

# Young People's Mental Health Listening Project



## Project Overview

This listening initiative builds directly on last year's health and care research listening project commissioned by Mid and South Essex NHS ICB in collaboration with ECVYS. During the initial phase, young people identified **mental health** as the most urgent area requiring deeper investigation, and said that more research was needed around young people's mental health.

In response, this year's project centres specifically on young people's mental health, with the following objectives:

- To explore the barriers that prevent young people from accessing mental health services
- To identify ways to make support more accessible and inclusive
- To gather insights on additional measures that could enhance mental health outcomes for young people

### Delivery Approach

ECVYS designed a two-phase listening model to engage young people meaningfully.

#### Phase One: Facilitated youth group/activity listening sessions

A structured session plan was developed around seven key questions which focussed on qualitative feedback, supported by a range of interactive and creative activities.

These activities were designed to create a relaxed and engaging environment, encouraging open dialogue and honest feedback. Sessions were delivered by trusted youth leaders in their usual youth group/ activity setting, with each group selecting activities that best suited their context, to ensure relevance and inclusivity. Each group fed back the young people's feedback to ECVYS, and then received a donation for their participation.

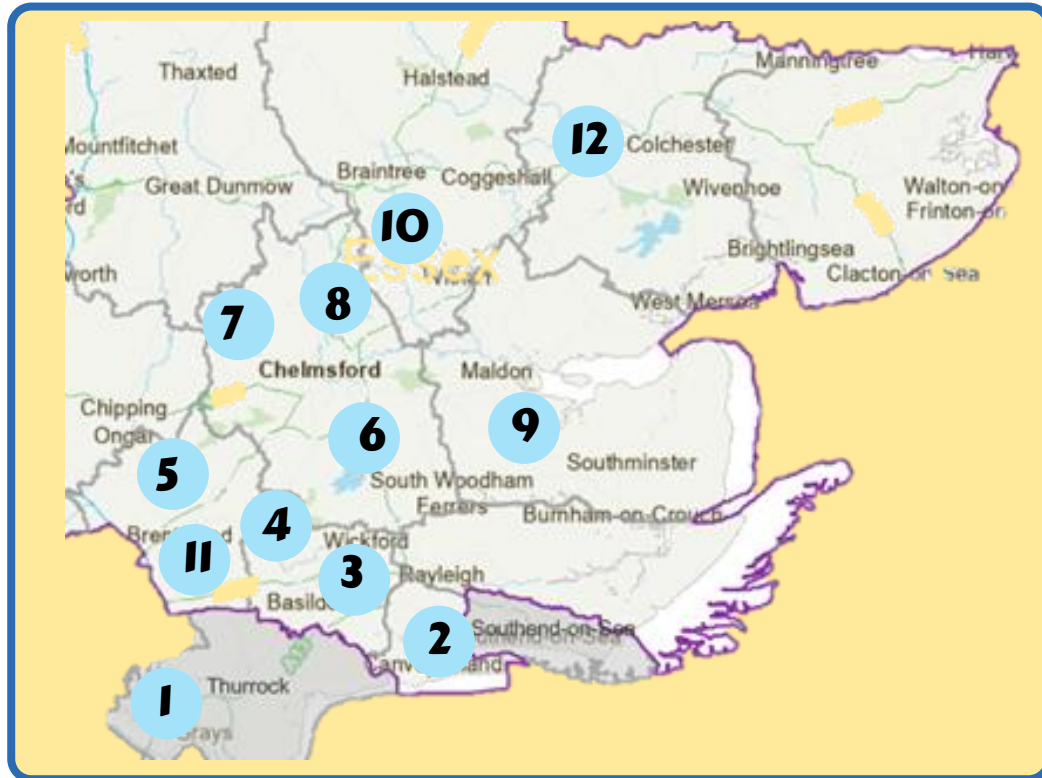
#### Phase Two: Peer-Led Research

The second phase, focused on gathering quantitative data through peer-led research. Each participating organisation nominated two young people to conduct simple surveys with their peers. The survey consisted of straightforward Yes/No questions, designed to be easy to administer and record.

