# Challenges to adolescent mental health and wellbeing in Newham

## Recurring themes based on the perspectives of young people participating in Kailo

October 2024

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# Introduction

Kailo is a programme of research and design that aims to work with local communities to understand and address the wider issues (sometimes referred to as 'the social determinants') that may impact young people's mental health and wellbeing.

During the 'early discovery' phase, researchers spoke to young people, professionals, parents and carers from across the borough and reviewed existing reports to identify the wider issues relevant to young people in Newham. Based on this research, two key opportunity areas were taken forward into the 'deeper discovery' phase:

- How might we support existing communities and activities that young people rely on for their wellbeing?
- How might we support the wellbeing of young people that are directly and indirectly impacted by the threat or presence of violence and crime?

In the 'deeper discovery and co-design' phase, we formed a group consisting of young people and voluntary and community sector (VCS) representatives for each opportunity area. While the main purpose of these groups was to generate co-design ideas to address challenges to young people's mental wellbeing in Newham, we also identified recurring challenges articulated in multiple conversations across both groups, expanding on our early discovery learning.

This report begins by outlining the 'deeper discovery and co-design' process in more detail, before moving on to presenting the key themes identified through this work. We conclude with reflections and links to the Kailo co-designs, and next steps. A summary of an evidence briefing conducted for this project is included in appendices.

It should be noted that since deeper discovery discussions were focussed around the two opportunity areas, these themes may not present a complete picture of all issues related to mental health and wellbeing in the borough.

Visit our website to find out more about the process or our wider programme of work.

# The Deeper Discovery and Co-design Process

At the start of the 'deeper discovery and co-design' phase, we partnered with five local organisations that support young people in Newham:

- Fight for Peace
- Exit Foundation
- Caramel Rock
- Ambition, Aspire, Achieve 'AAA'
- Newham Community Project

Through these partnerships, we formed two 'small circles', each consisting of a group of young people, VCS representatives and the Kailo team.

Opportunity Area: How might we support the wellbeing of young people that are directly and indirectly impacted by the threat or presence of violence and crime?

23 young people (5-11 per session) aged 16-26 and 2 VCS representatives from Caramel Rock and Exit Foundation

Facilitated by Fight for Peace and Kailo Researchers

Location: Fight for Peace Academy, North Woolwich

Opportunity Area: How might we support existing communities and activities that young people rely on for their wellbeing?

9 young people aged 14-17 and 1 VCS representative from Ambition Aspire Achieve

Facilitated by Kailo Researchers

Location: Ambition Aspire Achieve / Newham Community Project, Canning Town

Across multiple sessions, we worked together to explore the opportunity areas in depth and understand the perspectives and experiences of the young people in the group.

We explored the opportunity areas in more detail through participatory group model building to identify the factors influencing mental wellbeing in Newham. Following this, the young people prioritised areas of change that would have a high impact on the mental wellbeing of young people in Newham and would be possible to achieve by local organisations and communities working together. After identifying these areas, the young people then proceeded to generate ideas, which were refined into two final co-design proposals.

Throughout the process, the Kailo team was also working with a 'big circle' of professional stakeholders to provide insights into the small circles.

# What the Young People Told us About **Poverty and Finances**

## Young people feel the impacts when their families are struggling financially

Many families in Newham are struggling to meet their basic needs because of the increased cost of living. This is heightened by gentrification raising the cost of housing, leaving more families without access to affordable accommodation.

***"Newham is too expensive"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Young people with unmet needs may feel ashamed of their situation, envious of their peers, or demotivated. Some young people may also feel pressure to financially contribute to their family and, as a result, may attempt to earn 'easy money' through drug dealing or other criminal behaviour. Poverty can also reduce the activities that young people can participate in for their mental wellbeing. Parents and carers may be unable to support them with associated financial costs and some young people may be reluctant to ask for money if they know their family is already struggling.

Young people ideated that providing additional financial support or a universal basic income would help to alleviate some of the challenges associated with poverty that young people experience.

