/organisations they wanted there, and the decorations. The event

took place in one of our city buildings, Northside Youth Space, on the 14th May, 2023 from 11am-3pm. Approximately 100 young people from city and rural Limerick were in attendance. Buses were provided to support rural young people's attendance on the day.

The event provided young people with information about and related to mental health such as mental health services, substance use, sexual health, physical health. There were workshops for young people to attend including Zumba, boxercise, sexual orientation, and gender. Outside there were drop-in spaces which provided musical and creative activities. The two YAPs facilitated a self-care workshop in a sensory friendly environment. The workshop had four stations which were run by the YAP members. The stations included collaborative art, identifying your values, identifying your supporters, and creating your own wellness toolbox.

Food was provided for the young people and an ice-cream van was also on site. The space was set up to facilitate mingling between young people and a section was provided for interactive games for e.g. pool, ice hockey table and giant connect 4. The space was supervised by LYS staff and all young people were pre-registered with parental/guardian consent.

Appendix 4: Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)

WRAP is a wellness and recovery programme that aims to support, inform, and empower participants to take control of their own wellness. The programme delivered by the Rural Youth Mental Health Worker (RYMH) Worker is tailored for youth. The programme works on building young people's awareness of the different elements of mental health and developing coping skills/self-care habits. It also focuses on supporting the young person to create a plan to keep themselves well throughout their daily lives. There are 5 key concepts covered: hope, personal responsibility, support, education, and self-advocacy. Other important elements of the curriculum are learning how to recognise when they're feeling well and when they're not feeling well. They will be equipped with the skills to manage difficult feelings and advocate for themselves. The information the young person will learn during this programme will be useful

to them throughout their entire lives and the learning is encouraged to be shared with friends and family.

Appendix 5: My Mind Star - The Outcomes Star for young people's mental health and well-being

My Mind Outcomes Star is an evidence-based tool for both supporting and measuring change. It focuses on seven outcome areas:

1. Feelings and emotions
2. Healthy lifestyle
3. Where you live
4. Friends and relationships
5. School, training and work
6. How you use your time
7. Self-esteem

This tool enables conversation between the young people and youth worker and supports change along a five-point Journey of Change scale from:

- Being Stuck or unsafe
- To Talking about it
- To Believing and taking action
- To Learning what works
- To Managing well

Appendix 6: Be Well/CSMT Programme

This programme was developed through collaboration between the LYS Be Well Rural Youth Mental Health Worker and a social worker from Community Substance Misuse Team (CSMT). Mental Health competencies covered included self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and anxiety awareness. The substance misuse content included elements from the following: Adolescent Community Reinforcement Approach (ACRA) functional analysis, psychoeducation, motivational interviewing, and strengthening family's programme. It covered topics such as exploring what substances are, why people use them, positive and negatives, harm-reduction, refusal skills, what is addiction, alternatives to using substances,

and communication skills. Signposting to relevant services was also a key element of this programme.

Appendix 7: Narrative 4 Story Exchange Workshop

The N4 workshop supports young people in telling each other's stories which aims to develop empathy and listening skills through the process of putting themselves in the other person's shoes. N4 believes that storytelling can help to build resilience in young people and help them to become successful tolerant adults. Some issues that this storytelling process targets are poor mental health and isolation and has been shown to reduce levels of anti-social behavior including bullying and aggression. *'Getting young people to share personal stories is a cathartic experience which breaks down barriers, builds trust and reinforces the idea that they are not alone'* - Narrative 4.

Appendix 8: Youth and Covid 19 Conference - Response, recovery, and resilience. Building better practice through learning and experience' Thomond Park, Limerick, March 2023.

The aim of the conference is to understand and explore how young people can be supported to overcome the impacts of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing.

Speakers:

- Special guest speaker: professor Emer Smyth, Economic & Social Research Institute (ESRI) 'Disrupted transitions? Young adults and the covid-19 pandemic'.
- Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) input on the lived experience of 4 young people during COVID-19.

Interactive Workshops:

1. COVID 19 and substance use with - CSMT Community Substance Misuse Team.
2. Body Image & Eating Disorders with - Fierna Kennedy Adult & Adolescent Psychotherapist Special interest Eating Disorders MSc. MA. Dip ED. MIACP.
3. Sexual violence, adolescence and responding to disclosure with - Dr Michelle Walsh, Clinical Lead at Midwest Rape Crisis Centre.

4. Youth voices and how best to include young people in service provision and research - Be Well Youth Advisory Panel (YAP).

Appendix 9: CORE Outcome Measurement Tool

This software collects, stores, analyses and reports on counselling data gathered by Be Well's therapists relating to pre and post measurement of anxiety; depression; trauma; physical problems; functioning (3 items - day to day, close relationships, social relationships) and risk to self.