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# Seen, safe and supported:

The economic benefits of mentoring LGBTQ+ young people

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## Free2B Alliance

Free2B is a London-based community organisation, supporting LGBTQ+ young people and their parents.

Free2B provides 1:1 mentoring sessions and group services in schools and in the community, including trans-focused groups, with all their provisions co-developed with their members. Free2B seeks to provide safe spaces and champion empowerment, acceptance and a place where young people are Free2B.

## Acknowledgements

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# Summary

LGBTQ+ young people in the UK are at the sharp end of the crisis in children's wellbeing. If you're gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer, intersex, or questioning your identity, survey data suggests you face significantly higher risks to your mental health than your non-LGBTQ+ peers. This is closely linked to the discrimination and exclusion many LGBTQ+ young people face: they are twice as likely to be bullied at school, often for simply being themselves.<sup>1</sup> In 2023, an estimated 825,000 young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK – approximately 12% of that age group – identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual or another non-heterosexuality.<sup>2</sup>

According to survey findings, the mental health impact on LGBTQ+ youth is stark: between 58% and 68% report having had suicidal thoughts, up to one in five say they have attempted suicide<sup>3</sup>, and 60–70% report symptoms of depression, anxiety or self-harm.<sup>4</sup> While based on survey data, these findings offer a powerful insight into the everyday realities of LGBTQ+ youth and point to a clear and urgent challenge for health, education and social policy. This pattern is also reflected in earlier national data. In 2017, NHS England found that 35% of young people aged 14 to 19, who identified as LGBTQ+, had a mental health condition, compared to 13% of their heterosexual peers.<sup>5</sup>

There are multiple, overlapping drivers of this crisis. LGBTQ+ young people often face stigma, discrimination and misunderstanding in school, at home, and across wider society. Many of them experience family rejection, social exclusion, and barriers to expressing and affirming their identity. These challenges are often sustained and cumulative, with profound effects on a young person's ability to feel safe, supported, and valued.

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- 1 Just Like Us (2021). [Growing up LGBT+: The impact of school, home and coronavirus on LGBT+ young people](#). Based on a UK survey of nearly 3,000 young people in schools and colleges across the UK, 43% of LGBT+ young people reported being bullied in the past year, over twice the rate of their non-LGBT+ peers (21%).
  - 2 Annual Population Survey (APS) 2023. [Sexual orientation, UK 2012 to 2023 edition](#). Table 3a: Sexual identity by age (thousands) and Table 3b: Sexual identity by Age (percentage).
  - 3 Hughes et al. (2018). [Mental Health Staff Perceptions and Practice Regarding Self-Harm, Suicidality and Help-Seeking in LGBTQ Youth: Findings from a Cross-Sectional Survey in the UK](#)
  - 4 The Trevor Project (2024). [2024 United Kingdom Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ young people](#)
  - 5 NHS Digital, [Mental Health of Children, 2017: Summary of key findings](#), November 2018.



But the impact is not limited to individuals. When these challenges are left unaddressed, they have far-reaching consequences undermining young people's education, employment prospects and long-term participation in the economy and society. Mental health difficulties in adolescence are also associated with substantial costs to public services. They have been estimated at around £2,329 (in 2025 prices) per young person per year, with over half of this cost falling on the education sector.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, many LGBTQ+ young people find themselves excluded from mainstream mental health services that are not designed with their needs in mind. Long waiting lists, a lack of care tailored to, and focused, on their specific needs, and limited training on LGBTQ+ issues mean that support is often delayed, inappropriate, or inaccessible.<sup>7</sup> These gaps not only limit the impact of existing services but also risk reinforcing the very inequalities they aim to address.

There is still limited understanding of what works, and what does not, when supporting LGBTQ+ young people's mental health. While the problem is increasingly acknowledged, the evidence base around effective interventions remains limited.

Our report builds the evidence on the impact of effective support for young people. We evaluate the economic impact of Free2B's one-to-one mentoring model for LGBTQ+ young people, who often face difficulties accessing appropriate support through mainstream mental health services. The Free2Talk programme, developed by Free2B, is a targeted mentoring initiative designed specifically to support LGBTQ+ young people. It provides a safe, identity-affirming space in which young people can engage with trusted adults to explore challenges related to their mental health, identity, and wellbeing. Since its launch in 2016, the programme has supported 289 young people, offering weekly or fortnightly sessions that focus on building resilience, confidence and support networks, while addressing issues such as bullying, family rejection, and barriers to inclusive education or employment.

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<sup>6</sup> Costs have been uprated to 2025 prices (originally £1,778 in 2016). Estimates are based on analysis of data from the British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey (BCAMHS), which followed a nationally representative sample of young people aged 12–15 over a three-year period. Knapp et al. (2016). [Youth Mental Health: New Economic Evidence](#)

<sup>7</sup> The Trevor Project (2024). [2024 United Kingdom Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ young people](#). The report also highlights that LGBTQ+ young people often report negative experiences with both mental health services and school-based support. These include being addressed with incorrect names or pronouns, having their identities assumed and being asked inappropriate or invasive questions.