Importantly, the questions were developed by young people with lived experience of mental health challenges from **Kids Inspire** and **Healthwatch Essex**, ensuring that the research is grounded in genuine understanding and relevance.



**315 young people in total took part;  
251 young people from 12 amazing youth organisations  
and  
64 young people through research led by their peers**



**1. Riverview Charitable Trust:**  
Open Access



**5. Endeavour:**  
SEN Group



**9. 1st Guides Heybridge:**  
Uniformed Group



**2. Yellow Door:** Open Access



**6. Kids Inspire:**  
SEN Group



**10. Bar 'n' Bus:**  
Detached work



**3. Gateway Radio:**  
Open Access



**7. North Avenue Youth Centre:**  
Open Access



**11. Doddinghurst Community Church:**  
School lunch club



**4. Motivated Minds:**  
Neurodivergent Group

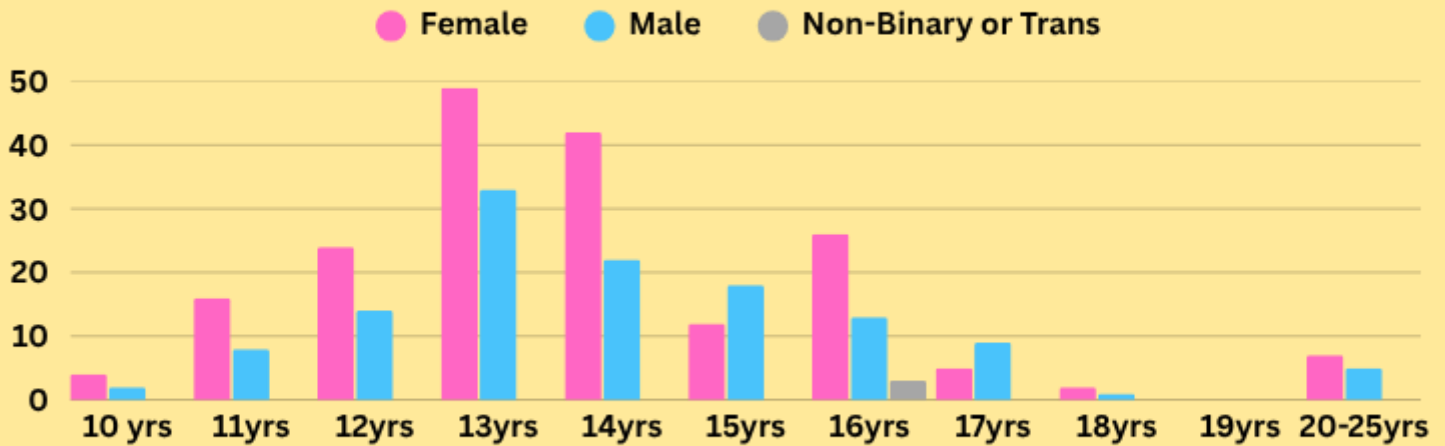


**8. Essex YMCA:**  
SEN Group



**12. Healthwatch Ambassadors:**  
Essex wide Mental Health  
Advisory group

## Gender and ages of young people that participated in the project



## Phase I: Questions asked in the youth group/activity sessions

- What does good mental health look like to you?
- What can have a negative impact on your mental health?
- What do you do to feel better if you become anxious, stressed or upset?
- WHO would you like to talk to if you were anxious, stressed or upset?
- WHERE would you prefer to access mental health support or services?
- HOW would you prefer to access mental health support or services?  
(this question was supported with the following prompt: Would young people go to their Doctor and ask for counselling services, or speak to a teacher to access support through the Pastoral Team, or ask a Youth Leader to sign post them to services?)
- What is the top issue around young people's mental health that needs to be researched further?

### COMMENTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

"Burn out due to working too hard in school/work, and then the social things that go along with it, have a negative impact on my mental health"

### COMMENTS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

"There should be more training to make professionals listen more, be kinder and follow through when they say they'll do something"

## What does good mental health look like to young people?



Being able to talk to someone (including being able to ask for help, talking about arguments and being open about feelings)	21%
Being organised (including good routines)	12%
Coping with stress (including coping strategies such as breathing exercises)	11%
Being happy	10%
Good relationships with friends and families	10%
Exercise and being active	9%
Feeling calm, relaxed and at peace (including having balanced emotions)	7%
Self-care (including hygiene and healthy diet)	5%
Being yourself (including having a high self-esteem)	5%
Having plans for the future	4%
My achievements	3%
Having time for myself (including time to be lazy, and freedom to go out)	3%

Young people described good mental health as a balance of social, emotional, and physical wellbeing. The most common theme was being able to talk openly about feelings and difficult experiences, including asking for help and discussing arguments. They highlighted the importance of communication, emotional openness, and having trusted relationships.

Being organised also featured strongly, with young people linking positive mental health to routines, planning, and feeling in control; especially around school work.

Coping with stress was another key theme, with many young people referencing personal strategies (like breathing exercises) and the desire to feel less pressure.

'Happiness' was described in varied ways, from loving life to simply feeling good at the end of the day.

Strong relationships with friends and family were seen as essential, alongside physical wellbeing through exercise, activity, and self-care.

It is important to young people that they feel calm, emotionally balanced, and that they are able to be themselves without fear of judgment.

Other themes included having future goals, having achievements celebrated, and making time for rest.

Overall, young people view good mental health as having a mix of emotional expression, supportive relationships, personal wellbeing, and a sense of purpose, rooted in feeling safe, understood, and empowered.

Comment from a young person "One person's experience of happiness is not the same as someone else's. For some, going outside for a walk or talking with others is helpful. For others, it might look like sitting in a dark room on their own."





## What can have a negative impact on young people's mental health?

<b>Relationships</b> (Conflicts with family/friends, and unhealthy relationships)	<b>21%</b>
<b>Being bullied</b>	<b>13%</b>
<b>Pressures of school</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Social media</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>Abuse</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Drugs</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>'Bed rotting'</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Friends mental health</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Having my phone taken away</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Overthinking</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Peer pressure</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Alcohol</b>	<b>4%</b>
<b>Being self-conscious</b>	<b>3%</b>
<b>Being isolated</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>Having multiple stressors</b>	<b>1%</b>



'Bed rotting' means spending too much time in bed! Either sleeping or engaging in low effort activities like scrolling on a phone.

Young people identified a wide range of factors that negatively effect their mental health, with **relationships** emerging as the most significant theme. Family conflicts, arguments with friends, and unhealthy relationships were frequently mentioned and highlight how emotional tension and breakdown in trust can deeply impact a young person's wellbeing.

**Bullying**, both in person and online, was another major concern, with many young people referencing the lasting effects of being targeted.

**Pressures of school** also featured strongly, including stress around exams, homework and school rules, and young people mentioned that they need learning environments that are more supportive of individual needs.

**Social media** was seen as both overwhelming and isolating, with some describing how excessive screen time can lead to anxiety and disconnection.

