Thinking differently

A manifesto on how prevention and early intervention can close the gap in children and young people's mental health

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Anna Freud
building the mental wellbeing of the next generation

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About us

Anna Freud is a mental health charity and we've been supporting children and young people for over 70 years.

We listen to and learn from their diverse voices, and integrate this with learnings from our science and practice to develop and deliver mental health care. This holistic approach has world-changing potential – our training, schools support, networks, partnerships and resources equip those who impact children and young people's lives with the knowledge and skills to support their mental health.

We believe mental wellbeing is the foundation from which children and young people achieve their potential. By continually expanding our understanding and translating it into practice – grounded in science and guided by children and young people – we can ensure they get the right support at the right time.

Our founder, Anna Freud, was a trailblazer who dedicated her life to helping children and young people. She wasn't afraid to challenge the status quo. Her legacy inspires us today as we release our radical new manifesto.



In 2023 we

- Reached more than **50,000** children in early years settings through our Personal Social and Emotional Development project run in partnership with the Education Development Trust
- Provided **90 opportunities** for **44** young people and parents* to influence our strategy, research and delivery
- Trained **23,000** clinicians and supported **450** postgraduate students
- Trained and connected more than **34,000** education professionals with courses, e-learning, our ‘Schools in Mind’ network and webinars
- Reached **120,000** people through the UK Trauma Council website and had **62,000** downloads of resources to support children and young people after potentially traumatic events



*When we say parents in our manifesto, we refer to parents, carers and guardians

Five-point plan at a glance

Our manifesto calls on political parties, policy makers and funders to help us close the gap in children and young people's mental health through a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention.

Work needs to focus on five key areas:

Give young people a meaningful say in an expanded approach to prevention

- Double the budget currently spent on the design, testing, implementation and evaluation of prevention strategies.
- Develop a unified prevention strategy in partnership with children and young people who have lived experience of mental ill health and come from backgrounds that are often overlooked or underserved.
- Transform the national conversation on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through youth-led initiatives and campaigns.
- Develop a cross-governmental task force to scrutinise the potential impacts of policy on mental health with a representative group of children and young people.

Focus on communities

- Increase funding for community assets like parks, sports centres and libraries to build support networks and improve wellbeing.
- Expand the definition of the children and young people's mental health workforce and increase the training and support available to workers.
- Increase support for community-based early intervention services like Family hubs.
- Ring-fence additional funding for community-led early interventions catered for and delivered with marginalised groups.
- Build infrastructure to collect, analyse and act on local data about the root causes of mental ill health distinct to each community.

Adopt a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing

- Create a more inclusive school system by promoting educational models that value social, emotional and physical development as well as academic achievement.
- Improve access to preventative mental health programmes in schools for children and young people with mild-to-moderate mental health needs.
- Include content in initial teacher training on how to build good mental wellbeing across the school community and provide annual training opportunities for all school staff and leaders.
- Invest in programmes delivered in partnership with schools that help parents understand and support their children's mental wellbeing.

Widen our collective understanding of childhood trauma

- Co-design a cross-disciplinary framework and shared language on childhood trauma with children and young people who've experienced traumatic events.
- Increase spending on accessible, digital prevention and early intervention services for children and young people impacted by trauma.
- Increase trauma-focused training for the wider workforce supporting children and young people in community, education, voluntary and criminal justice settings.
- Fund cross-nation collaborations that leverage learning from young people and collect and share best practice across the UK.

Leverage the power of science and data

- Standardise the definitions and measurement of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and ensure settings and services supporting young people collect these measures.
- Implement a regular nationwide measurement of young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Map, integrate and enable a single point for children and young people to access mental health resources and services.
- Improve the integration and sharing of digital information across education, health, criminal justice and social care settings.

A word from our CEO, Professor Peter Fonagy OBE



One in five young people in England has a probable mental health disorder.[1] The time has come for political parties, policy makers and funders to think differently.

It's clear there's a big difference between children and young people's mental health needs and the help available to them. It's also clear the system as it stands today is failing.

A perfect storm of COVID-19 lockdowns, feelings of isolation and societal insecurity – like increased poverty, rising levels of youth violence, racial inequity and climate change – have compounded the challenges young people face.

We believe the time has come to think differently about children and young people's mental wellbeing to close the gap in mental health. And we believe it begins with a renewed focus on prevention and early intervention to complement the urgent care services already supporting young people.

