



Youth Social Action and Public Health

Suffolk Annual Public Health Report

2025

The 2025 Suffolk Annual Public Health Report (APHR) spotlights the transformative role of youth social action and its profound connections to public health across our communities.

About the project

Suffolk's Annual Public Health Report 2025 marks a significant shift. For the first time, it is shaped and told by young people themselves, placing their voices, experiences and leadership at the centre of our public health conversation.

This year's theme makes the case that youth social action is a powerful public health approach. Across Suffolk, young people are not just responding to health challenges, they are driving the solutions. Whether tackling mental health stigma, supporting peers, shaping services or building more inclusive communities, their actions are transforming the conditions that shape health and wellbeing. Suffolk's commitment to the Power of Youth Charter has strengthened this work, showing a clear determination to champion youth social action not as a form of intervention, but as a way for young people to lead in and with their communities.

About the project

In this conversation, #iWill Ambassador Alex speaks to Stuart Keeble, Director of Public Health and Communities at Suffolk County Council, about why youth social action matters to public health, how sharing power with young people can change systems and the importance of this project.



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The report reflects Suffolk's core public health priorities, including mental health, meaningful work, equality, youth wellbeing and strong community connection. It also aligns with the principles of the #iWill Power of Youth Charter, embedding participation, shared decision making and intergenerational collaboration throughout.

Co-produced with young people at every stage, this report shows that youth social action is not an add-on to public health. It is a strategy for prevention, inclusion and lasting change.

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The story of Suffolk

Suffolk is building a story of youth empowerment at the heart of public health. Across our communities, young people are stepping up, volunteering, campaigning and leading creative projects that support health and wellbeing for all.

This year's Annual Public Health Report highlights how youth social action supports the county's key goals. These include better mental health, strong support for children and young people, financial stability and listening to local voices to tackle inequality.



A foundation for policy

Stephen Skeet from Volunteering Matters discusses how youth social action is already thriving in Suffolk, even if it often goes unrecognised. Through hackathons and similar events, young people come together to explore issues and lead their own change. He calls for a shift from top-down decision-making to approaches that start with young people's existing power and ideas. Suffolk's support for youth-led action shows how policy can be more inclusive and effective when shaped by those it affects.



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Over the past few years, Suffolk has become a national leader in youth participation. In 2023, Ipswich was recognised as the UK's first Town of Youth Social Action. In 2025, Suffolk County Council signed the Power of Youth Charter and committed to becoming the UK's first County of Youth Social Action.

This vision is clear. Young people are not just being listened to. They are helping to shape the future. As Councillor Bobby Bennett puts it, "we are making decisions with our young people, not for them."

Young people bring unique insights, energy and creativity to today's challenges. Their actions strengthen communities and support their own wellbeing, confidence and skills. This report shares the story of how youth social action is making Suffolk a healthier, more connected and more hopeful place for everyone.

The power of youth

Suffolk County Council has made a powerful commitment to youth voice by signing the Power of Youth Charter, pledging to put young people at the heart of decision making. In this video, Kayleb, Member of Youth Parliament for Suffolk Coastal and Waveney, speaks with Councillor Bobby Bennett, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People's Services at Suffolk County Council, about the significance of this pledge.

They explore what real youth leadership looks like, the impact of feeling connected to a wider movement and the importance of creating space for young people to shape their communities.



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The true value of youth social action

The evidence is clear: social action is a powerful tool for supporting young people to thrive. It builds confidence, improves mental wellbeing, and strengthens inclusion, civic engagement and a sense of belonging. Research consistently shows that when young people are empowered to lead change in their communities, the impact is transformative for individuals and for society as a whole.

Involvement in social action

47%

of young people in England have taken part in social action in the past 12 months.

National Youth Strategy Report (2025)

What type of social action

The most popular social action was helping to improve the local area

24%

National Youth Strategy Report (2025)

Social action boosts political engagement

It builds networks and civic identity but risks reinforcing privilege if access isn't equal.

