

The Avenues Youth Project commissioned Rocket Science to evaluate the Seniors programme over a two-year period. Rocket Science spoke with youth workers and young people at the start of the evaluation to co-design the methodology. This resulted in:

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- 8** on-site visits to observe Seniors sessions and interact with members.
- 7** case study participants spoken to several times over seven months.
- 6** one-to-one interviews with staff members and one staff member workshop.

"It's free, you can chill and it's time for you to relax... It's like home and not like school."

The Seniors programme at The Avenues are open-access nights on Fridays and Saturdays for young people aged 13-18 which provides an opportunity to relax, meet up with friends or meet new people, get involved in activities, and try new things.

New members feel welcome by other young people and staff...

Members said they feel more confident, more resilient, and better at communicating with others...

"We let them feel comfortable, we give them food, we have cooking, we have a live DJ to create an atmosphere and a vibe to make them feel welcome." - Staff member

"I would normally shy away from talking to people. The Avenues taught me that's not always the case, give it a chance and be open to talking to other people."

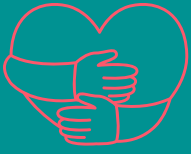
Members also said they feel more open talking about their mental health...

"I feel I can offload to people. Just about college and dealing with college problems. I would go to staff and ask what I should or shouldn't do."



The foundation of this development are young people's:

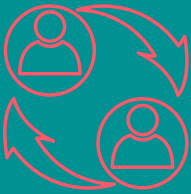
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Feelings of comfort



Mutual trust between themselves and staff, and the support staff provide



Being encouraged by peers to try new things and speak to new people

"I feel because of how welcoming the vibe is, it encourages people to let loose. Everyone has a side they can't show in school, but in The Avenues you can."

"I genuinely feel like I can talk and be heard. I was going through stuff, and they really did help with it. If I ever did need anything I can just go to them. They are genuinely there for you, the staff and the children. I love the connection there, it's like a second home."

Young people are given ownership of their time at the club, and it's a place where young people want to be...

"The Avenues is like a garden, they see your talent and water it, and then you watch it flower."

The Avenues helps remove risky influences from young people's lives and instead provides support and guidance for future pathways. It is a family where members are supported and empowered to grow.

"The Avenues will always be the beginning for me, it pushed me to do what I'm doing right now."

Isabel first heard about The Avenues in 2019. She went by herself and has since made new friends and built close bonds with staff members who have helped her discuss her wellbeing.

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When Isabel first joined she did not feel comfortable opening up about her emotions, but she said The Avenues has changed that due to its comforting and welcoming environment.

“From the beginning, everything is comforting and makes you feel welcome. Even the people that work there feel welcoming. Build trust and bonds with them. It becomes like a friendship.”

Another reason Isabel feels able to open up is the shared connection she has with her peers and staff. Nearly all have grown up under similar circumstances, faced similar challenges, and can connect with each other over these.

“I think in The Avenues you feel a sense of community. It’s easier to talk to people, especially if you have mutual ground. I might know I can go to this guy and continue the conversation there. “

Part of this connection and the sense of community relates to The Avenues longstanding place as part of the Westminster community, and the fact that many staff members also attended the club. This creates a family-like vibe.

“It’s the people in the building. I’ve seen the building change, it’s like watching house decorations change, so when you get pictures of old Avs, there’s pictures of things that’s happened – you feel nostalgic.”

Throughout her time Isabel has felt able to talk about sensitive topics with several different people, something she would not normally do.

“I socialise a lot, but when it comes to mental health I don’t talk to anyone much. There are a few people at The Avenues I opened to – 4 people! – that says a lot because I don’t normally do open up like that.”

On her first day at The Avenues, Maya felt awkward and shy, but another member she knew or helped show her round and introduced her to people

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"On my first day it was quite awkward, no one knew each other at the time and it was hard to talk to others. I went to a girl I know and she showed me around"

She said she has since seen other young people in similar situations but her, along with others, have encouraged them to engage in conversation and activities and feel more comfortable.