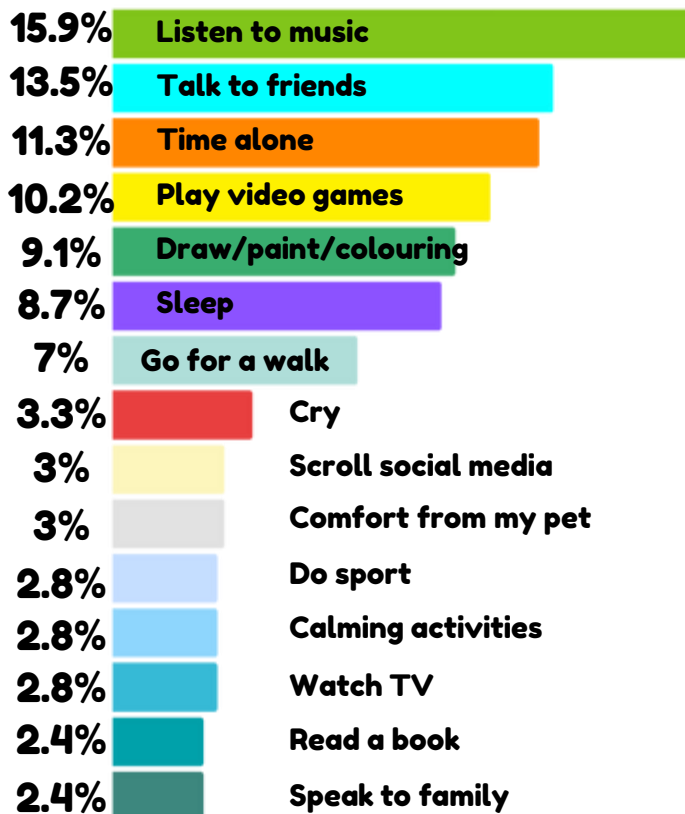
Other recurring themes included experiences of abuse, exposure to drugs and alcohol, and the impact of peer pressure.

Several young people also mentioned more personal struggles, such as overthinking, feeling self-conscious and being affected by the mental health of friends.

Isolation, lack of trusted adults and having multiple stressors at once were also noted as contributing factors to having poor mental health.

Overall, the responses show that young people's mental health is shaped by a complex mix of interpersonal, environmental, and internal challenges, reinforcing the need for safe spaces, trusted relationships, and accessible support across all areas of their lives.

## What do young people do to feel better if they become anxious, stressed or upset?



When asked what they do to feel better when anxious, stressed, or upset, young people most commonly responded that they listen to music, followed by talking to friends and spending time alone. These responses highlight a range of healthy coping strategies that help young people manage emotional distress. Listening to music can provide comfort, distraction, and a sense of connection, while talking to friends offers emotional support and validation. Choosing to spend time alone may allow for reflection and self-regulation. Together, these activities suggest that many young people are actively engaging in positive ways to process their emotions and reduce stress.

## WHO would young people like to talk to if they were anxious, stressed or upset?

### TOP TEN RESPONSES

1. Friends
2. Family
3. Youth Workers
4. Trusted Teachers
5. Therapist/ Professional
6. Dog
7. Helpline
8. Myself
9. Boyfriend
10. Someone I trust

The top ten results from the listening project reveal valuable insights into the support networks young people rely on when feeling anxious, upset or stressed.

The overwhelming preference for speaking to friends and family highlights the importance of close, familiar relationships in providing emotional reassurance.

These responses were given more than twice as many times as the next answer of speaking to Youth workers and trusted teachers. However, they also ranked highly, which shows that young people value approachable, non-judgmental adults within their everyday environments.

Fewer young people would chose to speak to therapists or professionals, but this still reflects a recognition of formal support options.

Interestingly, responses such as "my dog" and "myself" suggest that some young people find comfort in non-verbal companionship or internal reflection. Lower numbers that said they would talk to helplines, a boyfriend, or "someone I trust", may indicate either limited awareness or accessibility of other support options.

Overall, the data underscores the need to strengthen informal and formal support systems, while also promoting safe spaces and trusted relationships across all areas of a young person's life.

## WHERE would young people prefer to access mental health support or services?

### TOP TEN RESPONSES

1. Face to face
2. Online services
3. Over the phone
4. Youth centre
5. School/College/Uni
6. GP surgery
7. Drop in hub
8. Out of school
9. Anywhere if it was the right support
10. At home

The responses to this question highlight a strong preference for face-to-face interaction, with more than half the young people selecting this option. However, it's important to note that many of these responses did not specify a particular setting, suggesting that while in-person support is valued, the exact location may be less important than the quality and comfort of the interaction.

Among those who did specify a location, **46** mentioned professionals, while smaller numbers referred to support groups (2) and educational workshops (1).

Online services, and support over the phone including 'texting', were also popular, reflecting a need for flexible, accessible options that meet young people where they are.