This manifesto, funded by the Prudence Trust, brings together what our science, research and team of Young Champions tell us will help the most. These insights translate into a five-point plan that we share with political parties, policy makers and funders.

We begin by examining the role young people could play in an expanded approach to prevention and advocate for increased funding as well as greater youth voice, particularly for those with lived experience of marginalisation. We recognise the misalignment of early intervention resources in communities and offer evidence-based ideas for improvements.

We then look at how school staff and pupils can create change together and delve into the importance of building prevention policy and early intervention services that are truly trauma-informed.

And finally, we outline how leveraging better research nationally will ensure mental health interventions are science-led and data-backed.

I'd like to thank all Anna Freud colleagues who've contributed to *Thinking differently*. Their insights – allied with the voices of young people – shape our plan of action. And they'll shape our future thinking too.

There's no shortage of goodwill when it comes to improving children and young people's mental health. In the last 50 years we've reached a consensus on its importance from early years into adolescence. We're on a journey that our founder, Anna Freud, would have championed.

As we approach a general election, we have an opportunity to align science, research and lived experience in a way that could radically change how we approach children and young people's mental health.

Let's think differently. Let's do what matters most. And let's supercharge change – led by science and guided by young people.

A word from Anna Freud Young Champion, Naz

I'm 23 years old and I live with my family in north west London. I've worked with Anna Freud in a voluntary and professional capacity for over three years. Contributing to this manifesto and being able to share my experience makes me feel good because I'm giving back to my community. But I also hope it can lead to changes. I hope people will think differently about how to help children and young people with their difficulties.

My story

I was 11 when I began to show signs of mental health problems. I didn't understand what was happening – I was always nervous and quiet at school but I began to develop issues with my body image and friendships. Because I was naturally shy, I didn't realise that these signs might be concerning. At 13, my mood became low and by 14 I became physically unwell and missed a lot of school. My symptoms took a rapid decline at 15 when I began treatment for suspected anxiety with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

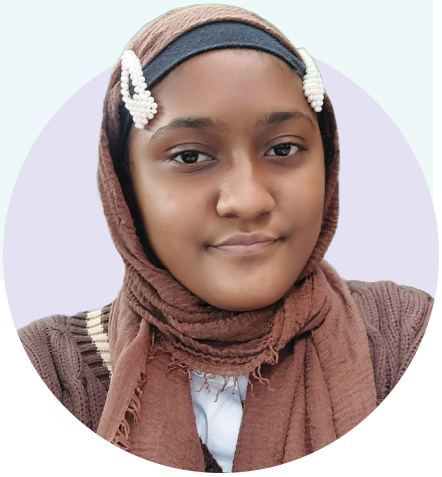
Thinking differently

I often think about where things went wrong in my journey. It's hard to know. But I believe we need to let people know from a very early age what mental health is and how to get help. This manifesto highlights that early intervention is really important, and I agree. Schools should help pupils be aware of their wellbeing. Then children and young people can recognise when things go wrong – or when they might need professional help – before more serious mental health problems develop.

What's next for me?

I am proud of who I am. My experiences have led me to develop a keen interest in mental health. As I complete my final year of a four-year psychology degree, I'm looking ahead to a career as an art therapist. I think my experience will help the people I will work with, because it's people with experience, like me, who understand mental health best.

Young people's mental health is continually changing – each generation will experience things differently. As this manifesto highlights, policy and practice need to keep up.



The context

Our mental health system is failing children and young people. Services are overwhelmed and young people are waiting too long for support. We believe there's a better way to tackle the problem and improve lives for the long-term.

Requests for mental health services for children and young people have risen by more than 120% since 2018. Despite this increase, only 32% more patients are now being seen by services compared to March 2021.[2] This treatment gap is negatively affecting young people's life experiences, and the effectiveness of the support they eventually receive.

While this is worrying on its own, the situation is particularly severe for marginalised groups:

- Mental health disorders tend to be more common among children living in lower-income households.[3] This group is also more likely to experience barriers to accessing help, such as poor community transport and working day appointments.[4]
- Young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or with another minoritised sexual identity are over two-and-a-half times more likely to have a mental health problem than those who identify as heterosexual.[5]
- The odds of children with special educational needs experiencing a mental health problem are around one and a half to two times higher than that of their peers.[6]
- Young Black men are more likely to be referred to specialist mental health services by youth justice than their GP.[7] This group also face daily challenges of racism and discrimination that can contribute to mental ill health.[8]

We believe several factors contribute to the gap between the support needed and the help on offer.