Our analysis builds on a previous study conducted by The University of Manchester using data from the #BeeWell programme. Among the young people for whom suitable comparisons could be made, those who took part in the Free2Talk programme appeared to experience wellbeing improvements equivalent to a 0.96-point increase in life satisfaction on a 0–10 scale, around 1.3 times greater than the average gain associated with moving from depression to full mental health.

We find that these wellbeing improvements have a significant economic value to society. Based on HM Treasury's (HMT's) methodology for valuing wellbeing, if the gains are sustained for a year, each young person supported through the Free2Talk programme in 2023/24 would benefit from improvements in wellbeing worth, approximately, £15,600. Focusing just on those young people that engaged with the programme for more than nine months, we find that the Free2B programme delivered around £71,000 in wellbeing benefits in 2023/24, for a cost of £17,900 in the same period. This suggests that, even when considering the short-term wellbeing impacts for a sub-group of those supported by the programme, the Free2Talk programme is likely to offer excellent value for money, delivering an estimated £4 in benefits for every £1 spent. If all participants experienced similar benefits (even if they engaged for less than nine months) the total benefits could be as high as £407,000 per year.

These initial findings highlight the urgent need for tailored support for young people facing the greatest risks to their mental health and wellbeing. For LGBTQ+ young people, programmes such as Free2Talk provide more than just practical help; they offer affirmation, belonging and a safe space to be understood. The results also reinforce the vital role that trusted, community-based organisations such as Free2B play in delivering this support. These organisations are uniquely placed to reflect the lived experiences of the young people they serve. Ensuring equitable access to such services must be a priority for policymakers committed to addressing the widening gaps in youth wellbeing.

## Key takeaways



### x3

LGBTQ+ young people aged 14–19 face significantly higher mental health risks, nearly three times the rate of their non-LGBTQ+ peers.



### 0.96 points (0–10 scale)

The Free2Talk programme is estimated to improve wellbeing by 0.96 points on the life satisfaction scale (0–10). Around 30% more than the average gain seen when someone recovers from depression.



### £15,600

The annual wellbeing benefits are valued at £15,600 per participant.



### £4 for every £1 spent

If the effects of the programme are sustained over a year, then it would deliver £4 of wellbeing benefits for every £1 spent.

**Citation:** If you are using this report in your own writing, our preferred citation is:  
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# Introduction

Young people in the UK are facing a decline in mental wellbeing. National survey data shows that life satisfaction among 15-year-olds has decreased over the last decade, with the UK now ranking among the countries with the lowest adolescent wellbeing globally. While mental wellbeing and mental health are conceptually distinct, they are closely linked. When mental health is compromised, young people's overall wellbeing is also likely to suffer. Recent statistics show that around one in five children and young people aged 8–16 in England had a probable mental health condition in 2023<sup>8</sup>. Given that adolescence is a key window for early intervention – with most lifetime mental health conditions emerging before age 24, and the peak age of onset at just 14.5 – addressing both mental health and wellbeing at that stage should be a central priority.<sup>9</sup>

While these challenges are widespread among young people, they are even more pronounced among LGBTQ+ young people. Research shows that those who identify as LGBTQ+ consistently report lower levels of wellbeing than their non-LGBTQ+ peers.<sup>10</sup> They are less likely to feel satisfied with life, emotionally well or positive about themselves. They are also more likely to experience depression and other mental health difficulties.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the disparities in wellbeing between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ young people are often larger than the gaps associated with poverty or ethnicity. These differences appear across all aspects of wellbeing, from how happy and connected young people feel, to how much distress they experience.<sup>12</sup>

These differences in wellbeing are largely caused by the persistent stressors and identity-related challenges that many LGBTQ+ young people face in their daily lives. This includes experiences such as bullying, discrimination, hiding who they are, or expecting to be rejected. On top of this, some face rejection from their families or feel isolated<sup>13</sup>, especially in schools or services that don't recognise or support their identities. Even simple things such as using the right toilet at school or being called by the correct name can become stressful and upsetting.

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8 NHS Digital (2023): [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England. 2023 –Wave 4 Follow up to the 2017 Survey](#)

9 Solmi et al. (2021): [Age at onset of mental disorders worldwide: large-scale meta-analysis of 192 epidemiological studies](#)

10 Weeks et al. (2021): [Minority stress as a multidimensional predictor of LGB + adolescents' Mental Health outcomes](#)

11 Amos et al. (2020): [Mental health, social adversity, and health-related outcomes in sexual minority adolescents: a contemporary national cohort study](#)

12 This is supported by evidence from Black et al. (2023), which focuses specifically on trans and gender-diverse (TGD) young people, a subgroup of the LGBTQI+ community. Black et al. (2023): [The influence of minority stress-related experiences on mental wellbeing for trans/gender-diverse and cisgender youth: a comparative longitudinal analysis](#)

13 Ryan et al. (2009): [Family Rejection as a Predictor of Negative Health Outcomes in White and Latino Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young Adults](#)

These challenges do not just affect how young people feel in the moment; they can have a lasting impact on their lives. Poor mental health and reduced life satisfaction in adolescence are strongly associated with long-term negative outcomes, including poorer physical health, reduced educational attainment, and reduced labour market participation in adulthood.<sup>14</sup> This places LGBTQ+ young people's futures at risk, highlighting a clear need for effective, identity-sensitive support.