Youth Social Action: Rapid Evidence Assessment (2021)

Social action boost political engagement

Young people from Black, African, Black British or Caribbean backgrounds in the UK were most likely to say there were no opportunities to share their views at 46%

Next Generation UK, British Council (2024)

How young people influence

34%

of young people know how to influence decisions in their local area

National Youth Strategy Report (2025)

Young people do not yet see their voice making a difference

31%

of young people felt their voice matters for decisions made in their local area

National Youth Strategy Report (2025)

Methodology

To create this year's Annual Public Health Report, we used a mixed-methods approach to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from young people and stakeholders across Suffolk.

Every organisation involved in shaping this report is a signatory of the Power of Youth Charter and shares a commitment to placing youth social action at the centre of public health. This collaborative approach reflects a shared belief that young people are not just contributors, but essential partners in building a healthier Suffolk.

In November 2025, we held three youth hackathon events at Suffolk New College, Abbeygate Sixth Form College and Lowestoft Ormiston Denes Academy, alongside an immersive workshop at Northgate High School Sixth Form. In total, 190 young people took part. These sessions combined collaborative group discussion, storytelling and short presentations, enabling participants to explore and share their ideas around community, public health and youth-led social action.

This approach fostered open and honest conversations, with facilitation designed to create safe spaces where young people felt confident to speak freely. To complement this engagement, we conducted interviews with two local councillors, the Director of Public Health, and representatives from four organisations working with young people and social action. These interviews helped us understand wider perspectives, strategies and challenges in supporting youth engagement in public health.

In addition, 122 young people completed a survey that gathered demographic data and qualitative responses about their experiences of living in Suffolk. Respondents were aged between 9 and 23 and represented 13 postcode areas across the county. Surveys were completed independently and anonymously, without any prompting, to reduce bias and ensure authenticity.



VOLUNTEERING MATTERS The Youth Effect Survey

I feel proud of where I live
☐ Always ☐ Sometimes ☐ Not really ☐ Not yet

What is your postcode (if you know it)

People in my area are kind and helpful
☐ Yes, lots! ☐ A bit ☐ Not that much ☐ Not really

There are fun or welcoming spaces for young people around here
☐ Loads ☐ A few ☐ Not many ☐ None

Young people like me can make a difference in my community
☐ Definitely ☐ Maybe ☐ Not sure ☐ No

I'd join a project to help others or speak up about something I care about
☐ Count me in ☐ Maybe, tell me more ☐ Not sure ☐ Probably not

Helping out or joining something fun could be good for my confidence or mental health
☐ 100% ☐ I think so ☐ Not really ☐ Nope

Key findings and themes

Through a series of public health hackathons, young people from across Suffolk came together to explore the question: what does a healthy, thriving community look like?

The result is a powerful set of reflections, grounded in lived experience and shaped by open discussion, debate and collaboration. These seven themes capture what young people discussed. Their concerns, challenges, values and hopes. Together, they provide a clear picture of the world as they see it now.

1 Youth social action is a lifeline, not a trend

Young people shared how being involved in social action helps them feel empowered, connected and hopeful. They want to lead, not just be consulted. From volunteering to campaigning, their ideas and energy are driving local change, but many feel this is still undervalued or unsupported. They described social action as:

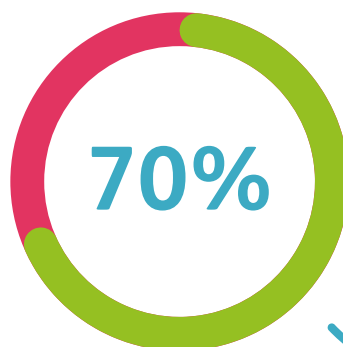
- Collective:** about solidarity and support
- Practical:** from running clubs to protesting policies
- Influential:** rooted in care and belief in a better future
- Emotional:** shaping change from the ground up



We aren't outnumbered, we are out-organised



Social action is about empowering others and being empowered yourself



Felt that young people could make a difference in their community



I fell into the social action space accidentally, I saw a problem I thought needed solving. I started doing a lot of charity work and people got in touch with me to say what I was doing is social action.

Bury St Edmunds Public Health Hackathon

The Bury St Edmunds Hackathon at Abbeygate Sixth Form College was a brand-new experience for many of the students taking part. At first, there were some nerves, but once the young ambassadors opened the session, the energy in the room quickly shifted. Confidence grew, ideas started flowing, and new connections were made.