Firstly, there is no unified prevention strategy for children and young people's mental health and little to no trauma-informed policy has been implemented. Harmful stereotypes of poor mental wellbeing as a sickness persist, and young people are not given enough opportunities to co-create solutions.

Early intervention services are also severely fragmented and funding levels are falling. In fact, spending on early interventions like children's centres and family support services fell by 48% between 2011 and 2020.[9] This has the adverse effect of increasing demand for urgent care and specialist services later down the line, leaving them overwhelmed by preventable admissions and young people waiting far too long for care.

In addition, schools and colleges are dealing with the fallout of excessive academic pressure,[10] sustained high levels of child poverty[11] and worryingly high levels of persistent school absence.[12] All these issues are compounded by a shortage of national data on the factors that influence children and young people's mental health.

The increase in need for children and young people's mental health services over the past two decades has not been a sudden shift and the pressures young people face are only growing.[13] Addressing this requires us to think about mental health in a pragmatic, long-term way.

We'll explain the actions we believe should be prioritised over the next few pages.

- One in five young people in England has a probable mental health disorder[14]
- 38% of young carers report having a mental health condition[15]
- 48% fall in spending on early intervention services from 2011 to 2020[16]
- 136% increase in probable mental health disorders in adolescent girls and young women aged 17 to 19 since 2017[17]
- Young Black Caribbean pupils are nearly **four** times more likely to receive a permanent school exclusion than the school population as a whole[18]

Definitions

Accessible communication is vital for changing thinking on children and young people's mental health. Please refer to this page to understand more about the language we use in our manifesto.

Anna Freud Young Champions

Anna Freud Young Champions are young people with mental health lived experience and an understanding and awareness of mental health services who work with us to ensure young voices are represented in our work. You'll hear from Young Champions throughout this manifesto as they share their experiences and opinions.

Children and young people

Individuals from 0 to 25 years old, when the brain is typically not fully matured.

Early interventions

Support, care and treatment provided at the earliest signs of mental ill health. They're designed to prevent problems escalating later down the line. Studies show that early intervention reduces the duration of mental health disorders and promotes better long-term outcomes.[19]

Family hubs

Community centres offering integrated services including healthcare, parenting support, early years education, mental health services and advice on employment or financial issues.

Marginalised groups

People who have historically experienced discrimination and exclusion on the basis of characteristics, shared experience or circumstances. This can include, but is not limited to, neurodivergence or special educational needs, disability, gender identity, ethnicity, sexuality, poverty or care experience.



Mental ill health prevention

Strategies and actions that aim to reduce the risk of mental health disorders developing. This includes promoting wellbeing, building resilience and addressing risk factors like poverty and homelessness.

Poor mental wellbeing and diagnosed mental ill health

Poor mental wellbeing refers to a state of suboptimal emotional and psychological health. This could include stress, unhappiness or difficulty coping with daily life. Diagnosed mental ill health involves clinically-recognised disorders with specific persistent symptoms that require professional help. When discussing mental ill health in our manifesto, we may also say mental health problems or disorders.

Trauma

A response to deeply distressing events that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. It can cause feelings of helplessness, diminish an individual's sense of self and prevent them from feeling a full range of emotions. It can often cause lasting psychological effects and contribute to mental ill health.



Give young people a meaningful say in an expanded approach to prevention

To improve children and young people's mental health, we must listen to their lived experience and respond to it. It's time to pass the baton to young people and provide the funding needed to bring their ideas to life.

Mental health services for young people are overwhelmed.[20] This is despite an overall increase in funding over the past two decades[21] and improved public knowledge and attitudes towards mental health across society.[22]

We believe there are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, there is no comprehensive prevention strategy that fully acknowledges the complex nature of children and young people's mental health. This lack of direction and dedicated funding to tackle the root causes of mental ill health, like child poverty, racial discrimination or poor parent-infant relationships, means we are persistently treating symptoms rather than causes. We're taking action much later down the line and at greater cost.

Secondly, framing poor mental wellbeing as a sickness and mental ill health as a crisis is counterproductive. These two terms are also often conflated, which overlooks the significant distinction between the two in a way that is both unhelpful and harmful.

Thirdly, there has to date been an insufficient focus on the impact on children and young people's mental health within wider government policy making. For example, some may feel that a policy of moving young people from public spaces improves community safety. However, amid widespread cuts to youth services,[23] young people could be left with nowhere to go, reducing their sense of belonging and wellbeing.