Youth centres and educational settings such as schools, colleges, or universities were also seen as approachable environments. GP surgeries, drop-in hubs, and out-of-school settings were mentioned less frequently, although they still represent important places to access support.

A few young people said that they would be happy to access support "anywhere, if it was the right support", and a few others would prefer support offered in their home.

Face-to-face support remains the most trusted format, young people would value more choice, accessibility, and a sense of safety and familiarity in where they receive support.

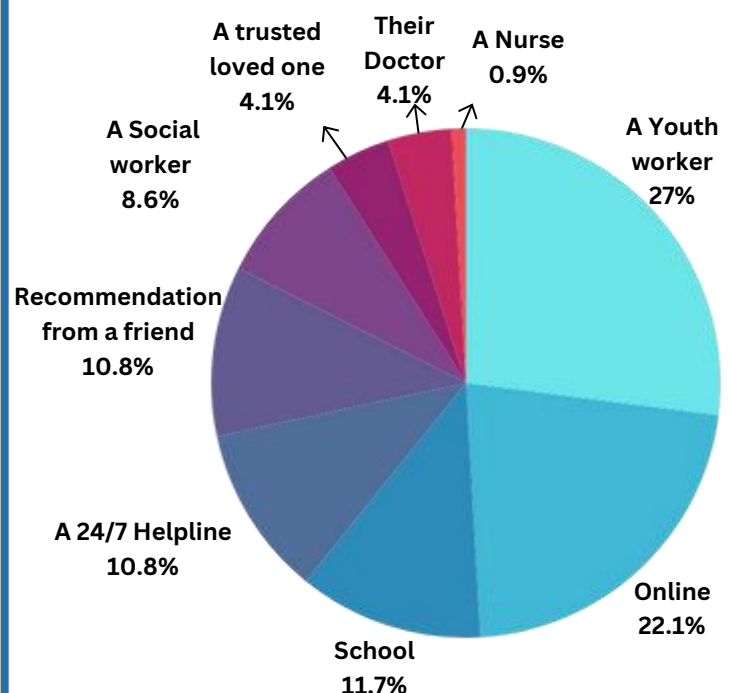
## HOW would young people prefer to access mental health support or services?

The responses indicate that young people would prefer to access mental health support through trusted, familiar channels, with youth workers being the most popular option. This helps us to understand the importance of approachable, face-to-face signposting.

Online access was also highly favoured; particularly self-referral systems, suggesting a desire for autonomy and privacy.

School, 24-hour helplines, and peer recommendations were also significant ways that young people would like to access support. This reflects the value of accessible, immediate, and socially endorsed pathways.

While professional and family support is valued, young people may prioritise informal or self-directed routes when seeking help.



## WHAT is the top issue around young people's mental health that needs to be researched further?



### **Social Media (24.4%)**

This was the most frequently cited concern, with the majority of young people emphasising the impact of social media on mental wellbeing.

Young people expressed anxiety over the emotional effects of online content, with some describing social media stories as "scary." This suggests a need for deeper exploration into how digital environments shape mental health, especially in adolescence.



### **Bullying (16.7%)**

Bullying remains a significant issue, with cyberbullying specifically called out by almost a fifth of the respondents.

The digital dimension of bullying adds complexity, reinforcing the importance of research into prevention strategies and support systems that address both in-person and online harassment.



### **SEN Support (13.3%)**

Young people voiced a strong desire for inclusive mental health research for those with special educational needs (SEN). Responses highlighted the need to understand neurodivergent experiences, and to improve mental health support within schools.

This points to a gap in tailored interventions and a lack of understanding of diverse needs.



### **Unhealthy Relationships (11.4%)**

Concerns extended beyond romantic relationships to include friendships and family dynamics.

Young people want more insight into how relationship breakdowns affect mental health. This indicates that emotional safety in all types of relationships is a critical area for study.



### **Drugs (9.6%)**

Almost all the responses around drugs focused on the impact of weed and alcohol on young people's mental health.

This reflects growing awareness and concern about substance use among youth, and a call for clearer information on how these substances impact on emotional wellbeing.



