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Debate Topic: Barriers to Accessing Mental Health

Services for Young People (16–25) in the UK

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Overall Introduction

Student A

Welcome everyone, today we discussed the question of whether mental health in the UK is being improved or whether there still exist serious obstacles to access. The issue of mental health among the youth has been on the rise as a public health concern in the United Kingdom. Mental health services involve a continuum of support mechanisms which are meant to help people who are psychologically distressed or mentally ill. The services are associated with specialist help like Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), community mental health, counselling, and online-based mental health services (NHS England, 2015).

In this debate, the youth are considered to be those who are in their 16-25 years of age, a period that is linked with significant social, emotional and biological transformations. The study by Scheiner et al. (2022) indicates that several mental illnesses commence at a young age. NHS (2022) further points out that in England, one out of six youths has a diagnosable mental health condition, which indicates the increasing need. The need to access services early is an effective way since timely intervention can help avoid the deterioration of conditions and improve the long-term outcomes (Patel et al. 2018).

Opening Statement

Student A (Positive)

The provision of mental health services to the youth in the UK has experienced huge development in the last decade. This has been achieved by government policies and increased investment in providing more services and also making them more accessible to the youth who face mental health challenges.

The NHS Long Term Plan is one of the policy initiatives where it was promised that an extra 345,000 children and young people will receive mental health support by 2023/24 (NHS England, 2022). It shows a considerable investment in the enhancement of early intervention and the increase of service capacity. Similarly, Future in Mind policy focused on the need to reform mental health provision to children and young people through enforcing prevention, early detection and integrated care (Department of Health, 2015).

Moreover, the availability of school-based mental health support teams and online mental health services has enhanced the ease of access since the youth presently have numerous options

in seeking assistance (Anselimus, 2025). These events are signs that, despite the existing challenges, various efforts have been made to make sure that the youth are given the assistance that they require. Consequently, policy changes and new models of services indicate that there is increased access to mental health services among the youth in the UK despite the barriers.

Student B (Negative)

Although policy actions can propose improvements on mental health services, the actual situation faced by most of the youths in the UK is quite the opposite. Despite increased awareness and investment, a lot of challenges still exist that deny the youth an opportunity to receive effective and timely mental health care. The growing demand for services is one of the significant problems. Referrals to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services have increased drastically in recent years. AMHs (Adolescent Mental Health Services) refer to more than 400,000 children and youths annually, although a significant proportion are rejected or have to wait an extremely long time before treatment begins (Children's Commissioner, 2025).

In addition, the shortage of workforce and resources implies that services are not usually able to match demand. Meanwhile, stigma and cultural stigmatisation still prevent the youngsters from seeking help, especially with some groups of people (Naslund and Deng, 2021). Consequently, access to mental health services is still constrained by systemic problems in the healthcare system despite the government's promises. Similarly, it is arguable that accessing support barriers is still a big challenge for the UK youth.

Main Arguments

Student A (Positive)

Among the indicators of better access to mental health services, one can distinguish the growth of access to services conducted by the national policy. The NHS Long Term Plan (2019) has invested heavily in mental health services and strived to assist hundreds of thousands more young people. The growth of community-based support programmes and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services has been made possible through increased investment. A study by Shidhaye (2023) indicates that greater funding and prioritisation of the policy are necessary to enhance the accessibility of services and reduce unmet mental health services by the youth.

The other relevant change is the emerging digital mental health services. Online counselling methods, psychotherapy devices and telecounselling are more prevalent. Such services

can overcome the geographical impairments and offer support to the youngsters who might feel embarrassed using the traditional face-to-face services. According to the Technology Acceptance Model, people will tend to use technology more readily when they believe that it is useful and simple to use (Alsyouf et al. 2023). As Fernández-Batanero et al. (2025) claim, since youth are very susceptible to digital technology, online mental health services can be an available and cost-effective alternative to traditional services.

Early intervention programmes are also very important in enhancing access to mental health support. Some of the current policies, like Future in Mind, focus on the prevention and early detection of mental issues amongst the youth (Department of Health, 2015). Mental health support teams in schools and Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programmes amongst youths seek to ensure the timely provision of support before the mental problem can develop into more severe disorders (Ellins et al. 2023). Recovery Model upholds this method by focusing on person-centred care, empowerment and early intervention in order to enhance mental wellbeing (Jacob, 2015).

Additionally, the program of development of community and youth-friendly services has contributed to making mental health more accessible. Informal and culturally sensitive services offered by youth hubs and voluntary organisations might be more accessible than the medical setting (Hassan et al. 2022). The services also help in decreasing the stigma and promoting the help-seeking behaviour of the youths.