One of the most consistent findings across child development and social work research is the protective role of a trusted adult.<sup>15</sup> Evidence shows that children who experience adversity but have access to a stable, supportive relationship with at least one trusted adult are significantly more likely to experience positive outcomes, including lower rates of depression, greater school engagement, and improved overall wellbeing.<sup>16</sup> Trusted adults help young people feel seen, safe, and supported, offering consistent emotional availability, non-judgemental guidance, and a sense of stability.

Mentoring programmes can formalise and structure this support. Reviews of effective youth mentoring programmes highlight the importance of personalised, long-term relationships built on mutual respect and trust, especially for the marginalised youth.<sup>17</sup> These programmes are most impactful when they are flexible, relationship-based, and culturally responsive, attributes that are especially important for LGBTQ+ young people who often lack affirming support within traditional mental health or educational systems.

Interventions that offer LGBTQ+ children a relationship with a trusted adult, someone who understands and affirms their identity, have the potential to fill a significant gap in current provision. These approaches have also been shown to deliver significant economic benefits to society through the improved wellbeing of the young people involved.<sup>18</sup>

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14 Young individuals aged 16–25 with mental health problems were significantly more likely to be not in employment, education, or training (NEET) compared to their peers without such issues (27% vs. 16%). Knapp et al. (2016): [Youth Mental Health: New Economic Evidence](#)

15 Lester et al. (2020): [Service needs of young people affected by adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\): A systematic review of UK qualitative evidence](#)

16 Frederick et al. (2023): [Supportive Relationships with Trusted Adults for Children and Young People Who Have Experienced Adversities: Implications for Social Work Service Provision](#). Accessed April 16, 2025.

17 Armitage et al. (2020): [What Makes for Effective Youth Mentoring Programme. A rapid evidence summary](#). Accessed April 16, 2025.

18 Franklin (2024): [Investing in trusted relationships: The economic value of Football Beyond Borders' impact on children's wellbeing](#). Accessed April 16, 2025.

## The Free2Talk programme

Free2Talk is a targeted mentoring programme run by Free2B and designed to provide 1:1 support for LGBTQ+ young people who often struggle to access mainstream support. The service offers a confidential, safe space where young people are immediately accepted for who they are.

Sessions focus on building resilience, self-confidence, and strong support networks to reduce isolation and emotional distress. Mentoring is flexible and typically delivered in one-hour sessions, held weekly or fortnightly, and tailored to each young person's needs through a personalised action plan. Mentors use a range of approaches, including solution-focused therapy, cognitive behavioural techniques, creative explorations, and practical support to help young people identify and overcome the challenges they face.

A key feature of the Free2Talk programme is that it is open-ended, with no fixed time limit on support. This makes the programme particularly distinctive, as it allows trusted relationships to develop at the young person's pace and ensures continued support through often complex and evolving challenges. Unlike time-limited interventions, Free2Talk does not expect young people "to move on" after a set number of sessions. Instead, participants can remain engaged for as long as they need, which is especially important for those facing ongoing issues such as navigating gender identity, coping with bullying or family rejection, or accessing inclusive education, training, or employment. The programme also extends its reach through group activities, parental support, and school-based training.

While clinical outcomes such as diagnosis, treatment uptake, or service usage are a key part of mental health provision, they do not always capture the broader, day-to-day experiences that shape young people's lives. Measures like the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) are increasingly used to understand changes in positive functioning and emotional wellbeing, particularly in early intervention and preventative support.<sup>19</sup> SWEMWBS is a validated questionnaire that asks young people to reflect on their thoughts and feelings over the past two weeks, providing a picture of their overall mental wellbeing. These kinds of measures help capture improvements that may not appear in clinical records but are meaningful to the young people themselves.

A comparison of mental wellbeing scores between Free2B participants and a matched group from the #BeeWell programme in Greater Manchester offers insight into the experiences of those supported through the programme. Mental wellbeing was measured using SWEMWBS, which focuses on positive thoughts and functioning. Scores range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating better mental wellbeing. Figure 1 shows that while both groups started from similar baseline scores, Free2B participants experienced a significantly greater improvement in wellbeing over time.

