



Youth Mental Health Ambassadors: Young people's participation in Waltham Forest

Thank you to the Waltham Forest Youth Mental Health Ambassadors (Waltham Forest CCG and Local Authority) for the interview.

Who are the Waltham Forest Youth Mental Health Ambassadors?

The Waltham Forest Youth Mental Health Ambassadors were funded by an i-THRIVE bursary won by Waltham Forest Local Authority in August 2017. The Youth Mental Health Ambassadors, a group of local young people with an interest in improving the system, were tasked with delivering a consultation with schools in order to find out from young people across the borough what was missing, and to advise the Local Authority and CCG on what an appropriate early intervention offer should look like.

The i-THRIVE in NELFT team interviewed the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors (YMHA) to find out what happened.

You held a number of workshops in schools. What were your aims?

YMHA 2: Mainly to see what mental health services are around and what sort of services young people know about. So the places they can go, the services that are available with regards to mental health support, and how many services they are aware of. Secondly and equally crucially, we wanted to know what young people think is necessary that doesn't yet exist. And where services already exist - how well signposted are they? The more general aim was also to raise awareness for mental health as a concept in schools.

What needs did you identify?

YMHA 1: Young people said there needs to be more signposting in the borough and in the wider society of mental health services and what's available, because when it comes to looking for some help, it's quite difficult. When the young people were describing an ideal service, they talked about a physical location, somewhere they could go as a safe haven that would be a walk-in service. Instead of having to be referred, they could just go in and get support then and there.

Was there anything that surprised you in the workshops?

YMHA 3: For me what was surprising was that you have this perception that young people don't actually want to talk about mental health. But what it seems like is that they actually really, really want to talk about it. It's just that the avenues that they can take to talk about this are limited. There's nothing really there or a place for them to go, and there's nowhere for them to talk about it. That's how they feel about it.

YMHA 1: It was interesting because across all the workshops, all the young people in a different way described this service that they wanted as a physical place they could go and get support. They wanted a space where they could actually say what they think and express themselves freely.



How involved did you feel as Youth Mental Health Ambassadors?

YMHA 1: I felt like from the beginning it was led by us. From the very beginning, it was our decision on how we wanted to structure the workshops and if we wanted to do workshops. It was all done by us and then really supported by (our managers). And they believed in what we wanted to do. It wasn't like we had different opinions – we were all in it together working towards the same goal. And I think it was really positive that we actually were able to design the process ourselves. We weren't told, 'This is what we want you to do.' We had that freedom.

It was our decision on how we wanted to structure the sessions and when we wanted to come in to do them. It was very much led by us. I always find that we have quite passionate discussions when we have meetings. We all bring our ideas to the table and no one's views are left out. So the managers facilitated that space, which allowed us to discuss and go back and forth with different ideas we had and then come together as one. We had that support from both managers, and then throughout the whole project they were completely on board with what we wanted to do.

YMHA 2: This was one of the cases where it's showed through that we're actually high up on the ladder of participation, and we were the ones that were in control. We were the facilitators.

YMHA 3: It felt like work, but not in a negative way. We all knew that we had responsibilities in terms of writing a report, doing the work, and doing the workshops. It felt very much like that there were times when I would say, 'I have to have an early night now because I've got to do the workshop tomorrow.' So that helped me in terms of feeling involved because the responsibility was on me and on the group.

What was it like facilitating and planning of the workshops?

YMHA 3: Because we have a lot of experience doing that in other groups, I think it just felt very natural. But, because of the training that we've done¹, and because we had clear objectives of what we wanted to do, it made the process of planning the workshops a lot easier.

YMHA 2: Obviously it wouldn't feel right for me to give a workshop if I didn't have any training on mental health. So, the training we received was really critical - it was a day of training, and by the end of the day I felt I was ready to actually go and talk to a group of young people.

What went well about running workshops in schools?

YMHA 3: I think it was the peer-to-peer aspect of it. Even outside of Youth Mental Health Ambassadors, what we have always found is that peer-to-peer mentoring, or just peer-to-peer facilitation, allows the young people to immediately feel comfortable. There's an immediate relatability. So, I think that's something that went really, really well, because it didn't feel like there was a distance between them and us.