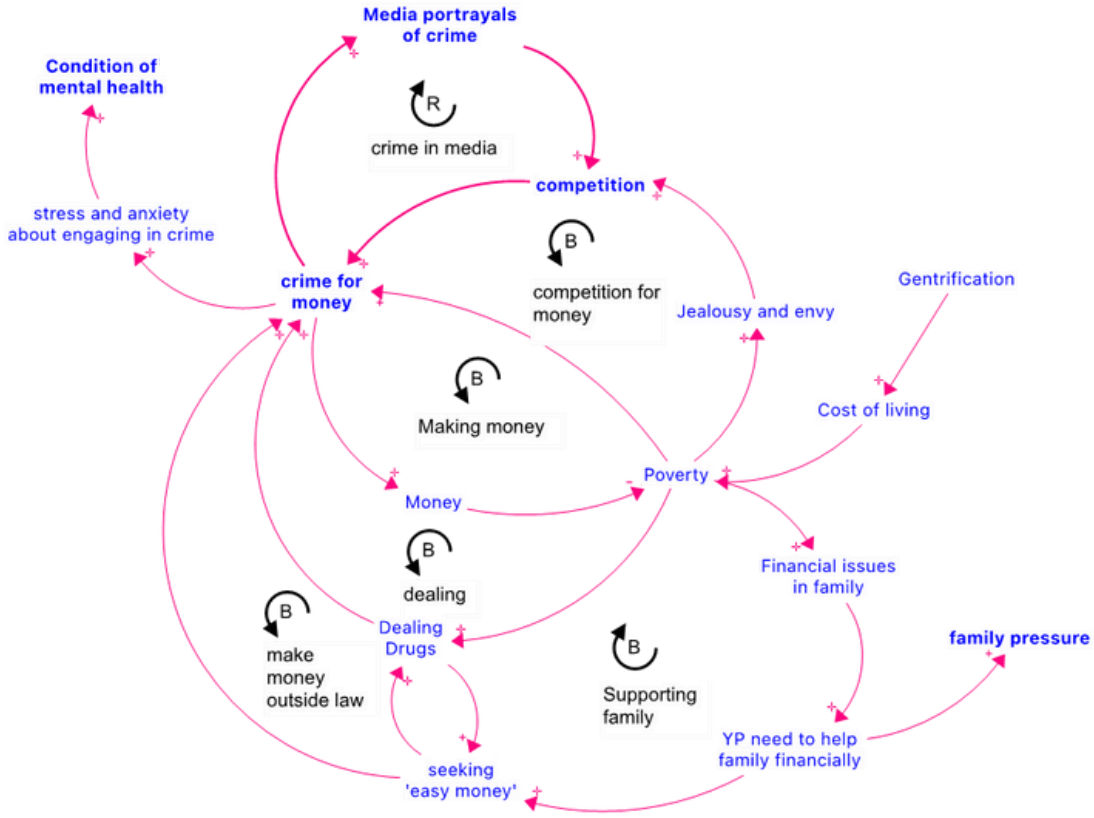



*Figure 1 is part of the system map that was developed by the young people in the violence and crime small circle. It focuses on the relationship between factors related to money, crime, and mental wellbeing.*

# What the Young People told us about **Learning and Development Opportunities**

**Learning and development opportunities are key to having choices but are out of reach for many**

Learning and development opportunities are valuable for young people, especially for those no longer in formal education. These include employment and educational opportunities (e.g., apprenticeships), personal development programmes (e.g., National Citizen Service), and opportunities to develop key life skills (e.g., financial literacy to support managing one's own finances, cooking and nutrition skills, mental health and emotional resilience, and employability skills).

Despite the importance of these learning and development opportunities, they are not available to all young people in Newham. For life skills in particular, if young people are not taught them at home, there are very few opportunities to develop these skills elsewhere. When young people have less access to these opportunities, it leads to less choice, which can affect self-perception and overall mental wellbeing. Alongside this, it can result in young people lacking the skills needed to make decisions and transition to life as adults. For example, lacking skills such as budgeting and cooking can lead to debt and living paycheck to paycheck. In some cases, young people may be unable to escape poverty and may view violence and crime as an option to survive.

***"...if you educate people to be more financially literate... it stops them from being financially manipulated"***

Young person (deeper discovery)

Access to these learning and development opportunities can be limited by a lack of provision, young people not knowing what is available, a lack of support networks connecting young people to opportunities, and time or financial constraints. In particular, young people would like to see more apprenticeships, opportunities with businesses, alongside more free services enabling young people to develop these life skills.

# What the Young People told us about **Support Networks**

## Support networks are critical to wellbeing but have complex dynamics

Young people rely on their family, peers, and other role models for support and guidance. These support networks are essential for ensuring that young people feel loved, included, and motivated. Without these support networks, young people may feel isolated and unable to support their mental wellbeing.

***"The more you talk about your problems, the more you're understood"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Although family relationships can be a key source of support for young people, these relationships may be strained as a result of financial struggles, strict parenting, pressure on young people to meet expectations, or adverse childhood experiences. Cultural and inter-generational differences may also make it difficult for young people to speak to their families about their mental health.

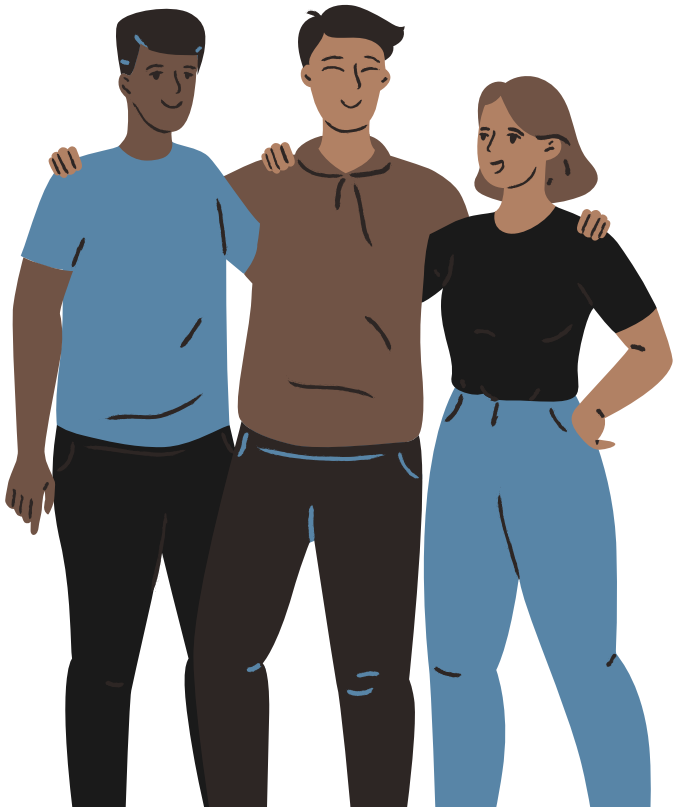
***"A lot of older generations, they don't really acknowledge mental health. I feel like they kind of turn away from it..."***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Peer relationships can provide young people with support outside of the family and also help them to develop their own identity. However, peer relationships can also be a source of conflict and result in young people experiencing peer pressure. **Social media** can help young people interact with a wide range of people and build online spaces where they feel supported and included, more connected and less isolated. However, young people may feel excluded and isolated if they cannot keep up with trends on social media, such as buying expensive products.