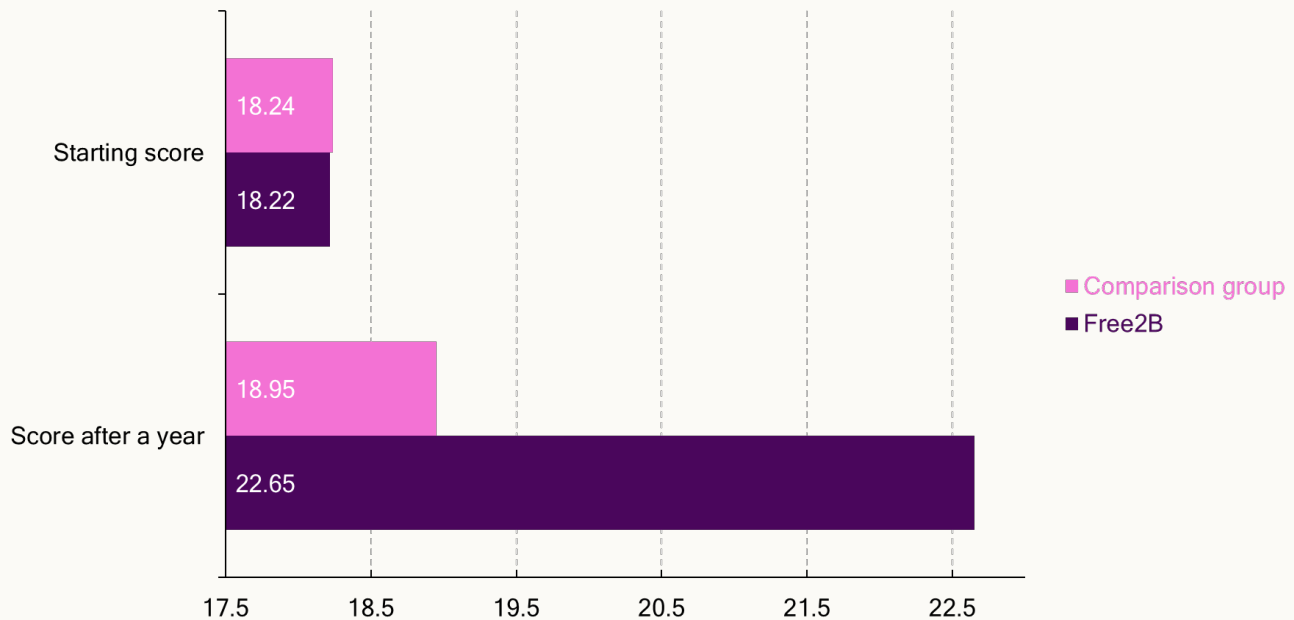
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<sup>19</sup> The [Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale \(SWEMWBS\)](#), overview and measurement.



**Figure 1. Free2B participants show greater improvements in mental wellbeing than a comparable group of young people**

Average SWEMWBS wellbeing score for Free2B participants and comparison group



**Note:** The axis on this chart has been truncated to better illustrate the difference in outcomes between groups. Post-intervention (i.e. after one year), Free2B participants reported an average SWEMWBS score of 22.65, close to the 23.10 average recorded for non-LGBTQ+ young people in Greater Manchester ([#BeeWell 2023/24](#)).<sup>20</sup> This suggests that the Free2Talk programme may help close the wellbeing gap typically observed between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ youth.

**Source:** Supporting tables from Cheng & Humphrey (2025)

<sup>20</sup> [#BeeWell \(2024\): #BeeWell Greater Manchester Headline Findings: Autumn 2023 Survey Results](#)

## Gaps in mainstream data

Despite the growing demand for LGBTQ+ youth services, building a robust evidence base for these programmes remains difficult. LGBTQ+ young people are often underrepresented in national surveys and sample sizes in mainstream surveys are too small to draw meaningful and reliable analysis. As a result, it has been historically challenging to demonstrate the scale of unmet need and the full value of identity-affirming interventions.

These data gaps also make it particularly difficult for charities to evidence the effectiveness of their work. Most large-scale datasets do not consistently record sexuality or gender identity in a way that reflects the full diversity of young people's experiences.<sup>21</sup> Gender is still frequently reported using binary categories (such as either male or female), limiting the ability to develop appropriate comparison groups. As a result, interventions such as Free2Talk, which are designed to support those who are often excluded from conventional services, struggle to demonstrate their full impact using standard national indicators.

This report seeks to address part of that gap by evaluating the Free2Talk mentoring programme. Drawing on data from the programme and using comparative wellbeing insights from the #BeeWell programme,<sup>22</sup> our analysis estimates the wellbeing benefits of the programme and presents an economic valuation of those impacts. We aim to contribute new evidence on the role of trusted adult support for LGBTQ+ young people, and the case for investing in services that meet their unique needs.

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21 Black et al. (2023): [The influence of minority stress-related experiences on mental wellbeing for trans/gender-diverse and cisgender youth: a comparative longitudinal analysis](#)

22 Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Evaluation of a Targeted, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Intervention for At Risk Youth: Football Beyond Borders](#). Accessed March 25, 2025.



## Case study 1: Frankie's<sup>23</sup> journey to explore identity

Frankie was initially referred by their school in May 2021. The school had expressed some concern that they might be emulating the experiences of a peer. Free2B's early sessions, therefore, focused on creating a safe and non-judgemental space for Frankie to explore their own identity, free from external influences.