In this video, you'll hear directly from the young people who helped lead the day. They took on the role of interviewers, speaking with partners and fellow students to find out what the hackathon meant to them. Their voices, questions and reflections capture the energy, creativity and leadership that made the event so special.



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2

Community should mean safety, support and belonging

“

A child is raised by the whole community

Young people spoke about what makes a community feel healthy and what makes it feel unsafe or excluding. Many raised issues around crime, discrimination and public spaces that feel unwelcoming or poorly maintained. A strong theme was the need for places where everyone feels they belong, regardless of age or background.

“

Somewhere everyone feels safe

They describe community as:

- A sense of identity and belonging
- Feeling safe, trusted and supported
- A place where people contribute and care for each other

“

Being there for one another, supporting each other

“

Mental and physical health are linked and we're being let down on both

Long waiting lists, stigma and isolation came up often. Young people talked about how hard it is to access support and how much peer connection, creativity and kindness matter to their mental wellbeing.

Many said that schools do not give enough space for emotional health, and that feeling part of a group can be just as healing as professional help. They spoke about:

- Peer support and group connection
- Art, sport, nature and activism as mental health tools
- The need for space to talk and be listened to

“

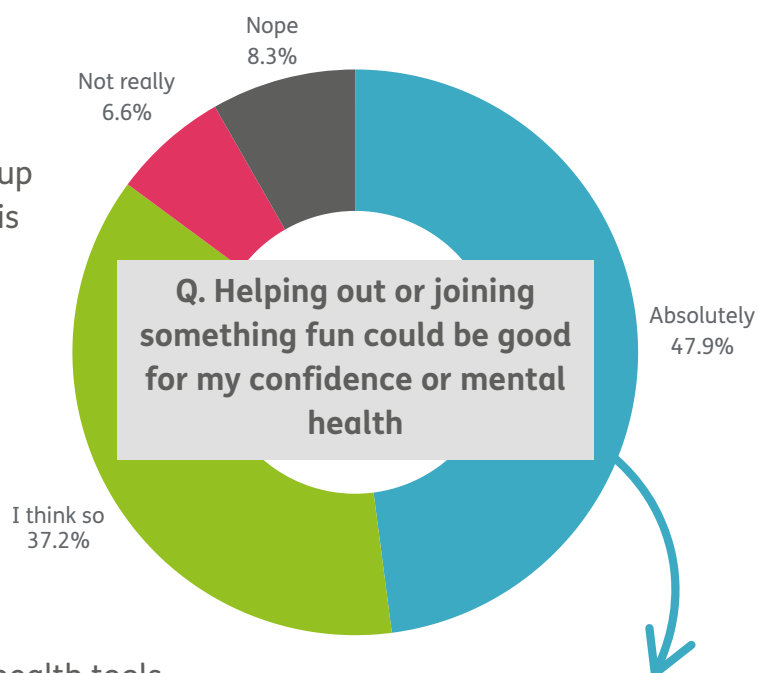
Events bring people together and let you learn about others

“

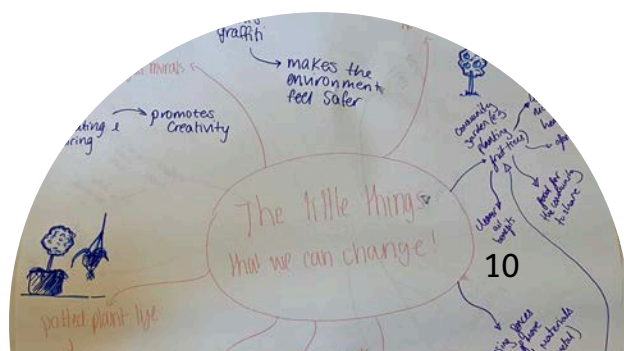
A healthy community talks to each other and interacts with each other