***"...the young person, they're in the wrong friendship groups and, you know, you can easily be influenced but it's also like a positive cause you have someone who's there for you, someone who understands you and supports you"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Other supportive adults and mentors can provide positive role models where they otherwise may not exist. This can be particularly beneficial for vulnerable young people who may have limited support networks. They can help to foster a 'safe space' to prevent young people from 'going down the wrong path'.

***"I think that without it [mentoring services], I wouldn't be here right now. I'd probably be lost, I can't lie. Like I wouldn't even be in school. I wouldn't be working... it plays a big part... it's like a guide... I think you need a mentor, personally..."***
Young person (deeper discovery)



# What the Young People told us about **Schools**

## Schools are not always supportive environments for all

Students with challenging behaviour often do not receive the support they need in schools, leading to exclusion, lower self-esteem, and less future opportunities. Alongside this, partaking in decision-making activities (e.g., student councils) is often reserved for high-achieving students. As such, many students do not have the opportunity to engage in these activities where they could develop their skills and influence future school practices. This echoed views of stakeholders in early discovery who referred to disproportionate treatment of students with challenging behaviour, notably for students from Black and Roma backgrounds.

***"Schools are too focused on what you shouldn't be doing rather than what you can do, too much focus on punishment"***
Young person (early discovery)

Schools can sometimes be too focused on academic attainment and add to the pressures that young people experience from elsewhere. Some young people wanted schools to provide confidential mental health assistance to ensure that students feel supported.

***"[There should be] private mental health facilities in school... [it needs to be] anonymous... it wouldn't be nice for someone to go there and [be] getting judged by everyone else"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

# What the Young People told us about **Experiences of Community Activities**

**Young people recognise that community activities benefit their mental health and wellbeing...**

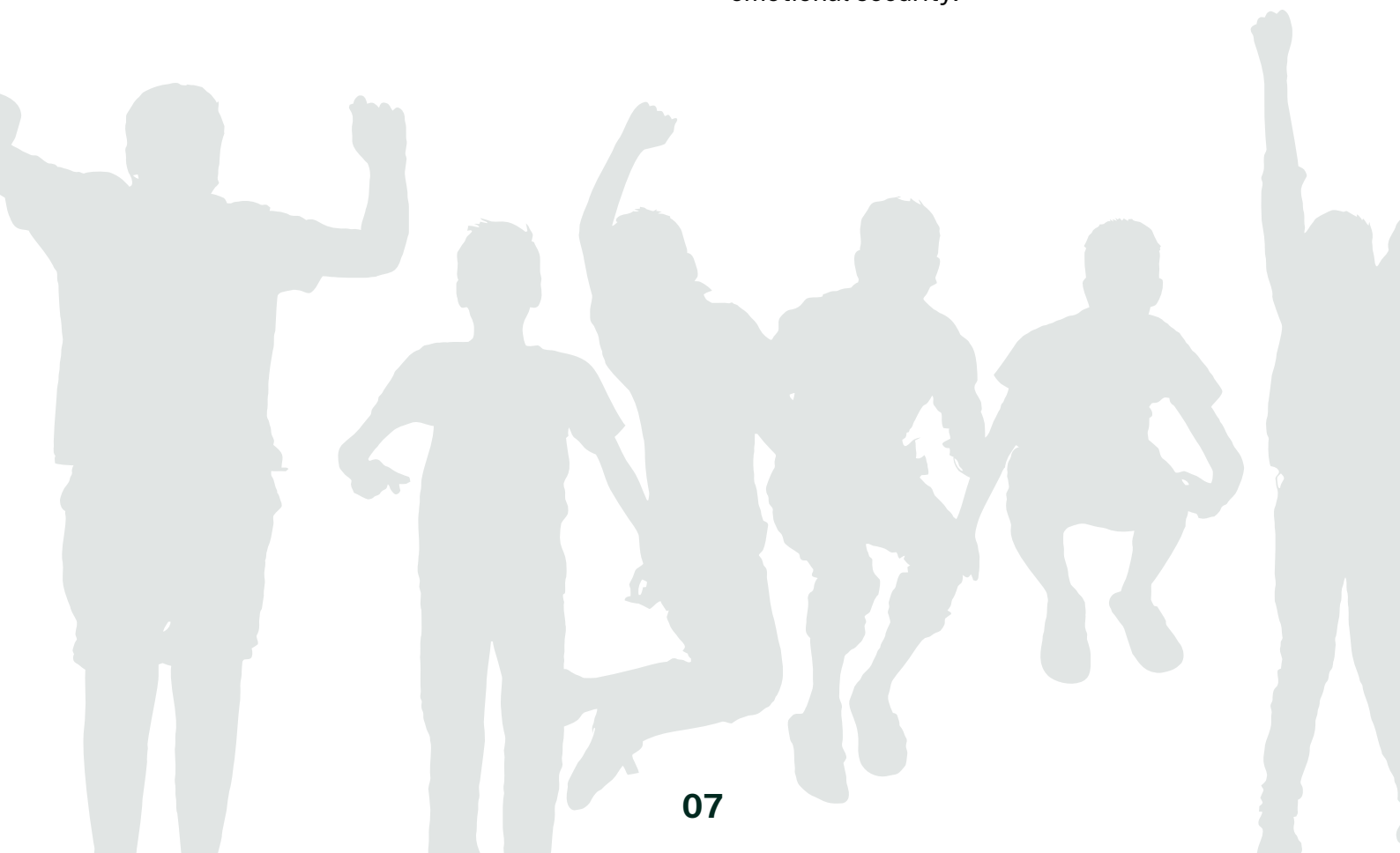
Engaging with community activities can have multiple benefits for young people's mental wellbeing. These engagements increase their self esteem, reduce stress, and contribute to feelings of happiness. Alongside this, the social aspect of community activities can combat loneliness, provide emotional support, and increase social connection. For some young people, attending community spaces such as youth clubs also provides them with an opportunity to spend time in 'conflict-free zones', away from any violence or conflict occurring outside of these activities.

