



11 May 2026

CONSULTATION ON THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING STRATEGY

Submission by the YWCA Waikato

1.0 INTRODUCTION

YWCA Waikato welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Consultation on the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy. For over 80 years, YWCA Waikato has supported young women in the Waikato, with a strong commitment to gender equity, empowerment, and wellbeing.

This submission focuses specifically on Priority 1: Prevention and Early Intervention, drawing on the *Young Waikato Women and Sex/Gender Diverse People Wellbeing Baseline Report 2024*.

Prevention and early intervention are the most effective ways to improve mental wellbeing and reduce long-term mental health, addiction, and social harms. Evidence from the *Young Waikato Women and Sex/Gender Diverse People Wellbeing Baseline Report 2024* shows that many young women and sex/gender diverse people are experiencing distress, often driven by everyday conditions such as lack of sleep, feeling unsafe, financial stress, and limited access to supportive environments.

These pressures emerge well before people reach clinical mental health services. A Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy that genuinely prioritises prevention must therefore focus on supporting wellbeing early, in everyday settings, and at key life transitions, especially for children, young people, and communities at higher risk of inequitable outcomes.

2.0 KEY EVIDENCE FROM THE YWCA YOUNG WAIKATO WOMEN'S WELLBEING BASELINE REPORT

2.1 Lower wellbeing than the national average

The Baseline Report shows that young women and sex/gender diverse people in the Waikato report significantly lower wellbeing than the national average. Overall wellbeing for respondents averaged **4.50 out of 7**, compared with a national average equivalent of **5.62**. Disparities were most pronounced for:

- Young people aged 16–24 (23% below national average)
- Sex/gender diverse respondents (32% below national average)

These findings reinforce the need for targeted and proportionate responses within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for groups experiencing compounded disadvantages.

2.2 Priority needs closely linked to mental wellbeing

The strongest predictors of wellbeing identified in the Baseline Report extend well beyond clinical mental health services and include:

- **Sleep** (the number one priority need)
- **Feeling safe and respected** in public, educational, and community spaces
- **Autonomy, hope for the future, and sense of purpose**
- **Access to employment pathways and financial literacy**

Less than half of respondents reported feeling well rested most days, and only around half felt safe alone in public at night. These are critical determinants of mental health that require cross-sector policy responses.

2.3 Sex/gender diverse people face heightened risk

Sex/gender diverse respondents consistently recorded the lowest wellbeing scores across most domains and reported:

- Higher levels of stress, anxiety, fear, and overwhelm
- Lower feelings of safety, particularly around males and in public at night
- Greater difficulty accessing timely, affirming mental health support

At the same time, self-acceptance of identity and feelings of happiness emerged as strengths for this group, highlighting resilience that can be further supported through affirming and inclusive systems.

3.0 ALIGNMENT WITH PRIORITY 1: PREVENTION AND EARLY INTERVENTION

The findings of the YWCA Wellbeing Baseline Report strongly align with **Priority 1: Prevention and early intervention**. The data demonstrates that mental wellbeing for young women and sex/gender diverse people is shaped early, across everyday settings, and throughout key life stages. Preventative, strength-based approaches are essential to stop distress from escalating into more severe mental health, addiction, or negative social outcomes.

3.1 Promoting mental wellbeing in everyday places

The Baseline Report highlights that mental wellbeing is most strongly associated with enjoyment of life, self-acceptance, autonomy, hope, and feeling safe and respected. These are factors shaped primarily in **schools, workplaces, whānau, and community environments**, rather than in clinical settings.

Less than half of respondents felt safe alone at night, and only around half felt their opinions were heard and respected. This indicates a clear opportunity for prevention through:

- Mental wellbeing promotion in schools, tertiary settings, workplaces, and community organisations
- Safe, inclusive, and gender-affirming environments that reduce stress and fear before distress becomes entrenched
- Media literacy and education that challenge gender stereotypes and result in social norm change

These approaches directly support the draft strategy's future vision where mental wellbeing is actively supported in everyday places.

