

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT WORKING LUNCH

A cross-sectoral, collaborative approach to youth mental health and the role of civil society in health promotion, prevention and early intervention

FOREWORD

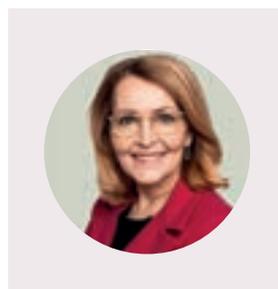
Young people across Europe are growing up in increasingly unstable times, and mental health challenges are on the rise. Despite this, our support systems do not have sufficient capacity to respond. The European Union must meet this challenge through collective, cross-sectoral efforts, acknowledging the crucial role of civil society.

For some young people, access to psychiatry and structured psychological therapies is important, and the systems that provide these must be strengthened. Many other young people, however, just need someone to listen to their thoughts and concerns; headspace Denmark offers this through low-intensity counselling available to all young people with no wait times, completely anonymously, and on the young person's own terms. By collaborating within and outside of the formal health sector, we can provide supports across the continuum of needs of young people.

The European Parliament plays a crucial role in coordinating and encouraging member states to participate in these collaborations.

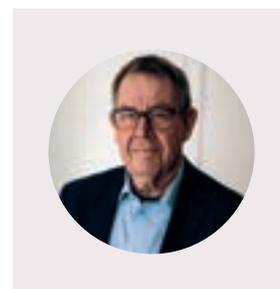
Across Europe, we have many examples of initiatives that are working across this spectrum of needs, particularly through civil society organisations. By working together, removing barriers and securing sustainable funding for civil society, we can scale these solutions to provide comprehensive coverage and ensure young people receive the support they need, when they need it.

We thank you for joining us at today's working lunch and look forward to collaborating further as we enable young people across Europe to thrive.



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Schaldemose'.

MEP Christel Schaldemose,
Vice-President of the
European Parliament



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Poul Nyrup Rasmussen'.

Poul Nyrup Rasmussen,
former Danish Prime Minister
and founder of headspace Denmark

BACKGROUND

Approximately 75% of mental health issues emerge before the age of 25.¹ Providing appropriate prevention and treatment for young people is therefore essential to setting young people up for healthy futures. Despite this, research shows that almost half of 18–29-year-olds in the European Union have unmet mental health care needs, and almost one in five 10–19-year-olds are affected by a mental health condition.² On top of this, young people are growing up in an increasingly insecure environment, facing global conflicts, rising costs of living and the climate crisis.

In 2023, the European Commission published their Communication on a Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health.³ This Communication recognises that improving mental health is both a social and an economic priority. Estimates suggest that the EU loses a value of €50 billion every year due to poor mental health of children and young people, but also that promotion, prevention and early intervention are the most cost-effective solutions. The Communication further advocates for a cross-sectoral approach to mental health that extends beyond the health sector and includes civil society, industry, academia and governments.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has also emphasised the importance of improving our prevention strategies in mental health in her Political Guidelines 2024–2029,⁴ and similar views were expressed by many Members of European Parliament in the 2024 World Mental Health Day plenary session.⁵ More recently, we welcome the establishment of an intergroup on mental health in the European Parliament, which further demonstrates the growing recognition of this important issue.

Today's working lunch, hosted by Vice President of the European Parliament, MEP Christel Schaldemose, and headspace Denmark, builds on this momentum. We call for increased investment and collaboration, particularly with civil society, as well as government, intergovernmental organisations and the private sector, to improve the mental health of young people in Europe. Critically, the voices and ideas of young people must be elevated to ensure solutions are appropriate, relevant and effective. We are excited to have the World Health Organization, World Economic Forum, collaborating civil society organisations such as @ease from the Netherlands, Members of European Parliament and the European Commission, and young people join us today to support this call.

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

The World Health Organization's recently released service guidance for the mental health of children and young people⁶ highlights that we already have significant evidence for effective solutions in a range of contexts. Civil society organisations such as headspace Denmark and Australia are referenced in this guidance as examples of youth-friendly, welcoming services backed by evidence. The important role of non-specialised staff, such as headspace Denmark's volunteer workforce, is similarly emphasised for their ability to provide support to the many young people who don't require specialist care.

The guidance also calls for action to reorganise and strengthen our response to youth mental health in all settings. This includes increased resourcing but also strengthened partnerships, including with civil society, to enable interconnected networks of services that young people can move smoothly between as their needs change.

Voices of young people

We must also remember that behind the statistics are real young people and families, whose experiences, perspectives and ideas must remain at the core of our approach. Evidence demonstrates that meaningful involvement of young people and families improves the quality, effectiveness, relevance and sustainability of policies, practices and services.⁷ Participation can take many forms, including advisory groups, co-creation of services and youth and carer representatives on boards.⁶ To be effective, this participation needs strong endorsement from leadership,⁶ appropriate training of staff and resourcing for activities, and feedback to participants on how their input was used.⁷ We must also recognise the diversity of young people in Europe and include representative voices in planning to ensure equitable access and that no one is left behind.

The role of civil society

The European Pillar of Social Rights⁸ highlights the right to timely access to affordable, preventive and curative healthcare of high quality. While health systems, usually government funded, take the primary responsibility for this, most do not have the capacity to provide sufficient mental health and wellbeing care to their citizens.³ Further, positive mental wellbeing is not just a health state, but one that is affected by social, economic and environmental factors that sit well outside the health system. Civil society is particularly well placed to provide promotion, prevention and early intervention support through universal interventions and low-intensity individual supports in settings that are accessible, safe and appropriate for young people.