We need to start thinking differently to tackle these issues. We believe giving young people a meaningful say –and increasing funding at the right moment – would be significant steps forward. Initially, funding is needed to design, test, implement and evaluate potential prevention strategies. These should be co-designed with young people to give them agency over decisions that affect them and their peers. Young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, neurodivergent young people, those from the LGBTQ+ community, young carers and care-experienced young people must all be included in this work. This will help ensure the support developed also removes barriers these groups experience. Knowledge from this work will build over time, culminating in this diverse group of young people being involved in creating a single, unified prevention strategy to tackle mental ill health among their peers.

Additionally we must transform the conversation on mental health and wellbeing with and for young people. Youth-led campaigns can shift the framing away from 'crisis' and begin to co-create a language that is more proactive and empowering. Involving young people in this campaign will help boost reach and influence while having the double benefit of improving the skills of the co-designers themselves.

Finally, young people should be meaningfully involved in scrutinising government policy that affects mental health. Within education, this could include a review of the national curriculum to ensure striving for academic achievement doesn't come at the cost of young people's mental health.

Political parties, policy makers and funders need to:

- Double the budget currently spent on the design, testing, implementation and evaluation of prevention strategies.
- Develop a unified prevention strategy in partnership with children and young people who have lived experience of mental ill health and come from backgrounds that are often overlooked or underserved.
- Transform the national conversation on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing through youth-led initiatives and campaigns.
- Develop a cross-governmental task force to scrutinise the potential impacts of policy on mental health with a representative group of children and young people.

"It's time to pass the baton"

I'm Sophie, 22, from Essex. I'm an Anna Freud Young Champion and I have lived experience of poor mental health. I believe active, continuous involvement of young people in policy making and service delivery is really important.

It doesn't make sense to exclude young people in developing services, research and policy. We're going to be impacted and, although adults have been young people too, they need to pass the baton.

Government policy has to reflect the people it's serving. Young people are crying out for help but there are always barriers in the way and we are not being heard. People at the top – government, commissioners and policy makers – need to open the feedback loop to young people and be open to change.

Policies also need to be flexible and adaptable so we can keep moving with the times.

Focus on communities

Children and young people's mental health is influenced by a complex interplay of factors. We should intervene where young people can be reached best – in their own communities.

Every young person has their own set of circumstances that influence their mental health and their ability to access services. It's impacted by anything from their upbringing to the structural difficulties they may face and the unique nature of their local communities. This is why we believe it's best to tackle mental ill health within these communities themselves.

First, let's consider community assets like parks, sports centres and libraries. They're often central to young people's lives and have the potential to offer significant benefits beyond their original scope. For example, a well-maintained park fosters a sense of community and creates a meeting place, while sports centres provide facilities to improve physical health and boost mood. Increasing funding for these spaces would have a positive impact on children and young people's wellbeing.

Expanded community investment requires a wider view of the mental health workforce. As all those who interact with children and young people become more involved in mental wellbeing, further funding is needed to train, support, boost collaboration and provide supervision. This way, no matter who a young person turns to, they will find understanding, safe support and guidance.

We noted on page 11 that funding for early interventions fell drastically between 2011 and 2020. This has resulted in a greater number of young people needing more urgent – and more expensive – care later down the line. This downward trend in funding must be reversed. This should come in the form of increasing support for Family hubs or similar community-based assets that bring integrated services for children, young people and families under one roof. We're also asking for additional ring-fenced funding to provide extensive community-led support for marginalised groups who are more likely to experience mental health difficulties and less likely to get the help they need. Early intervention services led from within communities are often delivered by the very members of the community they serve. This means support is often more accepted, accessible and socially and culturally relevant.

Finally, political parties must create the infrastructure needed to better collect and use local data that builds our learning on why mental health issues occur in a particular place for particular groups. Our pilot of the Kailo framework is enhancing our understanding of what influences poor mental health in two different communities (see next page). Rolling out this approach across the country – with the digital infrastructure needed to make it function – would ensure interventions are finely tuned to communities, culturally sensitive and significantly more effective.