***"[These spaces] make me feel happy and productive"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"Boxing relieves a lot of stress"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"Youth club helps you bond with people that you don't get to see for a long time cos they're not at your school"***
Young person (early discovery)

Experiences are largely determined by the atmosphere and environment of youth spaces. Young people stressed the importance of welcoming youth spaces and mutual respect between adults and young people. To create inclusive youth spaces, it is vital to involve marginalised youths to ensure that spaces cater to their needs and provide a sense of physical and emotional security.



# What the Young People told us about **Accessing Community Activities**

## ...but there are barriers preventing young people accessing community activities and spaces

Many young people encounter barriers that prevent them from engaging with community activities and spaces. Consequently, they are unable to access the many positive benefits outlined on the previous page.

Some young people cannot access activities or spaces because they are not aware of what is on offer and available to them.

***"I don't really know what there is"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Even when young people are aware of the existing activities, they may be intimidated by new spaces, and thus reluctant to attend activities in spaces they are unfamiliar with. Alongside this, they may also be uncomfortable with attending activities without already knowing other young people in these spaces.

***"I feel like if you don't know anyone there, you're less likely to go"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

For other young people, the stigma surrounding certain community activities and spaces (e.g., youth clubs) may deter participation. In some cases, the young people may choose to avoid associating with these spaces, but in other cases, parents or guardians may prevent young people from engaging in specific activities due to the stigma. This may be particularly true when parents are not aware of the wellbeing benefits that young people can gain from engaging in community activities and spaces.

Logistical challenges can also prevent youth engagement in community activities and spaces. Some young people may be unable to participate due to the associated financial, time or travel requirements, particularly if they have other responsibilities or if their family is struggling financially. In some cases, young people may be discouraged from partaking in activities necessitating public transport due to unaffordable travel expenses or concerns over safety.

***"I stopped boxing because I lived too far away"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

In some instances, there may also be demand for youth services that far outweighs the supply in the local community. During our early discovery discussions with Newham stakeholders, they expressed that they are often underfunded, understaffed, and under pressure to deliver services far beyond their capacity.

# What the Young People told us about **Safety in Newham**

## Young people do not feel safe in Newham

Incidents of violence can lead to retaliation and create continuous cycles of violence. This is particularly prevalent with gangs and the associated 'postcode wars'. Some young people said that drill music can glorify and encourage violence and 'postcode wars', although this was not a universally-held view. Violence and crime can sometimes be seen as a 'normal' part of growing up and living in Newham. Young people may be desensitised to violence, particularly if they have witnessed or experienced specific incidents.

A fear of violence and crime can result in young people avoiding parts of Newham and being reluctant to cross postcode boundaries. Young people may also be unwilling to use public transport because they fear encountering people they have issues with. Consequently, young people may be disinclined to access services and activities that would require them to travel. In some cases, young people may stay at home as much as possible to avoid violence and crime, potentially resulting in them feeling more isolated.