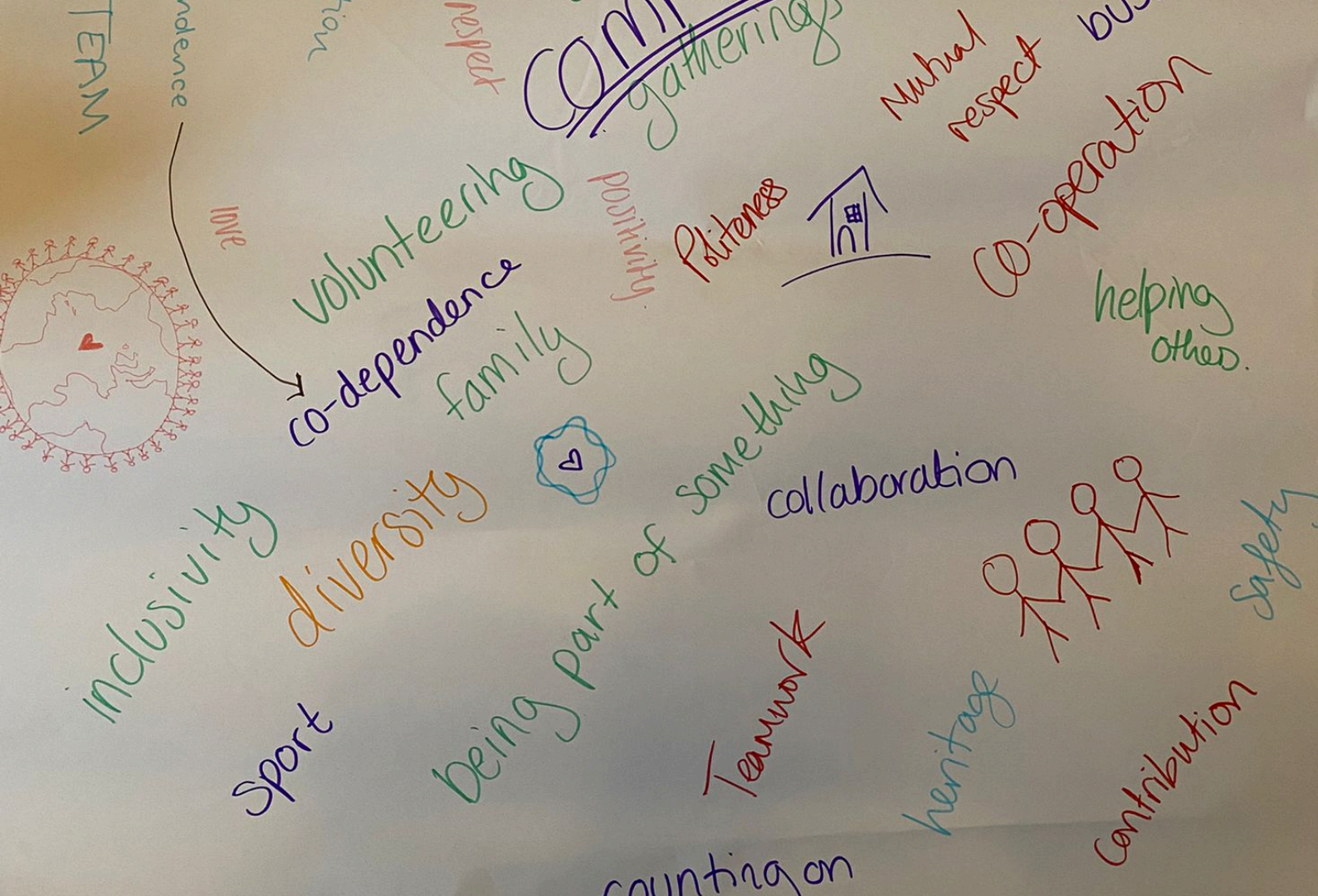
3

Mental health depends on connection, not just services



85% of young people felt social action is good for their mental health





Ipswich Public Health Hackathon

Welcome to the Ipswich Public Health Hackathon, filmed by young people, for young people.

Hosted at Suffolk New College, this was the very first public health themed hackathon. While there were a few nerves at the start, the setting quickly put everyone at ease. Held in the calm and welcoming space of Chefs Whites restaurant, the day brought together young people already familiar with hackathons. That confidence showed, as thoughtful conversations replaced frantic note-taking, and meaningful ideas began to take shape.