Political parties, policy makers and funders need to:

- Increase funding for community assets like parks, sports centres and libraries to build support networks and improve wellbeing.
- Expand the definition of the children and young people's mental health workforce and increase the training and support available to workers.
- Increase support for community-based early intervention services like Family hubs.
- Ring-fence additional funding for community-led early interventions that are catered for and delivered with marginalised groups.
- Build infrastructure to collect, analyse and act on local data about the root causes of mental ill health distinct to each community.

Case study: The Kailo framework

Kailo is an evidence-informed framework that aims to address the underlying social causes of mental ill health for children and young people. It's funded through the UK Prevention Research Partnership.

Kailo is being used in two different communities, one urban and one rural: Newham in east London and North Devon. It aims to move beyond treating symptoms of mental ill health to understanding its root causes, like poverty and access to services.

So far, Kailo has engaged 218 young people in North Devon and 135 in Newham. More than 150 professionals and 75 organisations have also been consulted. As a result of this work, North Devon's Integrated Care Board made improving young people's mental health a priority in their strategic plan. In Newham, research is being used to create a trauma-informed youth violence prevention strategy and an emotional health and wellbeing hub, in partnership with The Children's Society.

Adopt a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing

Schools* should be a focal point for community-level mental ill health prevention and early intervention.

Schools have an important role to play in the wellbeing of children and young people.

At their best, they provide powerful opportunities for social and emotional development alongside a sense of belonging that can protect children and young people from mental ill health. Every child deserves this experience of feeling safe, building connections and achieving together with their peers.

However for some, school can be a place of difficulty and distress. Academic pressures, feelings of exclusion or bullying can have a negative impact on mental health. Many students report stress related to school,[24] which points to a system that places a worrying burden on our younger generation.

We believe in tackling these issues through a whole-school approach to mental health and wellbeing driven by a more inclusive school system. We need to promote educational models that recognise and value difference, have relationships at their heart and value social, emotional and physical development as well as academic achievement. Our whole-school approaches at Anna Freud have helped some schools begin this journey by reviewing policy and practice through a wellbeing lens.

Where possible, we encourage greater opportunities for youth voice within schools so students can shape what a whole-school approach looks like. You can read how Young Champion James has done this in his story (below).

Work should also be done to improve access to preventative evidence-based interventions to tackle mental ill health in schools. Intervening at the earliest possible opportunity drastically improves a young person's ability to engage in education and can reduce the cost to adult mental health services in later years too. This improved access needs to be paired with training for education staff so they can build a better understanding on how to prioritise wellbeing and social and emotional development. This should begin in initial teacher training and continue through their professional development. We also recommend including guidance on how staff can better manage their own health and wellbeing.

Finally, it's important to complement work in schools by giving parents** the knowledge and tools they need to support their child at home. This way, parents will be more able to work in partnership with education professionals and be included in real and genuine consultation.

I'm Thea, I'm 21 and I'm from north west London. I've been an Anna Freud Young Champion since 2023 and I know first-hand the impact that excessive pressure can have in education.

My school was highly academic and very competitive; it created a toxic culture of tests and grading. A more balanced curriculum, with mental health firmly integrated within it, would help tackle this. This will help show young people that teachers and schools are not just there to help you get good grades, and there is life beyond academic achievements.

When we say schools in our manifesto, we refer to schools and colleges

***When we say parents in our manifesto, we refer to parents, carers and guardians*

Political parties, policy makers and funders need to:

- Create a more inclusive school system by promoting educational models that value social, emotional and physical development as well as academic achievement.
- Improve access to preventative mental health programmes in schools for children and young people with mild-to-moderate mental health needs.
- Include content in initial teacher training on how to build good mental wellbeing across the school community and provide annual training opportunities for all school staff and leaders.
- Invest in programmes delivered in partnership with schools that help parents understand and support their children's mental wellbeing.

"You can't schedule your mental health"

I'm James and I'm 15, from Lochmaben in the south of Scotland. I've been an Anna Freud Young Champion since June 2023. I'm also part of a mental health group in my school called Boys to Men. This gives students like me a chance to share how we feel and input into how the school works.

It's important to build a whole-school approach to mental health so no voices get left out. Everyone at school should have somewhere safe to speak whenever they need it. It's not enough to have someone available one or two days a week, because you can't schedule your mental health.

In the past, I've struggled with my mental health. I've known people who've dealt with similar situations and not come out the other side of their internal struggles. Schools have a big part to play in providing a space to talk about mental health.

Widen our collective understanding of childhood trauma

We need to better understand how potentially traumatic events can lead to mental health vulnerability. This will help us to create and deliver more accessible, evidence-based prevention and early intervention approaches.