YMHA 2: Young people are ready to talk. There wasn't much coaxing required to help them. It's as if they immediately understood what we wanted and had something to say about it. That was really quite satisfying to actually have suggestions given to us by the young people.

¹ Youth Mental Health First Aid



YMHA 1: We all trust each other. We're good at supporting each other when we're doing the facilitating with one another. You feel like you're not going at it alone and you're all in it together. We work really well with each other. We've got our different qualities and can feed off of each other, and I think that creates a really good atmosphere.

YMHA 3: It felt like the atmosphere is a factor and the fact that we all knew each other. We have worked with each other for many years. I think the atmosphere that was created when we actually went in to facilitate is one of the reasons why a lot of the young people found it very easy to communicate and open up. They could see that our relationships and how we worked together was solid.

What didn't go so well with the workshops in schools?

YMHA 1: I'd say maybe the number of workshops². This was affected by things like a teacher dropping out and being unable to take the young people. We had more workshops scheduled than went forward. So, it would've been nice if we could've done all of the workshops that were scheduled. But, that happens when you're working with schools and you're liaising with other people.

One of the meetings I went to was with head teachers. They wanted assurance that the suggestions of the young people would go somewhere. So, I think that was also a big thing – they wanted what the young people said to really count for something, and they didn't want it to be tokenistic. So it's about reassuring them that we want it to actually count too, how that will happen³, and that the young people's voices will be heard.

YMHA 3: Mental health is a very sensitive topic and I think teachers feel it's a bit of a risk talking about it. For instance, they worry that in a classroom we would facilitate, there could be a child who's suffering from mental health without the teachers knowing about it. But the fact is that they've got young people in class with those problems, whether they talk about it or not. But, there is a worry from teachers that they may not be trained well enough to deal with circumstances like that. I think that kind of perception around mental health makes it seem like a risk for some schools.

YMHA 1: A lot of people see mental health as a very mature issue. They think it's something that only people of a certain age can talk about in the right way. As a result, teachers might be reluctant to have a workshop which discusses mental health.

What's going to happen with the information and suggestions from the young people you spoke with?

YMHA 1: It's all in the report for commissioners. I've put quotes in there which are direct things that young people have described and said. I wanted all of their feedback to be at the heart of the report. I've set out all of the things that the young people have said that have to do with the services they'd like, as well as things that they don't like and that they've criticised, even in their individual schools. It's all in there. I felt it was important that since the young people

² 10 workshops delivered to 5 secondary and special schools and one alternative provision

³ The report will be fed into the Youth Voice (Life Chances), presented to the CAMHS Transformation Board, Health Scrutiny Panel, Safer Neighbourhood Board and LBWF Health in Schools Steering Group



have opened up and told us what they think and what they want, they should definitely be represented in that report. I've also made sure that it is completely centred on what they all said as young people. All of them as individuals, not just generically.

How did you make sure the young people felt listened to?

YMHA 3: Our priority in planning the workshops was ensuring that the young people felt heard. Even for the young people who perhaps didn't have the confidence to speak out in front of everybody, the fact is that they had something that they wanted to say. So we wanted to capture that, and that's why we included the anonymous post-it notes to collect feedback and comments. We didn't want anyone to leave the room feeling like they hadn't been heard.

How supported did you feel as Youth Mental Health Ambassadors?

YMHA 2: Personally, I felt very supported. Because we are employed by the council, I think having that backing behind us and having the support of our managers made us feel supported. Even in the training where it could trigger something in us, I knew that I could go back to (the managers) and ask for support on what the appropriate thing to do is in the situation.

As young advisers, we're asked to do workshops and stuff for other groups outside of our main work, and we feel sometimes you're put in those situations cold, knowing nothing. But the thing that was completely different with this work was that there was planning, there were quite a few meetings before we did any of the workshops just to prepare, [and if] anyone had any doubts or questions at that point [we had] great managers you could always talk to. So it wasn't just, 'Okay guys, you have to go and do a workshop, off you go'. It was more that everyone was there and no one felt alone.