This video captures their voices, their leadership and their vision for healthier, stronger communities.



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4

Barriers to access are everywhere

Young people repeatedly raised the issue of being excluded by cost, distance or lack of opportunity. Many live in rural areas with limited transport or activities. Some feel overlooked due to their identity or background. Affordability and accessibility were central themes, especially when it comes to health, learning and community spaces. Issues include:

- Expensive or unreliable transport
- Costly gym, club and event fees
- Inaccessible or non-inclusive spaces
- Limited support for those facing disadvantage



Transport prices



Everything is expensive or hard to get to, so we end up with nothing

68%

68% of young people know how to share ideas or speak up in their community



There is a lack of accessible spaces for young people



5

The education system feels disconnected from real life



Education affects who we become and how we connect

Young people want schools and colleges that support the whole person, not just their grades. They spoke about how education impacts social health, mental wellbeing and life opportunities. There were calls for more inclusive curricula, emotional support and practical preparation for adult life.

They talked about:

- Pressure to perform over space to grow
- Lack of representation in what is taught
- Need for digital access, apprenticeships and life skills



The system
prioritises grades
over wellbeing

6

Young people need space to thrive

Physical activity, creative outlets and social connection were all described as essential for wellbeing. But access to these is uneven. Many raised the lack of affordable gyms, youth centres and local opportunities. Having space to move, relax and connect with others was seen as critical for both physical and emotional health. Young people highlighted:

- Sports and arts activities that are free and consistent
- Accessible spaces and booking systems
- More social areas designed for them



How are students
meant to afford a
£35 gym?



There are not
enough places for
like-minded people
to come together



Healthy foods is too
expensive

53%

53% of young people
surveyed felt there
were not enough fun or
welcoming spaces for
young people



7

Young people want to be seen, heard and celebrated



Even small actions matter

There was a strong desire for recognition, pride and visibility. Whether it is through art, activism or simply being asked for their views, young people want to feel that they matter in their communities and in decision-making spaces. Culture, creativity and care were all raised as ways to bring people together and build hope. The spoke about:

- Feeling proud of where they live
- Being recognised for their contributions
- Having their stories and voices reflected in public life



People being able to proudly express themselves



We are all connected

37%

of young people are 'always' proud of where they live

Lowestoft Public Health Hackathon

The Public Health Hackathon, held at Lowestoft Ormiston Denes Academy, brought together a younger group of participants than previous events, with most attendees aged between 9 and 11. For many, it was their first experience of a hackathon environment and the room buzzed with energy, curiosity, and excitement.



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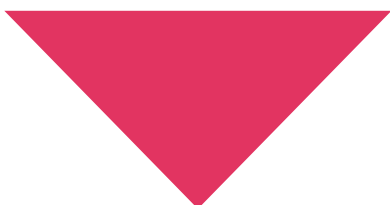


What's needed next

The seven themes shared by young people across Suffolk offer a bold and hopeful vision for the future. To make that vision a reality, we need action that matches the scale of their ambition. What's needed now is a Suffolk Youth Social Health Strategy, co-designed and co-delivered with young people, with investment focused on five key priorities.

These recommendations are directly informed by engagement with young people who took part in the youth-led hackathons. They are relevant for all adults in Suffolk, whether residents or those working in the public, private or voluntary sectors.

Invest in connection, not just services



Prioritise activities, events and environments that build trust, joy and relationships. These are the foundations of community wellbeing. Young people are asking for more ways to connect with each other through shared experiences.

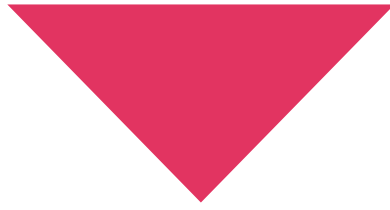
- Host more youth events, community celebrations and creative spaces
- Offer free or low-cost activities that help teenagers feel seen and included
- Make public spaces greener, more welcoming and fun
- Share youth-led stories and achievements through local awards and cultural projects
- Create clubs that support wellbeing through art, music, sport and nature



More youth incorporated activities in schools and out of schools
Student (15)



Support local infrastructure that young people trust



Young people need real places to meet, talk and feel at home. These spaces help build belonging, confidence and support networks.