Frankie began with a short block of four sessions with Free2B, during which they reflected on their gender identity. While Frankie and their mentor discussed the idea of joining Free2B's youth club, at the time, they felt more comfortable attending the school-based forum, which was a more familiar and supportive environment.

Over time, Frankie began accessing Free2B's one-to-one informal drop-ins. They didn't feel the need to set structured mentoring goals but valued having a consistent space where they could talk openly and feel heard.

In 2022, Frankie took a huge personal step by choosing to join Free2B's youth club. This was a particularly significant moment in their journey, as they attended independently, without the close friend from school who had previously been a source of comfort. This decision marked a shift in their confidence and autonomy and highlighted the positive impact of having access to safe, identity-affirming spaces.

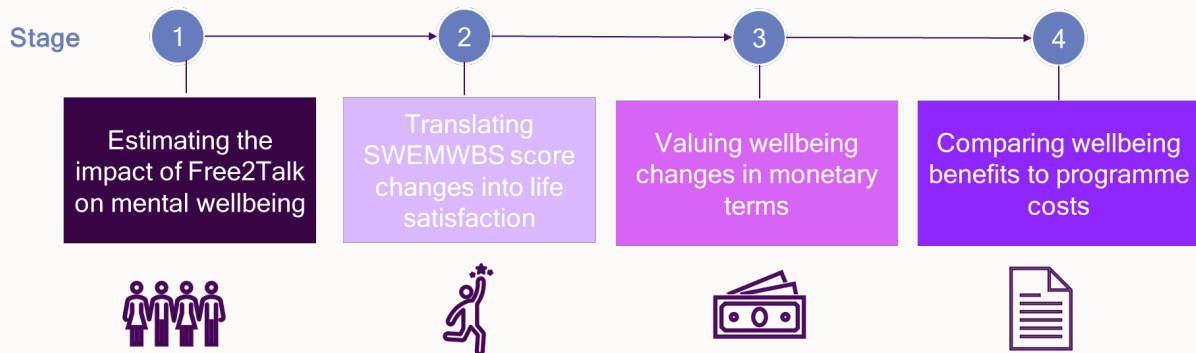
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<sup>23</sup> All names used in the case studies are fictional and have been changed to protect the privacy of young people.

# Approach

Our report assesses the economic benefits delivered by the Free2Talk programme and compares these against the costs of the programme to assess its value for money. We draw on an evaluation by The University of Manchester and apply HM Treasury guidance on the valuation of wellbeing to estimate the economic value of the outcomes delivered by the Free2Talk mentoring programme. Figure 2 provides an overview of our approach, which is described in more detail later in this section.

**Figure 2. Key steps to estimating the economic value of wellbeing changes delivered by the Free2Talk programme**



## 1. Estimating the impact of Free2Talk on mental wellbeing

We assessed the wellbeing impact of the Free2Talk programme by comparing changes in participants' SWEMWBS scores to those of a statistically matched comparison group drawn from the #BeeWell programme dataset. The University of Manchester team provided us with a comparison group, which was selected to mirror the demographic and baseline wellbeing characteristics of Free2Talk beneficiaries as closely as possible.

Relative to the matched group, young people who took part in Free2Talk experienced an average improvement in their SWEMWBS scores of 3.8 points by the end of the programme.



## The University of Manchester evaluation of Free2Talk programme

The University of Manchester team supported an independent evaluation of the wellbeing of young people who took part in Free2B's "Free2Talk" programme, using data from the #BeeWell programme collected between 2021 and 2023.<sup>24</sup> To do this, they compared changes in wellbeing among Free2B participants with those of a group of young people from the #BeeWell cohort who had not taken part in the programme but shared similar characteristics.

To ensure the comparison was fair, each Free2B participant was matched with a young person from the #BeeWell programme dataset based on a range of relevant factors. These included their baseline wellbeing, special educational needs (SEN) status, gender, sexuality, whether they felt socially isolated, whether they had pre-existing mental health needs, and whether they showed signs of struggling to cope with everyday challenges.

The research team used several different matching techniques to test the reliability of its results. Across all methods, the findings were consistent: Free2B participants showed a significantly greater improvement in their wellbeing scores compared to the matched comparison group.

To check the robustness of these findings, the researchers also carried out additional tests to rule out the possibility that the results were due to chance or other unobserved factors. These checks provided further confidence in the conclusion that the wellbeing of Free2B participants improved more than that of their peers in the #BeeWell programme.

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<sup>24</sup> Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Independent evaluation of Free2B: A targeted intervention to promote the mental wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth.](#)

## 2. Translating SWEMWBS score changes into life satisfaction

To estimate the monetary value of this improvement, we translated the change in SWEMWBS into an equivalent gain in the Office for National Statistics (ONS) life satisfaction scale, using modelling results from The University of Manchester. The University of Manchester research team developed statistical models using data from the #BeeWell programme, which includes both SWEMWBS and life satisfaction scores for a large sample of young people to estimate how changes in one measure relate to changes in the other.<sup>25</sup> This conversion enables wellbeing improvements to be valued within an economic framework using the HMT guidance.