Student B (Negative)

Long waiting lines still represent one of the most important obstacles to mental health service access despite the improvement of the policy. It is observed by Han et al. (2026) that many youths take months, or even years, before they receive treatment after referral to specialist services. In other areas, people are put on a waiting list before being served because of the lack of service capacity, such as, according to CQC (2022), almost over 7 million people are on a waiting list due to capacity issues. The treatment may deteriorate mental health states and cause more crisis settings in case of delays.

The other significant obstacle is the lack of mental health professionals in the NHS. The growth of the workforce has not corresponded to the expansion of demand for services, even though the amount of funding has increased. A study by Hobbs and Wood (2025) has shown that

the mental health workforce has serious issues with recruitment and retention, restricting access to care.

Stigmatisation is also a key factor that keeps the youths away from help. The Stigma Theory states that people with mental health issues cannot seek assistance because they are afraid of stigmatisation or social disapproval (Corrigan et al. 2014). This is specifically applicable to young men and people of some cultural backgrounds, who may view mental health problems as a weakness.

Moreover, socioeconomic factors are very powerful factors which determine access to mental health services. The Social Determinants of Health theory focuses on the role of some determinants like poverty, education and social inequality as factors that may influence the health outcomes and access to services (Braveman and Gottlieb, 2014). Youth residing in disadvantaged areas are most likely to have higher mental health demands but encounter more obstacles on their way to receiving help. Moreover, there is the issue of transition between CAMHS and the adult mental health service at age 18. Disruption of care in this transition can cause gaps in treatment and predisposition to vulnerability in many young people (Hardgrove et al. 2014).

Rebuttal

Student A

Although it is a fact that there are challenges like waiting time and workforce shortages, it should be noted that they are making serious efforts to help solve these problems. More resource availability by way of increased investments in the NHS Long Term Plan has already started to increase the potential of service capacities and the number of mental health professionals (NHS England, 2019).

Another beneficial way of decreasing the pressure of traditional services is the provision of digital mental health services, where the latter can offer alternative types of assistance. It has been demonstrated by Garrett et al. (2024) that online therapy and mental health apps can lead to an increase in accessibility and make young individuals more willing to seek help at a younger age.

Moreover, there has been increased openness in relation to mental health problems due to national anti-stigma campaigns and mental health awareness efforts. These campaigns promote the help-seeking behaviour and minimise the social impediments that come with mental illness (Henderson et al. 2017).

Student B

Despite all of these developments, the promises of policies are not necessarily translated into actual changes that are improved by the young people who seek to access services. It is also observed by BMA (2025) that many people are still waiting longer and receiving less treatment, even with more funds. Similarly, the digital mental health services will not completely substitute face-to-face therapy, especially when dealing with people who have serious mental conditions in question. It is claimed by Fraccastoro et al. (2020) that digital tools can be helpful but tend to be most effective in combination with traditional services. Besides, the rate of increase in the need for mental health services is still higher than the system can accommodate. Most of the young people will remain unable to receive proper care unless there are major changes in the structures, such as expansion of the workforce and service integration.

Closing Statement

Student A

Well, the UK has gone a long way in enhancing the mental health services among young people. Access has been increased and early intervention supported by government policies, augmented funding and innovative digital solutions. Though issues like waiting time and shortage of workforce continue to be experienced, the ongoing advancement of youth-based services and preventative programmes proves that there is a definite resolve to better the mental health provision. Similarly, one can claim that the UK mental health system is gradually getting more open and receptive to the needs of the younger generation.

Student B

Although this has been improved, most of the youths are still confronted with significant challenges in accessing mental health services. The system is still being disadvantaged by long queues, a shortage of workforce, stigma, and socioeconomic disparities. Until these structural problems can be solved, many of the youth will continue to be inaccessible to the support that they need. However, the serious changes are still needed to make the mental health services evenly accessible in the UK.

Overall Conclusion

Student B

This discussion shows how difficult it is to access mental health services among the youth in the UK. Policies like the NHS Long Term Plan and Future in Mind have an evident focus on enhancing services and broadening access. New opportunities for early intervention are also available through such initiatives like digital mental health platforms and school-based support. However, there are still great obstacles, such as growing demand, workforce shortages, social inequalities and long waiting lines. The challenges suggest that the mental health system needs to be reformed and invested more. The increase in access will involve an increase in workforce, a decrease in waiting lists, and the enhancement of the child and adult mental health coordination.

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