### **School Pressures (6.8%)**

These responses highlighted feelings of anxiety, being overwhelmed, and of educators showing a lack of understanding or compassion around issues.

Specific mentions included "school anxiety," "feeling overwhelmed with school," and calls for better mental health education within the school environment.

These responses suggest that academic stress and institutional pressure are significant contributors to poor mental wellbeing, and that schools need to play a more active role in supporting students emotionally.

Additional topics raised included; peer pressure, vaping, self-harm, low self-esteem, loneliness, body image, and homophobia. While these were mentioned less frequently, the issues reflect the diverse and complex challenges young people face and emphasise the need for inclusive, wide-ranging mental health research that doesn't overlook young people's less visible struggles.



## Phase 2: Questions asked through the Peer-led listening

- Do young people feel they can talk openly about their mental health with someone they trust?
- Have young people ever avoided asking for mental health support because they didn't know where to go?
- Do young people think that schools and youth spaces take young people's mental health seriously enough?
- Would young people use mental health support if it was easier to access and more friendly?

**Do young people feel they can talk openly about their mental health with someone that they trust?**

**YES! 64.5%**

**NO! 29%**

**SOMETIME 6.5%**

A clear majority said they feel able to talk openly about their mental health with someone they trust. Which is great news, and suggests a growing awareness and support among peers, family or professionals.

However, almost a third of young people feel unable to do so, highlighting persistent barriers such as stigma, fear of judgment or lack of safe spaces.

Others expressed that their ability to open up depends on the situation, because of the complex and varied nature of young people's experiences.

It is important for young people that environments where young people feel consistently safe and supported in sharing their mental health experiences are available and accessible to them.

**Have young people ever avoided asking for mental health support because they didn't know where to go?**

**YES! 48.4%**

**NO! 46.9%**

**"No 'cos it's not happened" 4.7%**

Almost half of the young people said that they have avoided seeking support because they didn't know where to go. They point to gaps in awareness, and the access to services.

A similar number also said they haven't faced this issue, suggesting some young people feel confident navigating support systems.

Notably, a small group of young people said they haven't needed to ask for help; which adds important context, that some young people have not yet encountered mental health challenges requiring external support. These insights show the need for clearer signposting and proactive education about resources, so that all young people are equipped to seek help when they need it.

## Do young people think schools and youth spaces take young peoples mental health seriously enough?

**56.25%**  
**young**  
**people**  
**said**

When asked whether schools and youth spaces take young people's mental health seriously enough, 43.75% of participants said yes, while 56.25% said no.

More than half of the young people that took part in the peer-led research feel that their mental health is not being adequately prioritised in the environments where they spend much of their time.

**No!**



While some young people recognise the positive efforts being made, the majority of young people say that there is a need for stronger commitment, visibility, and consistency in how mental health is addressed and supported across educational and youth settings.

Comment from some of the young people  
"School is not always a safe space"

## Would young people use mental health support if it was easier to access and more friendly?

**82.8%**  
**young**  
**people**  
**said**

82.8% of participants indicated they would be more likely to seek mental health support if it were easier to access and tailored to youth needs, while 17.2% said they would not be more likely to access support.

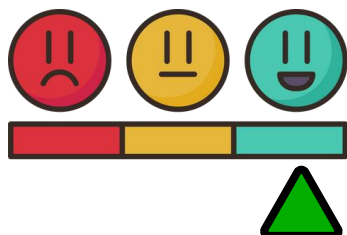
This shows a strong demand from young people for mental health services that are not only accessible but also designed with their specific experiences and preferences in mind.

The high percentage of affirmative responses suggests that current barriers that they have previously mentioned, such as; stigma, lack of awareness, or services that feel too clinical or adult-oriented, may be discouraging young people from seeking support.

Making support more youth-friendly could involve; offering services in familiar environments (like schools or youth clubs), using digital platforms, ensuring confidentiality, and involving young people in the design of these services.