Based on The University of Manchester research, the estimated 3.8-point SWEMWBS increase observed among Free2Talk participants corresponds to a 0.96-point rise in life satisfaction.

## 3. Monetising wellbeing changes

The HMT's Green Book guidance<sup>26</sup> assigns a central estimate of £13,000 (in 2019 prices) to a one-point increase in life satisfaction sustained over one year. After adjusting for inflation to 2025 prices, this figure is equivalent to £16,000.

Multiplying this adjusted value by the average life satisfaction gain of 0.96 points gives an estimated per-participant wellbeing benefit of £15,600, assuming the effect is sustained for one year.

To calculate total wellbeing benefits, we first multiply this per-participant wellbeing value by the total number of young people engaged with the programme in 2023/24. We then adjust this figure to reflect the proportion of participants who remain engaged with the programme for at least nine months, which is estimated at 17%.

Applying this approach to the 2023/24 cohort, we calculate total wellbeing benefits as follows:  $£15,600 \times 26 \times 0.17 = £71,000$  (rounded).

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<sup>25</sup> Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Evaluation of a Targeted, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Intervention for At Risk Youth: Football Beyond Borders](#). Accessed March 25, 2025. Annex A. Methodology analysis here: working example, page 14.

<sup>26</sup> HM Treasury. [Green Book supplementary guidance: wellbeing](#). July 2021.



## 4. Comparing wellbeing benefits to programme costs

To assess the value for money of the Free2Talk programme, the estimated wellbeing benefits are compared to the delivery costs per participant. In 2023/24, the total expenditure for delivering the programme was £17,900, of which £15,600 were direct delivery costs (including mentoring time, travel, and session materials), and £2,300 covered indirect costs such as safeguarding, training, supervision, and administration.

Divided across 26 participants, this results in an average cost of £687 per young person supported through Free2Talk in 2023/24.

The ratio of benefits to costs is then calculated using a Benefit–Cost Ratio (BCR). A BCR greater than 1 indicates that the benefits outweigh the costs. We also include sensitivity tests to account for uncertainty in the estimated impact, the choice of matching methods, the assumed duration of effects, and the monetary value assigned to wellbeing improvements.

## Key assumptions

Several important assumptions underpin our analysis. These relate to the scale and duration of wellbeing impacts, the methods used to compare outcomes, and the approach taken to value improvements in life satisfaction.

- This evaluation focuses solely on direct improvements in wellbeing, as measured by the SWEMWBS. However, the programme is likely to generate additional economic benefits that are not captured here, for instance, by improving educational outcomes and, in turn, boosting future earnings. Similarly, we do not quantify the broader advantages linked to enhanced wellbeing, such as better mental health or improved school engagement.
- This analysis compares baseline and endline SWEMWBS scores from Free2Talk participants with those of a similar group of young people from the #BeeWell programme dataset, matched on key observable characteristics. A direct comparison of changes over time is limited by differences in the observation periods: while #BeeWell programme participants are typically followed for a full year, most Free2Talk participants are observed over a shorter period (around nine months). To account for this and reduce uncertainty in the estimated effect, we estimate wellbeing benefits only for the proportion of participants who were engaged with the programme for more than nine months.
- We assume that most of the improvement in wellbeing happens while young people are taking part in the programme and continues for some time afterwards. This is a cautious approach that helps keep the estimates realistic and avoids overstating the benefits. We explore different versions of this assumption in our Sensitivity Test 3 (see details in Annex B).
- We apply HMT's central monetary value for changes in wellbeing but also explore the impact of using the upper and lower bound estimates in Sensitivity Tests 4a and 4b to reflect uncertainty in the monetary valuation.

# Results

The evaluation of Free2Talk suggests that the programme could be improving the wellbeing of young LGBTQ+ people by around 0.96 Life Satisfaction points. This can be considered a large effect, around 1.3 times greater than the average gain associated with moving from depression to full mental health.

As with many evaluations, there is some uncertainty around how long these effects last once the programme ends. However, analysis from the #BeeWell programme finds evidence of wellbeing improvement at least nine months after the Free2Talk programme began, providing a reasonable basis for assuming that benefits could be sustained for at least 12 months among those who engage with the programme over a longer period.<sup>27</sup>

Our analysis indicates that the Free2Talk programme likely offers excellent value for money based on wellbeing benefits alone. By applying HM Treasury's methodology for valuing changes in wellbeing, we have estimated how these benefits compare to the costs of delivering the programme. Our analysis suggests that, for those that engaged in the programme for at least nine months, the programme delivered around £71,000 of wellbeing benefits in 2023/24. The benefits already exceed the average £687 cost per young person supported. This means that the programme delivers £4 of wellbeing benefits for every £1 spent.

It is important to note that these estimates only reflect the direct wellbeing benefits of the programme. They do not account for potential longer-term economic gains that may result from its wider effects. In particular, the presence of a trusted adult, which Free2Talk provides through its mentoring programme, is consistently linked to better outcomes in mental health, educational attainment, and overall life satisfaction. While we are currently unable to quantify the impacts through reduced demand on mental health services or increased future earnings as a result of higher attainment, they likely represent a substantial and additional layer of economic value generated by the programme.