***"The fear of like encounters, of getting robbed and all this violence that's on the roads, it makes people more anxious, it kind of messes with the vibe and that. I've been in encounters many times, it's like I never really feel too bad but sometimes I'm like I don't really want to go here"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"Even if you haven't like really experienced it [violence and crime] yourself... you hear it so much, it just becomes like normal, like it's an everyday thing"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

Social media may also be used to share conflicts, including footage of fights, and "call for backup". This can then impact on young people's feelings of safety and stress levels. When young people fear going outside because of violence and crime, they may isolate themselves at home and rely on social media as a way to combat loneliness. However, this may then expose them to more social media posts about violence and crime and further intensify their fear of going outside.

Young people are also fearful of robbery and sexual violence in the local area.

***"...it's kind of like you don't feel safe cause like you know the crime rate's high, stuff like that, so you're always looking over your shoulder"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"[After experiencing violence or crime, it's like] constant things on your mind like okay it's gonna happen again, it's gonna happen again"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"Hearing like in your area there's been someone that's been raped or sexually assaulted you are now... [thinking] when is it going to happen to you"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"[Sexual violence can] make you like feel unsafe all the time"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

The young people reported that better lighting, more CCTV, clear pathways, and, for some young people, more police officers would make them feel safer. However, as discussed on the next page, not all young people feel safe around police officers.

# What the Young People told us About **Policing**

## Many young people do not trust the police

Levels of trust in the police have a significant impact on how safe young people feel in Newham. Many young people do not trust the police as a result of the overuse of police powers. Furthermore, some young people have personal experiences with racist policing practices, including the use of racial profiling and stop and search powers.

In some of these cases, the police are viewed as the perpetrators of violence and the young people may fear future interactions with the police. This may lead to young people feeling unprotected and seeking other forms of protection, such as carrying weapons.

***"I wouldn't trust the police with a family member who I know has special needs"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"[For some people, it's about] not liking the police due to racism and that's because certain police decide to overuse their power"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"Some of them [police officers] think they're in COD [Call of Duty] or think they're in a game"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

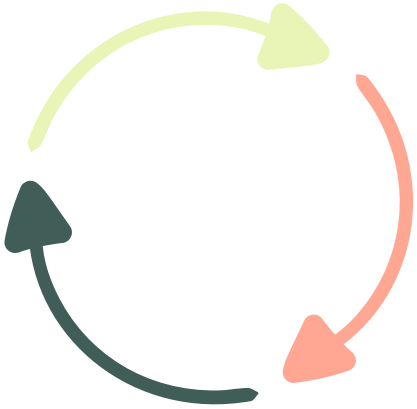
***"The police... get abusive with young people... there's other ways of approaching them"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

***"The fear of police or not liking police goes into people feeling unprotected, and then if you feel unprotected by those who are meant to keep you safe it's gonna impact your feeling of safety outside... you're gonna be more inclined to isolate and be by yourself"***
Young person (deeper discovery)

# Our Summary

**Cost of Living**

**Increasing living costs** are destabilising young people's support networks and living environments, with some shouldering increased responsibility.



**Choices**

Having opportunities to **learn new skills**, **find mentors,** and develop **support networks** offers young people choices

**Access and Location**

**Time, costs, and feeling unsafe** influence how, and to what extent, young people feel able to travel across Newham to access opportunities

# Young People's Co-design Ideas

The young people went on to collaboratively design and share initial ideas about how these things might be improved locally in Newham. You can read about these initial ideas in our blogs here:

- Co-design strategies: Life skills for young people
- Co-design strategies: Increasing access to youth spaces

# Next Steps

Kailo aims to understand wider issues that determine mental health and wellbeing in local places, to identify more systemic solutions. *Systems thinking* is an approach to identify responses to complex challenges - such as poor mental health - that focusses on leveraging change at many levels for greater impact.

We have started to present the challenges articulated by young people throughout Kailo to **four levels of intervention within a system** (see box). **These provide an initial, and partial articulation of the system largely as seen by young people,** but may provide a useful starting point for wider conversations. Each perspective focusses on a core building block of young people's mental health - learning opportunities, support networks and feeling safe. Other core building blocks - such as having money and resources to meet basic needs, are referenced across all of these.

We are now looking to work with wider stakeholders, using these as a starting point for identifying other opportunities to shift structures, goals and beliefs among existing organisations, services and communities which hold these systems in place, and support recommendations for change.

**Four levels of intervention within a system***

**Events:** The issues (behaviours and outcomes) that can be observed in the world around us

**Structures:** How the system is organised; the structures, the processes, and the relationships between the parts

**Goals:** The targets that the system is actively working to achieve

**Beliefs**: The deeply held beliefs, attitudes and values of individuals, the public and organisations causing the system to function as it does

**Actions Scales Model, Nobles et al 2022*

**Going forward, there is an opportunity for communities to work together to build a better Newham.**

We hope that by sharing **this report** and **the co-designs** developed by our young people widely, we can start to build the case for wider joined up action to address these important issues, with the voice of young people at its heart.

Contact Sophie.Bulmer@uclpartners.com for more information.