While featuring childhood trauma in a manifesto focused on prevention and early intervention may seem unusual, childhood trauma is the most significant modifiable risk factor for mental ill health.[25] It's heavily linked to poorer social and economic outcomes and costs an estimated £42.8 billion in England and Wales every year.[26] Trauma should, therefore, be a key priority in any policy maker's work to prevent mental ill health among children and young people. And while trauma itself is innately complex, our work in this field points to several key interventions and principles that we believe should be developed further.

First, we must recognise that complex trauma impacts the whole child. As such, our response – as professionals and society – needs to be holistic. Education, social care and mental health systems need to work as one to support the child or young person and the adults around them. This requires a common language and framework for understanding what trauma is, how to help, and how different responses can support healing and recovery. Recognising and amplifying lived experience will be an essential part of the process if we are to successfully realise this aim.

We're also calling specifically for more accessible and, where possible, digital prevention and early intervention services for young people who face barriers to accessing in-person support. This should come alongside improved trauma-focused training and support for the wider workforce supporting children and young people.

Finally, we want to see further support for cross-nation collaborations that give a meaningful voice to children and young people who've been impacted by potentially traumatic experiences. These collaborations should leverage learning and lived experience insight to share with professionals who can positively impact young people's lives. Anna Freud is already sharing trauma-focused resources through our UK Trauma Council project and our new Participation Strategy is giving a meaningful say to young people via the Lundy model. A similar commitment from this cross-nation collaboration would be a significant step towards improving outcomes for children and young people who've experienced traumatic events.

Political parties, policy makers and funders need to:

- Co-design a cross-disciplinary framework and shared language on childhood trauma with children and young people who've experienced traumatic events.
- Increase spending on accessible, digital prevention and early intervention services for children and young people impacted by trauma.
- Increase trauma-focused training for the wider workforce supporting children and young people in community, education, voluntary and criminal justice settings.
- Fund cross-nation collaborations that leverage learning from young people and collect and share best practice across the UK.

Case study: UK Trauma Council

The UK Trauma Council (UKTC) is an Anna Freud project that exists to improve the help children and young people receive following potentially traumatic experiences. UKTC develops evidence-based resources and guidance, co-produced with professionals, communities, children and young people.

Learning from lived experience is essential to the project's success. UKTC implemented a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) made up of young people who have experienced traumatic events from across the UK.

"Trauma can have such profound impacts on your ability to function day-to-day, from flashbacks of the event to symptoms of depression to physical health problems. It is crucial that the government is educated on the long-lasting impacts of trauma and that they take action to tackle the burden of trauma in young people's lives today."

Founding YAB member Sarah

By collaborating with young experts by experience, the UKTC champions a world where people and communities have the knowledge, skills and confidence to nurture and protect those who have experienced traumatic events.

Leverage the power of science and data

Closing the gaps in science will help us all understand mental health better. And to get there faster, we need commitment from political parties to collect, share and leverage national standardised data.

Solutions that address the entire system are rare. Policies typically address immediate needs and leave long-term issues unresolved. Now is the time to shift thinking from repairing problems to building children and young people's mental wellbeing from the start. Put simply, mental wellbeing should be a foundation, not a fix.

To do this, we need the best available evidence and scientific insight at our fingertips, alongside children and young people's real-world experiences. This data can then be translated into better care and interventions – as we're already doing at Anna Freud on a smaller scale with our UCL and Cambridge University partnerships.

The first step to building this insight is to standardise how we measure children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. This should include regular, ongoing data collection in settings that support young people as well as an annual nationwide measurement that goes above and beyond current epidemiology studies. Consistency in this data collection will help form a comprehensive national picture. Data should also be sufficiently detailed to allow communities to understand local need and respond accordingly. Programmes like #BeeWell demonstrate what can be achieved when we regularly collect, review and act upon data to shift local systems.

We also need to better understand what resources are currently available to support children and young people's mental health. Establishing a resource map will facilitate work towards a full and comprehensive directory of services, with a single point of access for children, young people and the adults referring them for support. This mapping should be a collaborative effort, engaging system leaders, policy makers, schools, parents and young people themselves. It should encompass both official support services and voluntary and community organisations.