How much do you feel you are able to create change?

YMHA 1: I feel like the change is definitely going to come. We'll see that based on the workshops we've done and the report. I think we'll see the change when the bid is shaped for the new programmes to go ahead. I think that's when we can say, 'Oh, that's where we can see what we've done'. And I think that's going to reflect what the young people wanted.

Today I've been working and going through the different bids for the online counselling. That's going to be part of the structure next year for young people in the borough, and I've had a direct role in picking which type of service is going to go forward. And, honestly when I was going through the different bids and seeing which ones were the best, I had in my mind what the young people said in the workshops we led. A lot of them brought up online counselling as one form of the service that they liked, but they expressed how they would like it to be. So that was always in my mind when I was going through the bids today. I thought, 'Okay, they would've liked that idea, and not so much this one'. That's definitely an example of creating an active change.

YMHA 3: I think change is a funny concept because it's different for everybody. For me personally, I don't expect to see change in what I do. I didn't go into this project looking for this big thing to come out at the end of it, because I feel like you have to have a sense of realism. It's a change just knowing that a young person may have been dying to say



something about how they're feeling or about something that they need, and we provided that space for them to do that. That might have been the only time that they've voiced their opinions. That to me is a change because it's a change in that person, and that's what I was striving for when I went into this project.

YMHA 1: I think it worked perfectly because we all bring together different ideas of what we would like our change to be. We've had all of those ideas combined in one on the individual level and then on a systematic level as well. I think that's brilliant to have done both in the small time we've had on this project. I think that's so important.

So what's next for the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors in Waltham Forest?

YMHA 1: So we're going to finish the report and then develop the communications plan on how to create further awareness. We're also going to be looking at the sustainability of the roles with different counsellors in the department as well, some of whom have taken a massive interest in our work and with health as well. It's to see if the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors role can be sustainable.

YMHA 2: It's mainly a plan of what we need to do to make sure that people hear us. And then, consequently that those young people can speak out. So for example, for social media, it's about the different platforms that we use and what we say on those platforms. Also not just social media, beyond that. Schools, for example, most children spend the majority of their waking day at school. So that's a big area where we need to make sure that young people are aware of mental health. Outside of school, we are also hoping to increase awareness. It links into the whole thing with change, because we don't want this to be something that drops off and is forgotten about. We need something that has a lasting impact, even if it's just on a few people, to actually have any presence.

What could be improved about the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors?

YMHA 3: Just more people in the group. Because I think one of the struggles was that the group was made up of just young people. Some people had college, some people had exams, and some people had coursework. It becomes hard to juggle all of that with such big projects. I think it could've helped if we had had more people in the group, perhaps some people who are a bit older who didn't have as much on at the time.

YMHA 1: I think it would be quite nice if the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors were a wider group that could bring in people from different places in the borough. It would also be quite nice if we could oversee what they do. They could meet together to come up with ideas and work in the borough and in schools. It's also important to think about the kids that aren't in school and we reach them as well. So I think opening the group up wider would be really important.

Any final thoughts?

YMHA 1: If this group is successful here and we manage to scale it up, the other boroughs could look at doing like a similar thing. Because it would be nice if this were a national thing where we had Youth Mental Health Ambassadors and that just became the norm. If we're talking about raising more awareness, just talking about mental health like physical health. That's the way it should be. We should just talk about it. So, if on a national scale we could



have Youth Mental Health Ambassadors in all the different places, all the different boroughs, it would be so nice to have that impact on a wider scale.

YMHA 2: It's like first aid. You see first aid everywhere, and there are people who know first aid everywhere in the country. So why shouldn't it be the same with mental health?

YMHA 3: It would be sad to see such a project go to waste because of funding. I think that's something that happens so often where a project goes off really well, and it just comes down to where you hear the word 'funding' and people say, 'Oh, we can't afford to do it.' In terms of what we've done and what we could plan to do, and just how well the young people responded, I think this is something that, without a doubt, should be invested in.

If you would like further information on the Youth Mental Health Ambassadors in Waltham Forest, please contact Zaya Fullerton at Zaya.Fullerton@walthamforest.gov.uk.