3.2 Supporting people early in life and during key life stages

The lowest wellbeing scores were recorded among **young people aged 16–24** and **sex/gender diverse respondents**, highlighting the importance of early and age-appropriate intervention. For those aged 16–24, unique predictors of wellbeing included access to health services, physical health, transport, and perceptions of equal opportunity.

The strategy should prioritise:

- Early support for rangatahi that are embedded in schools and youth services
- Targeted support during key transitions such as leaving school, entering tertiary study or employment, and forming adult identity
- Prevention-focused supports that address stress, sleep deprivation, and time poverty during these stages

Early intervention at these points can prevent compounding disadvantages and later mental health and addiction challenges.

3.3 Building skills, tools, and confidence for individuals and communities

The Baseline Report shows that wellbeing improves when individuals feel capable, supported, and hopeful. Key predictors such as self-acceptance, goal setting, emotional skills, and access to trusted adults or mentors point to the importance of **equipping people with practical tools** to care for their own wellbeing and support others.

Preventative opportunities include:

- Programmes that build emotional literacy, stress management, and sleep hygiene
- Peer support, mentoring, and navigation services that strengthen protective factors and support wellbeing
- Community-based initiatives that foster connection, belonging, and purpose

These approaches reduce the impact of mental distress before more intensive intervention is required.

3.4 Working across sectors to improve conditions for wellbeing

The strongest predictors of wellbeing identified in the Baseline Report sit at the intersection of **mental health and social, economic, and environmental conditions**. This includes employment pathways, financial literacy, safe housing and communities, access to transport, and income stability all shape mental wellbeing.

Prevention and early intervention therefore require:

- Cross-sector collaboration between health, education, housing, transport, employment, and community services
- Integrated responses that address essential needs alongside mental health supports
- Local, place-based solutions that reflect regional and community realities

This aligns directly with Priority 1's focus on working with other sectors to help people stay safe and well.

4.0 PRIORITY 1-FOCUSED RECOMMENDATIONS

To strengthen Prevention and Early Intervention within the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, YWCA Waikato recommends:

1. Invest in wellbeing promotion programmes in schools, workplaces, and communities, with specific focus on young women and sex/gender diverse people who experience higher levels of distress and lower wellbeing outcomes.
2. Expand early-access supports such as support system navigation, peer support, and community-based services that help people respond early when mental distress, stress, or overwhelm begins.
3. Embed evidence-based prevention initiatives that address suicide prevention, harmful substance use, and gambling harm, particularly for young people and marginalised genders.
4. Strengthen support for families, pregnant people and parents, recognising the strong intergenerational impact of caregiver mental wellbeing on children and young people.
5. Increase access to age-appropriate, affirming supports across life stages, particularly during transitions into adulthood, employment, or independence.
6. Ensure continuity of support for people exiting mental health and addiction services, including access to safe housing, education, income, and employment pathways as part of prevention against relapse.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The Young Waikato Women and Sex/Gender Diverse People Wellbeing Baseline Report 2024 demonstrates that prevention and early intervention are not optional additions to the mental health system; they are foundational. Supporting wellbeing early, in everyday environments and at key life stages, is essential to reducing distress, preventing escalation, and improving long-term outcomes.

YWCA Waikato strongly supports Priority 1 and calls for a Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy that is preventative, equity-led, community-based, and grounded in lived experience. We welcome ongoing partnership to ensure national strategy is translated into meaningful change for young women and sex/gender diverse people across the Waikato and Aotearoa New Zealand..

In conclusion, this submission reinforces that delivering Priority 1—Prevention and Early Intervention—must be central to the Strategy if Aotearoa New Zealand is to reduce distress early, prevent escalation, and achieve sustained improvements in mental wellbeing for current and future generations.

6.0 FURTHER INFORMATION

- The Young Waikato Women and Sex/Gender Diverse People Wellbeing Baseline Report 2024 can be viewed here <https://bit.ly/4uJ8EVy>
- Should there be any questions, please contact Riikka Anderson (General Manager) on 021 508 633 or riikka@ywcaWaikato.org.nz

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Riikka'.

Riikka Anderson
General Manager
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