However, the results suggest that Free2Talk delivers strong value for money and makes a meaningful contribution to the wellbeing of young LGBTQ+ people, even without accounting for longer-term or other associated benefits.

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<sup>27</sup> Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Independent evaluation of Free2B: A targeted intervention to promote the mental wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth](#).



## Case study 2: Charlie's<sup>28</sup> journey to self-discovery

Charlie was referred to the programme by their school in January 2023. They were looking for a space where they could explore their emerging identity and feel supported as they considered socially transitioning. More than anything, Charlie wanted a safe and non-judgemental environment where they could reflect, be heard, and build the confidence to come out to their family when the time felt right.

Alongside their one-to-one mentoring sessions, Charlie joined one of Free2B's youth groups. Being part of a community of peers who understood and respected their journey helped Charlie feel less alone and more hopeful.

In their individual sessions, Free2B's mentor focused on the things that helped Charlie feel good in their identity. They experimented with different names, explored androgynous clothing, and reflected on what forms of expression felt most comfortable and affirming. The mentor also supported Charlie in managing less-positive experiences, such as receiving female-focused Christmas gifts that didn't align with their identity, by helping them build strategies for self-advocacy and emotional resilience.

Charlie's journey is still unfolding, but they've already made meaningful progress – growing in self-understanding, confidence, and the freedom to live more authentically.

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<sup>28</sup> All names used in the case studies are fictional and have been changed to protect the privacy of young people.

## Sensitivity analysis

Our analysis suggests that the Free2Talk programme is likely to offer good value for money, even when tested against a wide range of alternative assumptions. We conducted a series of sensitivity tests (detailed in Annex B) examining how results vary under different scenarios. These include changes in the estimated effect size, the assumed duration of the impact, the monetary value assigned to wellbeing improvements, and the matching method used to compare participants with the #BeeWell programme. Across most scenarios, the estimated benefits per £1 spent range from £2.1 to £5.8, indicating that the short-term wellbeing gains are very likely to outweigh the programme's costs.

While these results are encouraging, further analysis using a larger sample and collecting follow-up data over longer intervals, beyond the nine-month period observed for most participants, would improve confidence in how long wellbeing improvements are sustained. It would also support more meaningful comparisons with nationally representative datasets, which typically use longer follow-up periods. However, across all modelled scenarios, including the most cautious, the programme consistently demonstrates a positive benefit–cost ratio, reinforcing the conclusion that Free2Talk offers good value for money.



# Conclusion

Our report demonstrates that we don't have to accept the health and wellbeing inequalities experienced by LGBTQ+ young people as inevitable. We provide early evidence that targeted programmes, such as Free2Talk, can make a difference and are likely to deliver significant value for money. Free2Talk creates a safe, identity-affirming space in which young people are immediately accepted for who they are. Within this setting, the consistent presence of a trusted adult helps lay the foundations for positive and lasting change.

Our analysis reflects only short-term wellbeing gains, but previous research shows that early intervention can significantly influence long-term economic outcomes. The benefits of early, targeted support for LGBTQ+ young people are not limited to improvements in individual wellbeing. By improving mental health and emotional resilience during adolescence, programmes such as Free2Talk can help reduce the risk of school dropout, long-term unemployment, and involvement with the criminal justice system. These protective effects translate into broader societal benefits, including improved employability, higher productivity, and lower public service costs.

With mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ young people significantly worse than for their peers, there is a pressing need for services like Free2Talk, which are tailored to the realities of their lives and can meet LGBTQ+ young people where they are.

Alongside this, we need a stronger evidence base to identify effective ways to support LGBTQ+ children and young people. This challenge is all the greater because of the absence of robust, inclusive data. Most national surveys do not consistently collect data on sexuality and gender identity. When such data is included, sample sizes are often too small to support meaningful or detailed analysis. Even where estimates exist, for example, on the size of the LGBTQ+ youth population, they are frequently subject to high levels of statistical uncertainty, making them less reliable and requiring cautious interpretation. This lack of robust data limits not only our understanding of outcomes, but also the underlying drivers of poor mental health and wellbeing for LGBTQ+ youth. The result is a continuing invisibility of this group in national mental health strategies and service provision.

A national effort is required to improve data collection on sexuality and gender identity in all major surveys involving children and young people. More longitudinal and large-scale research is needed to identify effective approaches to improving mental health outcomes in this population over the life course, particularly the role of trusted adult relationships, identity-affirming spaces, and early intervention. We know that LGBTQ+ young people are struggling. We just do not count them properly. LGBTQ+ youth face higher mental health risks, but poor data and weak inclusion leave them out of the picture.

Only by closing this evidence gap can we ensure that support reaches those who need it the most, and that LGBTQ+ young people are no longer overlooked in the development of inclusive and effective mental health systems.