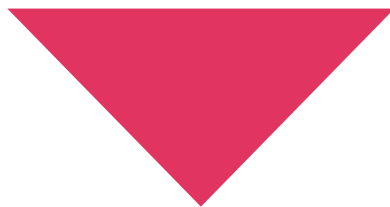
- Create more youth-led community hubs, cafés and safe gathering spaces
- Bring back key civic spaces like local museums and libraries
- Develop recreational areas for hobbies, sports and creative activities
- Design and co-create spaces with young people to ensure accessibility and comfort
- Make it easier for young people to set up and lead their own clubs and projects
- Fund community hubs, safe spaces and increased engagement with local policing and safety groups



Make more community centre's for young people and more encouragement for young people to join them

Student (16)

Shift systems to meet youth needs



Young people face structural barriers that affect their health, access and opportunities. Public systems must become more responsive and fair to reflect what young people need.

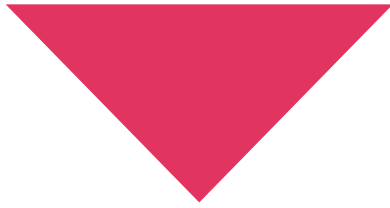
- Make public transport cheaper, more reliable and easier to access
- Increase safety in public areas and take real action on crime and discrimination
- Prioritise environmental sustainability in local planning
- Focus resources on rural areas and underserved communities
- Collaborate with schools and colleges on inclusive policies that remove financial and access barriers
- Support targeted funding and inclusive infrastructure audits



Make public transport cheaper for students, including college not just university, as most of the time we have to get at least 1 bus everyday and the money adds up

Student (16)

Amplify youth leadership and lived experience



Young people want the power to shape decisions and lead change in their communities. They are ready to act and need support to turn ideas into impact.

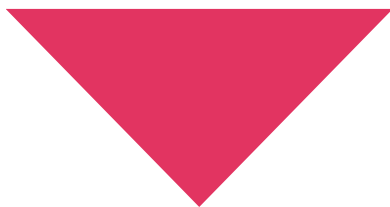
- Back youth-led campaigns, peer-led initiatives and social action projects
- Provide mentoring, training and microgrants to develop leadership
- Include youth voices in councils, boards and decision-making groups
- Make social action a normal part of education and youth services
- Create platforms for young people to influence local decisions and be recognised for their contributions



Real integrated ways for young people to participate in public health more regularly. We want young people to speak and then we want young people to be heard. And more than that, we want young people's ideas to be implemented.

Student (17)

Make access and inclusion a guarantee



Every young person should be able to take part, no matter their background, ability or income. The system must remove barriers and actively support inclusion.

- Provide free or low-cost access to gyms, clubs and youth spaces
- Develop targeted programmes for minority and marginalised groups
- Design with inclusion in mind, not as an afterthought
- Support transport and device loan schemes to tackle digital and physical exclusion
- Create age-specific spaces and programmes that reflect different needs and experiences
- Fund youth vouchers and reduce or remove cost barriers



The times there have been activities, it's aimed at all age groups, and older teens don't always want to mix with the younger ones, so having more age appropriate activities / designated timings for age groups would definitely make going people feel more included and supported within the community.

Student (18)

Stories of change

Beyond powerful personal stories, we are seeing clear evidence of youth-led action driving meaningful change across Suffolk. These case studies highlight how young people are working alongside organisations to shape stronger and fairer communities.

Together, they are improving public health and challenging outdated systems. Each story reveals a broader truth: when young people are trusted and supported to lead, their impact is deep, far reaching and transformative. Here are just a few inspiring examples.



Eastern Education Group

Sue Calvino, Student Ambassador Lead

This case study highlights how youth social action is transforming lives across Suffolk. Sue Calvino, Student Ambassador Lead at Eastern Education Group, shares how giving young people the space to lead and be heard is reshaping education, community, and health. In conversation with #iWill Ambassador Claire, they explore how social action builds confidence, connection and a real sense of purpose. This is a powerful reminder that when young people lead, entire communities thrive.



