



Support for children and young people to understand their feelings and mental health in Somerset

2024

Summary



This report presents the findings from activity conducted in 2024 by a multi-agency group aimed at understanding the lived experiences of children, young people, parent carers, and those who support them in accessing help for managing their emotions and mental health.

The report builds upon existing intelligence, incorporating local and national data, including insights from prior surveys. By centering the lived experiences of those involved, it identifies barriers to accessing support and highlights areas for improvement.

It reinforces findings previously shared by children, young people, parent carers, and practitioners. It highlights that despite the development of various websites and information sources in the past, these have not succeeded in providing clear, current, and easily accessible information in formats that align with the needs of the target audiences.

Feedback from children and young people indicates that they primarily rely on peers and parents for information and support. This underscores the importance of ensuring high-quality information is readily available to these groups, without the need for direct engagement with mental health practitioners.

We hope the insights presented in this report will inform the ongoing development of services in Somerset, improving support for the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

Key findings

1

Children and young people predominantly depend on their peers and parents for information and support

2

The pathways to support are often unclear, leaving individuals uncertain about eligibility for services and the appropriate timing for access.

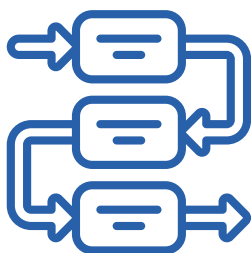
3

Children, young people, parent carers, and the people supporting them all express a strong desire for a greater emphasis on early intervention.

4

There is a need to address the gap between Young Somerset and CAMHS services to ensure cohesive support.





Methodology

With the decommissioning of Somerset's Big Tent a working group was brought together to look at the experience of children and young people in Somerset when accessing information on emotional wellbeing and mental health.

The group consisted of representatives from SPARK Somerset, Healthwatch, Somerset Parent Carer Forum, Somerset NHS ICB, Somerset Council and CAMHS, which is part of Somerset Foundation Trust.

The project took an approach which included 3 strands: a literature review, a survey and an opportunity for focus groups.

Initial work was undertaken to review existing feedback from surveys, discussions and presentations, which had been collected previously.

Following this review a survey and focus group activity was designed to capture any new views and address any potential gaps in knowledge.

The survey captured the views of children and young people, their parents and carers and the practitioners who worked with them. In addition to this we provided an opportunity for existing youth groups and organisations to capture young people's views at their groups and feed this into the project.

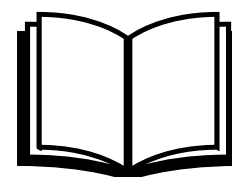
The questions focused on what children and young people, parent and carers and practitioners had found helpful, where they go for information and their experience of trying to find information and support. You can view the survey in Appendix A and the focus group questions in Appendix B.

An analysis of the results has been undertaken and are contained within the report.

The review of existing feedback included:

- Survey result on people experience of using the Big Tent website
- Results from Somerset School Health and Wellbeing Survey (2023)
- Healthwatch Somerset Report – Looking at mental health support for young people (October 2023)
- National research and data from The Children's Society
- NHS report Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey, conducted in 2022
- The Cass Review 2024
- Autistic Girls Network – Keeping it all inside
- SEND and Mental Health Presentation (Nov 21)

Findings from the literature review and previous research



A review of existing studies on support for children and young people in managing their feelings and mental health reveals that significant work has already been undertaken. Both national⁽⁵⁾ and local data indicate an increased likelihood of children and young people requiring support for their mental health, with one report highlighting a 50% increase⁽⁴⁾.

A considerable number of children and young people, across various sources, indicated that their own mental health and wellbeing, as well as that of their friends and family, are important to them. For instance, the Health and Wellbeing survey⁽³⁾ revealed that 39% (of Year 8) and 46% (of Year 10) of participants reported worrying about their own mental health, while 33% (of Year 8 & 10) expressed concern about the mental health of someone in their family. This trend has been further emphasised in the Children and Young People's Plan 2024 ⁽¹⁰⁾, which highlights mental health as a key priority area, a shift from previous approaches that primarily focused on health. Listening to the voices of children and young people has shown that they rely on each other and their parents predominantly for information and support.