The findings evidence the importance of listening to youth voices when shaping mental health strategies, as their willingness to engage clearly increases when services feel relevant and approachable.

**YES!**



Comment from a young person

"it's easier if support services are at school, as we are there already and don't have to travel a long time to get there, and there would be no extra cost to go to another place"

## Summary and observations

Young people described good mental health as feeling safe, understood, and in control. The most common theme was being able to talk about feelings and ask for help. They also valued supportive relationships, emotional openness, self-care, rest, exercise, and being themselves without judgment. Feeling happy, calm, and having future goals were also seen as important.

Relationships were the most cited factor affecting mental health, especially family conflict and friendship issues. Bullying, both in person and online, was a major concern, alongside academic pressure, social media, and abuse. Other issues included drugs and alcohol, peer pressure, overthinking, isolation and feeling unsupported.

To cope, young people turned to music, friends, and time alone. Many also used video games, art, more sleep, going for walks (often with pets), sports, and calming routines. These self-directed strategies helped them manage stress and regain calm.

Friends and family were the most trusted sources of support, followed by youth workers and teachers. Some also mentioned therapists, pets, or themselves.

Face-to-face support was preferred, though comfort and quality mattered more than location.

Online and phone options were also popular. Youth centres, schools, and universities were seen as approachable, while GP surgeries and drop-in hubs were mentioned less often.

Youth workers were the most preferred access point, with online self-referral also favoured for privacy and autonomy.

Schools, helplines and peer recommendations were commonly mentioned. However, nearly half had avoided seeking help due to not knowing where to go, highlighting the need for clearer signposting and education.

Around 20% highlighted the value of free physical and creative activities, like art, gym and swimming, for mental wellbeing.

Top research priorities included social media's emotional impact, bullying, SEN support, unhealthy relationships, school stress, peer pressure and self-esteem. These reflect a need for inclusive, youth-led research.

## Feedback from the Peer-Led Research: Summary and observations

Nearly two-thirds of young people feel able to talk openly about their mental health, showing encouraging levels of trust and support. However, 29% still feel unable to do so, due to stigma, fear of judgment, and lack of safe spaces, highlighting the need for consistently supportive environments.

Nearly half have avoided seeking help because they didn't know where to go, while others felt confident navigating support systems. This points to the importance of clearer signposting and proactive education.

Over half said schools and youth spaces don't take mental health seriously enough, though some acknowledged positive efforts. Most young people want greater visibility, consistency, and commitment to support in the places where they spend time.

Nearly 83% said they'd be more likely to use services if they were easier to access and tailored to youth needs. Reducing barriers like stigma, low awareness, and adult-oriented services could significantly boost engagement.

## Anything else that young people wanted to tell funders about this topic

Young people have shared a powerful message they want mental health support to be faster, fairer, and more accessible.

Long waiting times were the most common concern, with many saying delays can worsen their struggles.

**"Waiting lists are really long and you can get worse in that time. We need to know where to go for support in that time between"**

Young people called for more affordable services, better awareness of free resources like Kooth, and quicker access to therapists.

**"More awareness of Kooth as my friends don't know about it"**

Schools were highlighted as key spaces for change, with requests for improved teacher training, more youth workers, and better support for SEN and girls' wellbeing.

**"Young girls need to know they are okay for their age"**

Some voiced discomfort with professionals who feel rushed or are too clinical, while others stressed the need for inclusive clubs, age-appropriate support, and more open conversations to reduce stigma.

**"Some professionals are pushy and it can feel like they are interrogating you"**

There is a real desire for systems that truly understand and respond to the realities young people face.

ECVYS would like to thank the ICB for funding this important and informative listening project, all the amazing young people that took part and the Youth Leaders that facilitated the listening sessions.

This project has given great insight to changes that need to happen for young people to access early intervention support. We are already working on plans for future development in this area, and are working with partners to help make positive changes.

For more information please contact [Nicole@ecvys.org.uk](mailto:Nicole@ecvys.org.uk)

thank  
you

-Nicole Redgwell,  
ECVYS Youth Researcher  
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