# Annex A: Methodology to translate changes in SWEMWBS to life satisfaction

Professor Neil Humphrey and Dr Qiqi Cheng from the University of Manchester team analysed data from the #BeeWell programme to estimate the relationship between two commonly used wellbeing measures: the Short Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS) and the ONS life satisfaction scale. The #BeeWell data is uniquely suited for this type of analysis, as it includes both measures collected at two points in time from a large sample of children and young people.

Drawing on methods commonly used in health economics mapping studies, the researchers developed a set of predictive models to link changes in SWEMWBS scores to changes in life satisfaction. A range of modelling techniques were tested, including fixed effects ordinary least squares (OLS), fixed effects Tobit models, generalised linear models, and robust OLS models.

These models were applied to two versions of a matched comparison dataset, using both aggregate and item-level SWEMWBS data. For each version, models were estimated with and without additional covariates. Performance was evaluated using standard metrics such as mean squared error (MSE), mean absolute error (MAE), absolute error, and  $R^2$  within a cross-validation framework.<sup>29</sup>

In a subsequent analysis evaluating the Free2B programme, researchers compared outcomes for programme participants against a matched comparison group drawn from the #BeeWell dataset. This analysis found that young people taking part in Free2B's "Free2Talk" programme experienced an average increase of 3.81 points in their SWEMWBS scores.<sup>30</sup>

Based on the estimated relationship between SWEMWBS and ONS life satisfaction, a 3.81-point increase in SWEMWBS corresponds to an estimated 0.96-point increase on the ONS life satisfaction scale. This estimate is derived using a central conversion factor of 0.251, which represents the typical life satisfaction gain associated with each one-point increase in SWEMWBS.

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29 Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Evaluation of a Targeted, School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Intervention for At Risk Youth: Football Beyond Borders](#). Working example page 14. Accessed March 25, 2025.

30 Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Independent evaluation of Free2B: A targeted intervention to promote the mental wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth](#).

## Annex B: Sensitivity analysis

We used sensitivity tests to explore the impact of key assumptions on the main conclusions of this report. The sensitivity tests explored are as follows:

- **Uncertainty around the estimated impact:** To reflect the inherent uncertainty in any statistical analysis, we consider a range of possible effects based on the 95% confidence interval from the original University of Manchester modelling. This interval provides an estimate of the range within which the true impact on mental wellbeing is likely to lie. Based on this, we estimate that the potential impact of the Free2Talk programme could fall anywhere between a 0.50 and a 1.41 increase in life satisfaction points. Results are presented in Sensitivity Tests 1a and 1b.
- **Matching approach:** To explore how the choice of matching technique influences the estimated impact, we applied alternative methods to identify comparable young people in the #BeeWell dataset. This affects the point estimate of the wellbeing impact per participant, which, in turn, influences the overall estimated wellbeing benefits of the Free2Talk programme. This Sensitivity Test helps illustrate the extent to which the results depend on the underlying comparison approach. Our Sensitivity Test 2 compares results under the Nearest Neighbour Matching (2a) and Optimal Matching (2b) techniques based on results from the original research from the University of Manchester.<sup>31</sup>
- **Persistence of wellbeing effects:** In the core scenario, we assume that the wellbeing improvements experienced by Free2Talk participants are sustained over the one-year period during which support is provided. In Sensitivity Test 3, we explore a longer-term pattern; wellbeing effects are assumed to gradually build up over the course of 12 months, remain stable for a further three months, and then slowly decline over the following year until they return to baseline.
- **Alternative valuation of wellbeing:** The economic value of improved wellbeing is based on HM Treasury guidance, which includes a central estimate as well as lower and upper bounds, from £12,584 to £20,134 (in 2025 prices). These alternative values are used to test the effect of different assumptions on the overall value for money. Sensitivity Tests 4a and 4b show the impact of using these alternative wellbeing valuations.

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31 Cheng Q & Humphrey N (2025): [Preliminary Independent evaluation of Free2B: A targeted intervention to promote the mental wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ youth](#).

Table 1. Summary of results from the sensitivity tests

	Benefit per young person	Total wellbeing benefits	Benefits per £1 spent
Core scenario	£15,644	£71k	£4.0
<u>Sensitivity Test 1a:</u> Apply lower confidence interval from University of Manchester study	£8,253	£37k	£2.1
<u>Sensitivity Test 1b:</u> Apply upper confidence interval from University of Manchester study	£23,035	£104k	£5.8
<u>Sensitivity Test 2a:</u> Based on The University of Manchester results using Nearest Neighbour Matching (10 neighbours)	£22,120	£100k	£5.6
<u>Sensitivity Test 2b:</u> Based on The University of Manchester results using Optimal matching	£17,151	£78k	£4.3
<u>Sensitivity Test 3:</u> Assume wellbeing effects grow over a year, stay steady for three months, then gradually fade over the next year	£15,644	£88k	£5.0
<u>Sensitivity Test 4a:</u> Low HMT value for wellbeing	£12,034	£54k	£3.1
<u>Sensitivity Test 4b:</u> High HMT value for wellbeing	£19,255	£87k	£4.9



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