Sharing this important data more effectively is the final piece of the puzzle. On page 16, we called for better infrastructure so local teams could collect and use data in a way that helps them understand why local mental health issues occur. Here, we ask to go further by improving how all data related to the mental wellbeing of children and young people is shared across health, education, criminal justice and social care settings. An improved infrastructure and way of working would drastically improve collaboration between professionals and the consistency of support children and young people receive. All data stored and shared would need to be done so lawfully, in line with data protection legislation. This may sometimes require young people's own explicit consent.

Political parties, policy makers and funders need to:

- Standardise the definitions and measurement of children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, and ensure settings and services supporting young people collect these measures.
- Implement a regular nationwide measurement of young people's mental health and wellbeing.
- Map, integrate and enable a single point for children and young people to access mental health resources and services.
- Improve the sharing of digital information across education, health, criminal justice and social care settings.

Case study: #BeeWell

#BeeWell is a programme delivered through schools to capture feedback from young people about their wellbeing. It launched in 2019 as a collaboration between The University of Manchester, The Gregson Family Foundation and Anna Freud. After a successful pilot in Greater Manchester, #BeeWell has now been introduced in Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton, with further reach into Devon and areas of London.

Central to the programme is a survey, created collaboratively with 350 young people from 30 schools and a team of mental health and wellbeing experts. The young participants played a crucial role in designing the survey to ensure it reflected what truly mattered to them.

What sets #BeeWell apart is the commitment from local coalitions of leaders and agencies to act and respond to young people's voices. #BeeWell is designed so the data can inform action at the levels of a school year group, a locality, a region, or through nationally transferable research findings. Sharing the data – and having insight specific to particular geographies or groups of young people – facilitates a shared ownership and responsibility across a wide range of agencies.

To date, #BeeWell has reached more than 85,000 young people across almost 300 schools. The goal is to ensure the perspectives of young people remain central to the ongoing efforts to promote mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Thinking differently **is a watershed moment for Anna Freud. For the first time in our history we bring young voices, scientific insight and research together to say what needs to change in the approach to children and young people's mental health. It's an ambitious manifesto with life-changing potential.**

The work outlined in our manifesto is intricate and interconnected.

At its heart is a passionate call for a refocus of mental health resources, funding and support on prevention and early intervention services for children and young people.

It's a bold five-point plan of action that's informed by science and guided by young people. Our aim is to provide a holistic response to many of the issues our younger generations face today, and we need urgent action from political parties, policy makers and funders to bring it to life.

We began by laying out the case for greater youth agency and funding for prevention strategies and delivery. We need to shift the language of mental health away from crisis and put young people's voices first so they gain a meaningful say over their own futures.

This approach should continue in communities, too, with efforts made to reduce the burden on overwhelmed specialist mental health services while also enriching local activities. It is essential that this work tackles the inequity of support many marginalised communities face.

Schools are also a focal point. For too long, academic achievement has been prioritised to the detriment of wellbeing, relationships and play. A move to a whole-school approach to mental health and greater support for parents are just two ways this disconnect can be tackled. Further research into childhood trauma will enhance our understanding of its role in mental ill health, and leveraging better data would enable every intervention we list in *Thinking differently* to have the greatest impact.

We're at a critical moment in the journey to improve children and young people's mental health. We recognise that greater focus and support for prevention and early intervention is a radical and costly change to the norm. We also recognise that essential funding and support is still needed for young people in specialist services.

However, if our five-point plan is fully implemented, we have a unique opportunity to change the lives of children and young people by shifting once and for all how we tackle mental ill health.

This is a moment to truly empower those who have the most at stake, and to do so at the earliest opportunity. We said at the outset that we wanted to close the gap in mental health for children and young people.

We will do this by thinking differently. Will you join us?

How you can get involved

Collaboration is at the heart of what we do. Get involved in our work building the mental wellbeing of the next generation in the following ways:

- **Support our work** by donating at annafreud.org or by joining the Anna Freud Pioneers - a community of like-minded philanthropists. Email **annafreudpioneers@annafreud.org**
- **Shape our policies and services** by signing up to become a Young Champion. You'll need to be aged 14 to 25 years old with mental health lived experience and an understanding and awareness of mental health services. We also have a Parent and Carer Champion programme for parents and carers with mental health lived experience and an understanding and awareness of mental health services. Email **participation@annafreud.org**
- **Get in touch at manifesto@annafreud.org** to discuss our five-point plan if you're an MP, policy maker or funder. Young people shape our work and we can share together why we believe our plan will make a difference.

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PRUDENCE TRUST

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