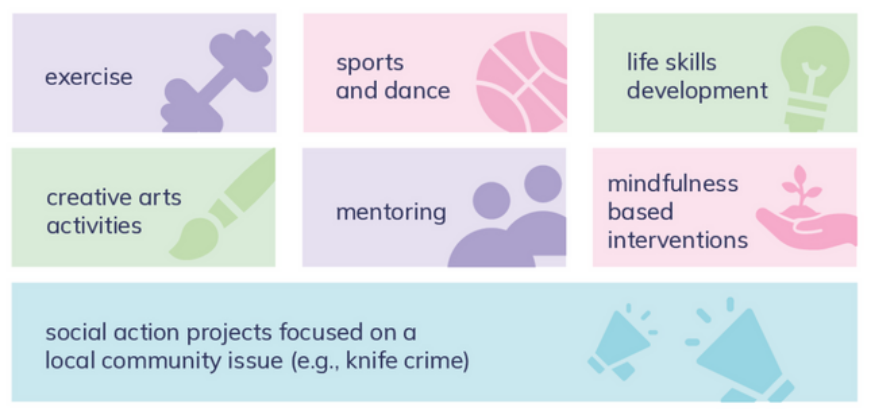
Nobles JD, Radley D, Mytton OT. The Action Scales Model: A conceptual tool to identify key points for action within complex adaptive systems. Perspectives in Public Health. 2022;142(6):328-337. https://doi:10.1177/17579139211006747

# Appendix A
# Summary of an evidence briefing on activities available outside of school settings

Our partners at the Anna Freud Centre conducted an evidence briefing to synthesise existing evidence on the relationship between activities outside school settings and the wellbeing of young people to inform our co-design ideas. They examined systematic reviews addressing the following questions:

## 1. Which activities have a positive impact on wellbeing?

There are a wide range of activities available outside of school settings. The following activities have been reported to have a positive impact on wellbeing:




## 2. What prevents and supports engagement in activities outside of school?

Engagement in activities outside of school is driven by three overarching components: individual factors, interpersonal factors, and environmental factors.

They can include both barriers and motivators for engagement, with the same factor having the potential to influence young people in different ways.

For a full description of methods, detailed findings and implication visit the Anna Freud Centre website.

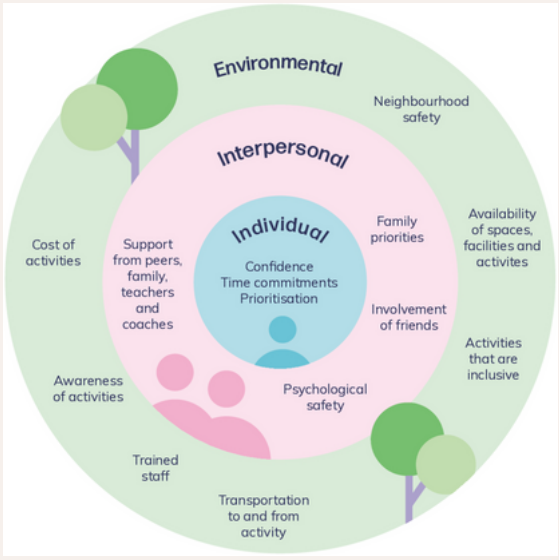
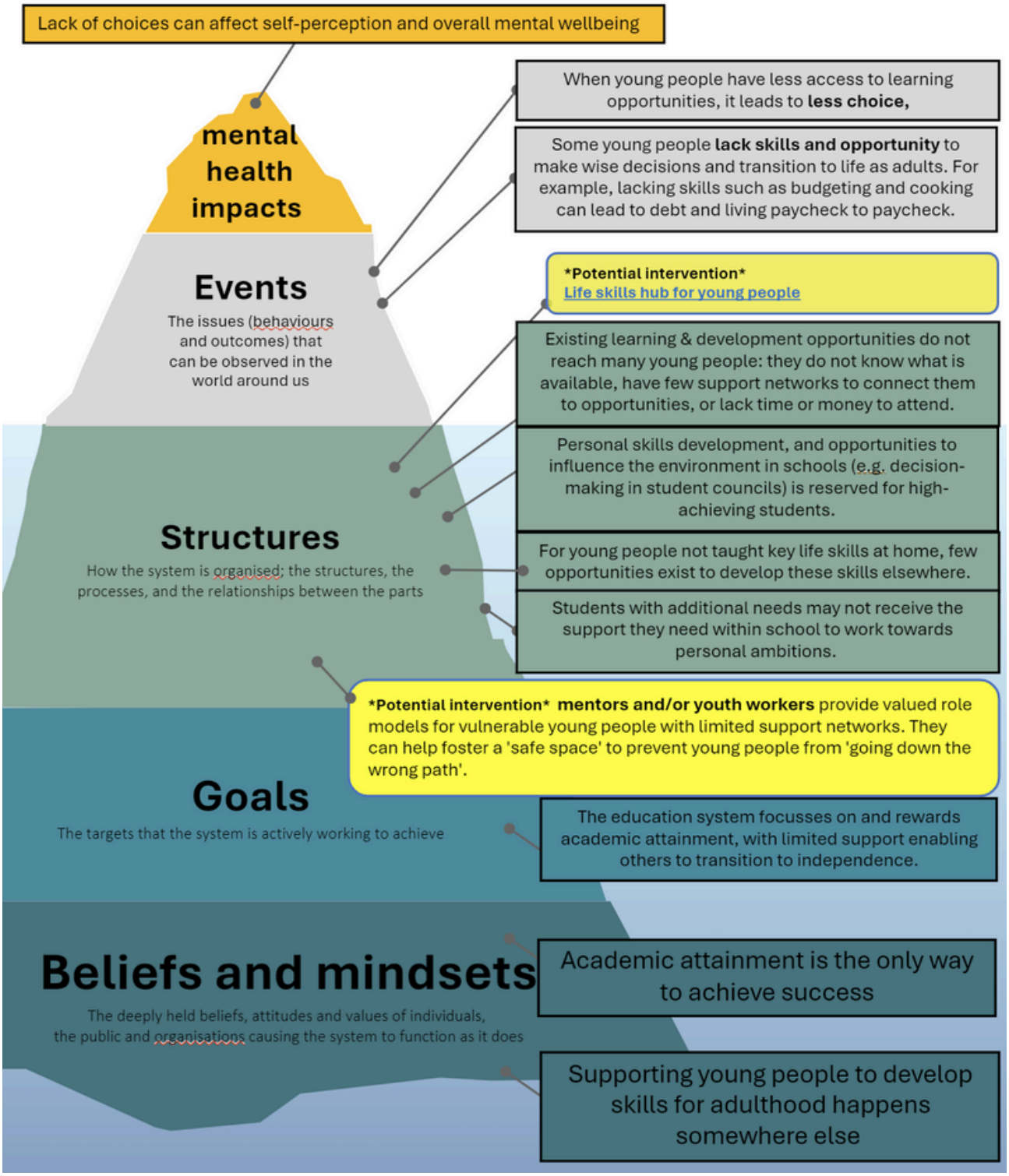