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ASSET Education Jacqueline Bircham, CEO

In this inspiring interview, Kayleb, the Member of Youth Parliament for Suffolk Coastal and Waveney, speaks with Jacqueline Bircham, CEO of Asset Education, about how a youth-led project transformed her organisation. What began as a pupil parliament activity evolved into a trust-wide food education movement across 15 primary schools. The young leaders, known as the Asset Arrows, explored issues of fairness, hosted a food summit, designed new menus, and created a recipe book that shaped their in-house catering. Their work earned national recognition and led to a cultural shift in how Asset Education values youth voice. Jacqueline reflects on how this journey, rooted in youth social action, built a lasting culture of leadership, empowerment, and change.

For Children & Young People (4YP) Rebekah Warnock, CEO

This is a case study from Ipswich, featuring Rebekah Warnock, CEO of 4YP, a youth charity rooted in the community. In this short film, Becky shares how youth social action is shaping their work. From designing a new community building to influencing leadership and decision-making. It shows what meaningful youth involvement looks like in practice, and how giving young people real power can transform organisations, spaces and futures. This case study highlights the progress being made in Ipswich and Suffolk, where youth voice is not just heard but truly acted on.



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Suffolk New College

Marianne Flack, Deputy Principal



This case study interview is with Marianne Flack, Deputy Principal at Suffolk New College. Here Marianne talks about the positive impact of youth social action on young people. She explains how taking part in projects helps students build confidence, work together and make a real difference in their community. She also shares how the college is creating more chances for young people to lead, grow and shape their own environment.



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Moving forward

This work has clearly shown how important youth social action is for public health. Young people bring energy, insight and experience that often go unseen. Through this approach, they have spoken up, taken action and helped shape solutions to the issues that affect their lives and communities.

Young people do not want to sit back and accept what adults decide. They want to be part of the change. They have ideas, knowledge and a strong desire to make things better. This report proves they are ready to lead and ready to be listened to.



Reflections and looking ahead

In this final video, Alex, one of Suffolk's place-based youth ambassadors, speaks with Councillor Steve Wiles, Cabinet Member for Public Health and Public Protection at Suffolk County Council. They discuss what is next for public health in Suffolk and how insights from the recent youth-led hackathons and final report will help shape future strategy and decision-making.

From applying lived experience to setting new priorities, this conversation looks ahead at how young people and policymakers can continue working together to improve health and wellbeing across the county.



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Young people see public health challenges and solutions through the lens of their communities and the places they live. When we create spaces where they feel seen, heard and supported (and invest in their role in local life) we strengthen not only public health systems but young people's own health, connection and sense of belonging.

Now is the time for services and organisations to go further. We must not stop at asking young people for feedback. We must create real opportunities for them to lead, take part in decision-making, and help shape the systems around them. This includes making sure volunteering and social action are supported and resourced.

We also need to rethink how we see young people and what we think they need. We must move away from only focusing on problems and instead focus on their power to create solutions. Public health should not just be something done to people. It should be something done with them.

Finally, we must change how we measure success. In the past, success meant counting the number of young people involved. Now, it is about bigger change. It is about schools improving how they support young people's health. It is about young people influencing services and shaping their communities. These are real, lasting changes.

Youth social action is not a nice extra. It is a vital part of building a fairer, healthier future for everyone.



With thanks

A huge thank you to the young people who took part in our hackathons and helped shape this report. To Kayleb and Alex for conducting the interviews. Kezia for taking some amazing photos and film recordings.

From Suffolk New College, Link, Jamie, Kamile, Jessice, Sophie and Callum. From Abbeygate Sixth Form, Phoebe, Felix, Jakub, Andrew and Cobi. From Suffolk One, Janet, Lynn and Chelsy. #iWill Ambassadors, Tabbie, Esme and Claire.

Thank you to Suffolk New College, Abbeygate Sixth Form and Orimston Denes Academy for hosting us.

A big thank you also to those who shared their stories with us throughout the project.





Report produced by young
people in Suffolk and

VOLUNTEERING  **MATTERS**