The World Health Organization notes that, “using trained and supervised non-specialists to assess children and young people’s mental health and provide evidence-based interventions substantially increases the availability of care.” Such offerings in particular increase availability for young people who experience barriers to accessing traditional services. These barriers may include high thresholds or restrictive eligibility criteria, a desire to remain anonymous, or a mistrust in government systems. Solutions through civil society can thus (a) provide flexible supports to young people regardless of the size or type of the presenting concern, (b) deliver supports in a setting that young people feel safe, and (c) provide a positive experience of seeking help. This enables appropriate supports at the time, as well as encouraging future help-seeking.

It is therefore essential that policies and strategies to improve the mental wellbeing of young people in Europe include civil society as an integral component, in partnership with government funded and private services.

Example of a civil society solution for youth mental health: headspace Denmark

headspace Denmark is a mental health-promoting counselling service for young people aged 12-25, run by volunteers and paid staff at 34 physical centres across Denmark. It is a welcoming, anonymous space where there is always someone to talk to, where nothing is wrong, and no problem is too big or small. Young people can book an appointment at a time that suits them, walk into a centre for an appointment on the same day, or chat online with the counsellors. headspace listens and acts on the young people's terms and is free with no waiting time.

headspace's service consists of:

- Individual counselling sessions (face-to-face or video)
- Group conversations
- Online chat
- Outreach activities delivering health promotion interventions to schools and other educational facilities

headspace Denmark has been operating since 2013 and its counselling approach has been accredited by RådgivningsDanmark ('Counselling Denmark'). All local authorities have a dedicated employee who is physically placed at the headspace centres. This close collaboration with local authorities provides the necessary support to young people and facilitates smooth referrals to more intensive psychological and psychiatric supports when these are required (approximately 14% of young people). This partnership demonstrates the strong commitment from local authorities to engage with civil society and their recognition of the essential role that civil society plays in their communities.

As headspace can provide rapid, responsive support to young people when they reach out for help, it is anticipated that fewer young people's needs escalate to a point that they require a more intensive clinical intervention. It also means that psychology resources are not being used for young people who don't require structured therapy in this way. As such, municipalities report that the limited psychology and psychiatry resources are reserved for the young people who do require it, reducing demand on the system and shortening wait times.

Evidence for headspace Denmark

A recent large-scale impact evaluation of headspace Denmark, conducted by the Copenhagen Research Center for Mental Health (CORE), examined the mental health effects of the headspace intervention on young people who had received counselling compared to a control group. Preliminary findings show a statistically significant improvement in wellbeing of young people over the age of 15 in the intervention group, with headspace users moving from mental distress and being “at risk of depression or stress-related illnesses” to a state of positive wellbeing at the six-month follow-up. The headspace intervention thus reduces the burden of mental distress. The study also revealed a near-significant improvement in self-efficacy among headspace users from baseline to follow-up, indicating greater confidence in their ability to handle challenges. This strengthened level of self-efficacy is a significant preventive factor and an important investment in young people's mental health.

This evaluation is due to be published shortly and concludes that headspace plays a central role in identifying and supporting young people in distress. It forms the first part of an ongoing 5-year research project that will provide valuable insights for shaping future mental-health promoting initiatives for young people.

headspace Denmark is just one example of a civil society organisation, but others such as @ease in the Netherlands, Bergið headspace in Iceland and Mental Helse in Norway are similarly providing dedicated promotion, prevention and early intervention to young people and achieving positive outcomes. headspace has a mixed financing model, with funding from national government, philanthropic foundations and the private sector. This collaboration enables sustainable, ongoing service delivery and effective partnerships to provide smooth transitions of care to young people as required.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

This is a critical time for Europe's young people. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen articulated in her Political Guidelines 2024-2029⁴ that protecting the mental health of children and young people was one of the greatest challenges of this decade.

The establishment of the intergroup on mental health is an important step in the right direction and we look forward to partnering with members to develop and scale solutions to support young people across the European Union. We echo the call from Members of the European Parliament at the World Mental Health Day plenary session,⁵ and the Joint Statement from 33 European Organisations,⁹ advocating for the Commission to prepare a European Strategy on mental health. This strategy must include a focus on the unique challenges faced by young people, and the importance of providing appropriate promotion, prevention and early intervention supports to this age group. It must also recognise the need for collaborative approaches from within and outside of the health sector, and the importance of civil society as key actors in the implementation of solutions. Finally, it must emphasise young people's perspectives and lived experience as central to the development of solutions.

Member states must strengthen their partnerships with, and funding for, civil society organisations delivering promotion, prevention and early intervention activities to young people. We also encourage schools and universities to join these partnerships as settings where young people can benefit from promotion activities and those who need more intensive supports can be identified. We similarly urge the private sector to implement strategies and develop similar partnerships that can improve workplace wellbeing.

Best practices and learnings must also be shared between member states to contribute to ongoing improvements. European Parliament is a key mechanism for this, as well as for encouraging member states to implement recommendations to strengthen their overall response to youth mental health. It is crucial that the European Union provides ongoing funding opportunities to civil society organisations, such as through the ERASMUS+ programme. Finally, we encourage the development of European policies that recognise the risks, as well as the benefits and opportunities, of the online world for young people.

The need to support young people is urgent. We must act now and together to create a Europe where young people thrive, otherwise we risk significant costs to individuals, society, and our economy. We have solutions with clear evidence, but we need financing and collaboration to implement and scale these across Europe. We look forward to your partnership as we work to better the lives of young people now and for the future.

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