*Figure 2 is a summary of the factors that prevent and support engagement in out-of-school activities.*

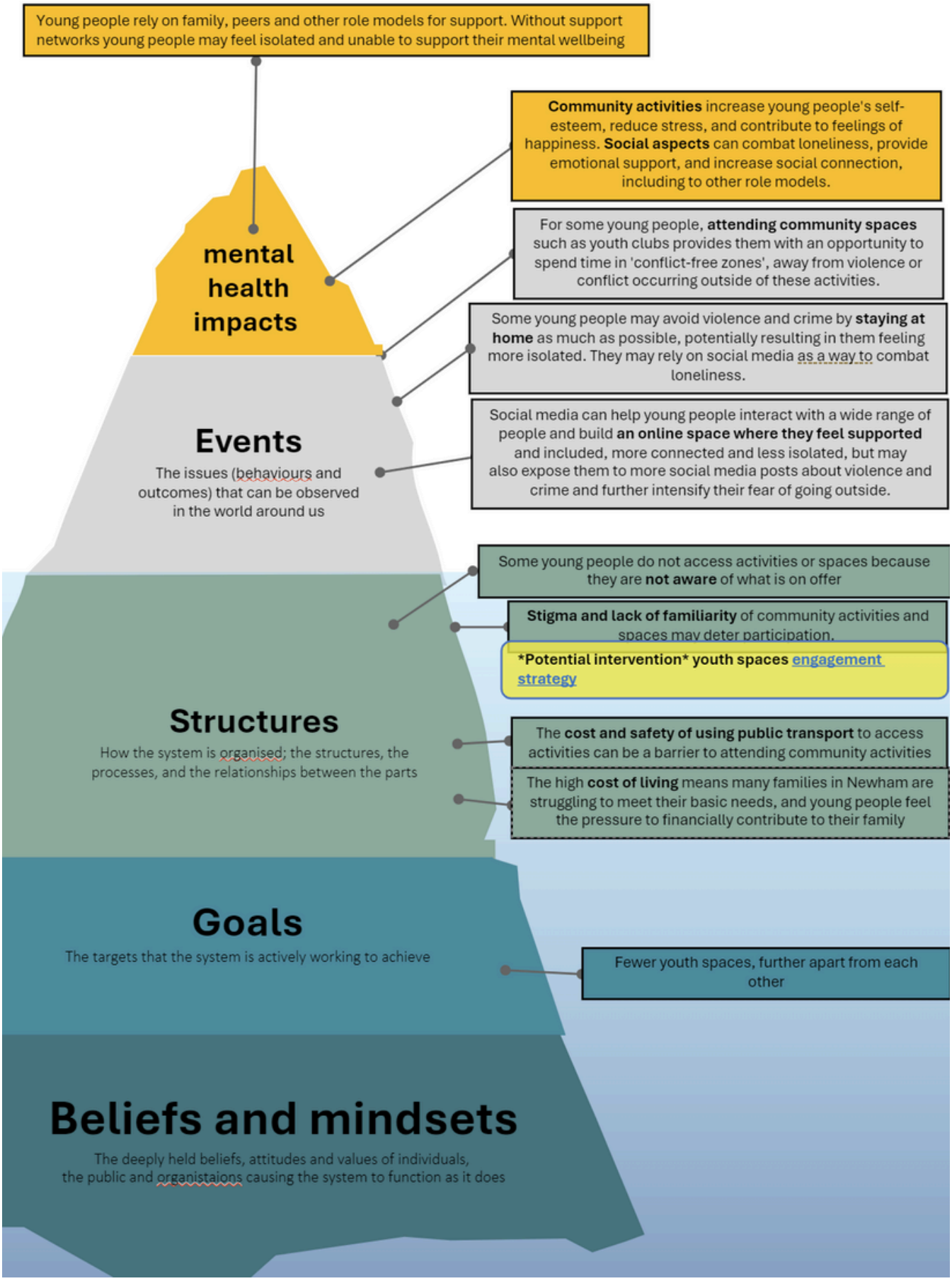
# Appendix B
Thinking systemically about ..