"They come to a new place and see new people and might feel bit fishy for first couple days. I've worked with young people, when they first come they're a bit closed off at first. Then young people start talking and we make them feel comfortable."

On one of her first visits Maya took part in a nail course Seniors was providing and said although she initially felt nervous, the way other members interacted with her made her feel more comfortable and confident.

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These experiences have all left Maya far more self-confident than she was before starting at Seniors. She feels more comfortable interacting with others inside and outside of The Avenues and is not afraid to try new things.

"I now feel more comfortable to just talk. Now if there's no conversation I'll find something to talk about. I feel more confident with being myself as I see I make people feel comfortable."

Mark said from the beginning of his time at Seniors staff expressed an interest in his future, and he would occasionally talk with them about his next steps.

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"I had a few conversations about future options, whatever you want to do they're happy to help you with it. One staff member was concerned about where I wanted to go to school, she wanted to help me find somewhere I would be comfortable."

He was also given opportunities to try different career-related skills. At an Open Mic night he tried sound and light engineering and enjoyed it. Staff also approached him to apply for the Junior Support Worker qualification – a qualification The Avenues provides to young people to start their training for being a youth worker. Mark accepted the offer and said the responsibility he was given and skills he learnt were critical for his development.

"You're given more responsibility as you get more experience. I've been given lots of interesting situations when working with the children. Then you get more and more experience as you go on."

Through these experiences and conversations with staff members Mark had the opportunity to think about his future and what his aspirations are. He has seen other members go through similar processes.

"It helps open your eyes to see your goals and ambitions. One person was very good at art, but had always been in the fun zone. When a staff member asked what they want to do they said art and dancing. Now they've gone on to a dancing course and they're doing more art."

After talking with a member of staff Mark expressed an interest in working in the security sector. After these conversations The Avenues staff helped him apply for a security accreditation and then find and apply for jobs he thought he would like. He is now working in one of these roles and enjoying it.

"I had help from The Avenues, help from staff with courses and right companies to join. I'm definitely enjoy doing security – it opens my eyes to new things. There's challenges too – I'm experiencing new people from all walks of life."

Aaron said one of the main reasons he feels safe at Seniors is the presence of the staff and the security measures they put in place.

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"They treat you like their own child. If something was to happen they would protect you like their own. If someone was to come to the door, banging on the door, they will go there and sort it."

He said the staff are proactive when it comes to checking on members, and said this is true of both the older staff with stronger connections to members but also the newer staff.

"I feel comfortable around them. Even those who are new – they genuinely care. They are not obligated to ask are you okay, they just do it. They genuinely care."

Similarly he said other members feel safe around staff and trust them, regardless of whether they are new or old members.

"Everyone my age has good relationship with staff and support workers. It's like family."

Through his ability to express himself Aaron has built long-lasting relationships with other members and staff. Through these relationships he has had support with his personal and school life.

"To be honest, it's just the safe place. You build a relationship, it's not built in the one day. The first day can be scary, it's a new surrounding, there's not many places like The Avenues. You need to adjust to it, that builds trust."

Kofi first started going to The Avenues with a family member but said he quickly met others through the activities, and once that happened found it easy to meet other new people.

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“When you become friends with one person you get introduced to another”.

He was given the chance to meet and make friends with people outside of his usual friendship group and said the socialising opportunities at Seniors were different to those at school

“I feel they are different, all different age groups with different stories, from different places. In school they are all from same area.”

These interactions have given Kofi the opportunity to build up his social skills.

“You learn how to make friends with people not your age. I’m 16, but I’ll make friends with someone who is 17 or 18.”

Kofi said spending time at The Avenues has helped him choose his friends more carefully by learning about what to look for in people and understanding what a healthy friendship looks like.

“The Avenues has changed me a lot. Back in school I used to have a lot of friends but going to The Avenues showed me how to see the difference between friends and people are who won’t bring anything to your life. It taught me how to respect myself first of all, what my potentials are, my strengths, weakness, and making myself believe in myself more. That changed how I approach friendships.”