## .. Learning opportunities



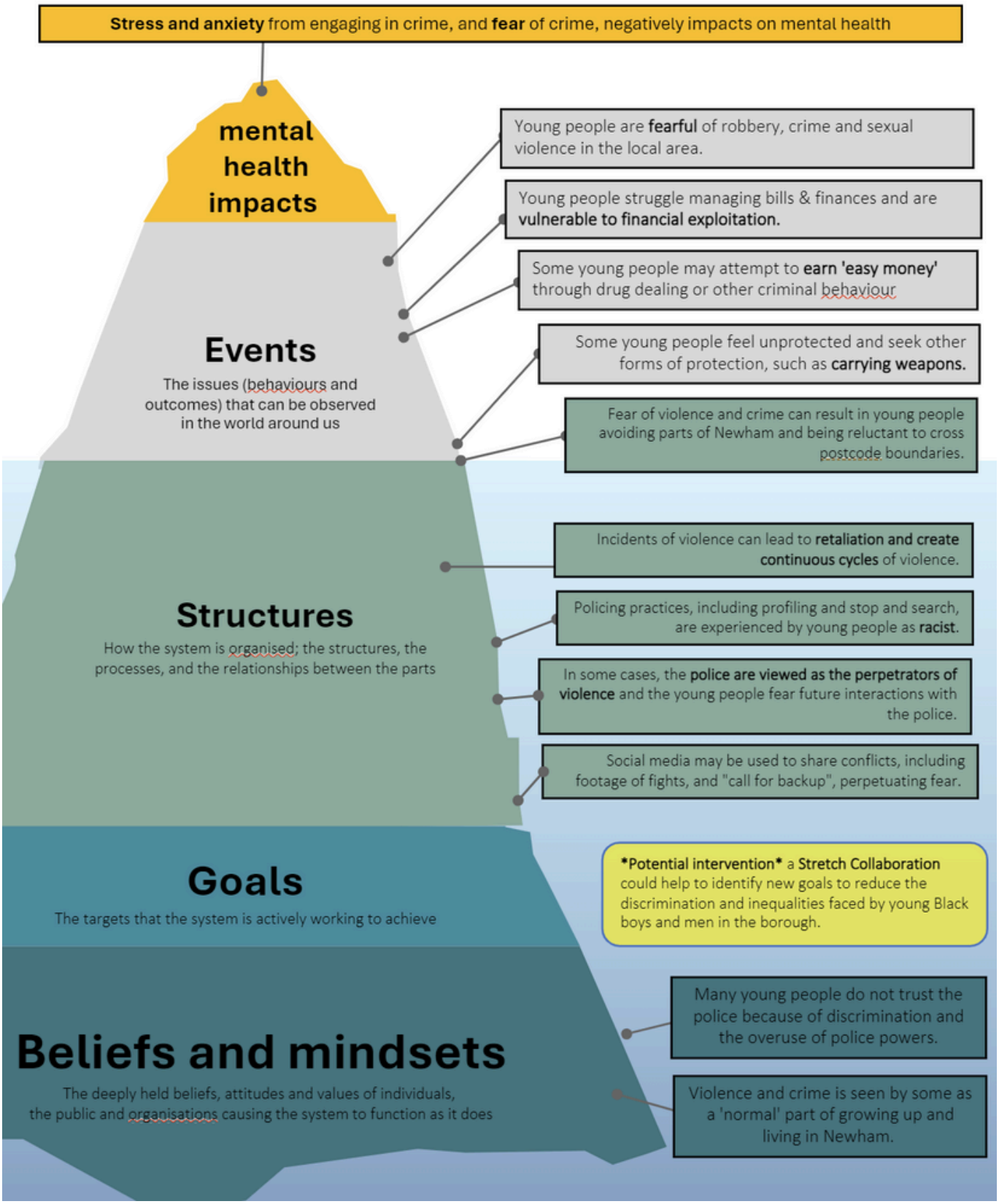
*Thinking systemically about...*

# ...Support networks



***Thinking systemically about...***

# ...Feeling safe



With many thanks to the young people and community organisations involved in these sessions.

**Newham Community Partner Organisations**
Fight for Peace
Exit Foundation
Caramel Rock
Newham Community Project
Ambition Aspire Achieve (AAA)

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This work in Newham is part of the Kailo research programme, funded by UKPRP and delivered through collaboration between UCL, Dartington Service Design Lab, UCLPartners, University of Exeter, Shift, NIHR ARC North Thames and the Anna Freud Centre.

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Kailo

kailo.community
The shape of mental health to come