Young people identified various ways they support their own feelings and mental health⁽³⁾ (through Year 6-10), including:

- Talking to others (45-31%)
- Spending time with friends (31-45%)
- Exercising (22-24%)
- Gaming (48%)

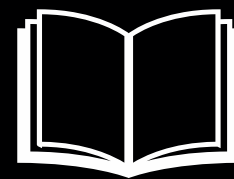
Additionally, they noted coping strategies they use to manage their feelings and mental health, such as:

- Smoking (1.5-8%)
- Self-harm (9-12%)
- Suicidal thoughts (11%)

The review indicates that many parents face challenges in accessing up-to-date, high-quality information tailored to their needs^(1 & 3). A lack of clarity regarding appropriate pathways and urgent support was frequently mentioned. Respondents also highlighted the prevalence of broken links and outdated information on websites. Parents reported ⁽⁸⁾ low confidence in knowing where to seek support, rating their confidence at 2 out of 5, and expressing dissatisfaction with the support received, which was rated 1.7 out of 5. This is particularly concerning, as seeking support from a parent or carer was the most common response among children and young people when asked where they turn for help with their mental health⁽²⁾.

**Number in (*) refers to reference list*

Findings from the literature review and previous research continued



The literature review identified two groups requiring more specialised approaches: children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those questioning their gender identity or experiencing gender dysphoria (6).

While these areas are not considered mental health issues themselves, the research suggests that tailored support may be necessary to ensure these individuals can access appropriate care. The Cass report emphasises the importance of mental health support and the negative impact of not receiving adequate services.

Research from 2017 (9) indicates that the average anxiety rates for disabled individuals are nearly double those for non-disabled individuals. The experiences of The Unstoppables reflect this, with young people often internalising or masking their difficulties.

They also expressed concerns that their mental health needs were not always considered when decisions were made about their lives. Parent-carers reported that SEND can act as a barrier to accessing support for mental health, with behaviours sometimes masking underlying mental health issues (8).



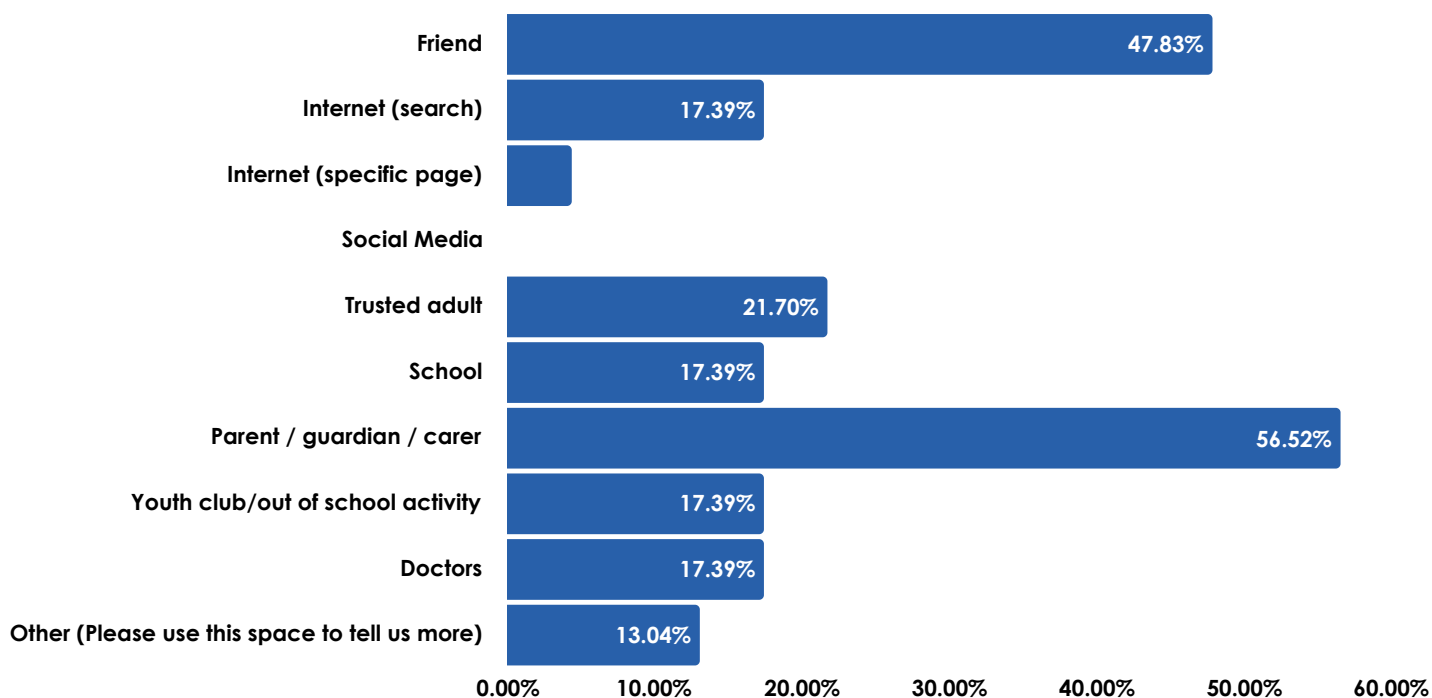
Findings from the survey

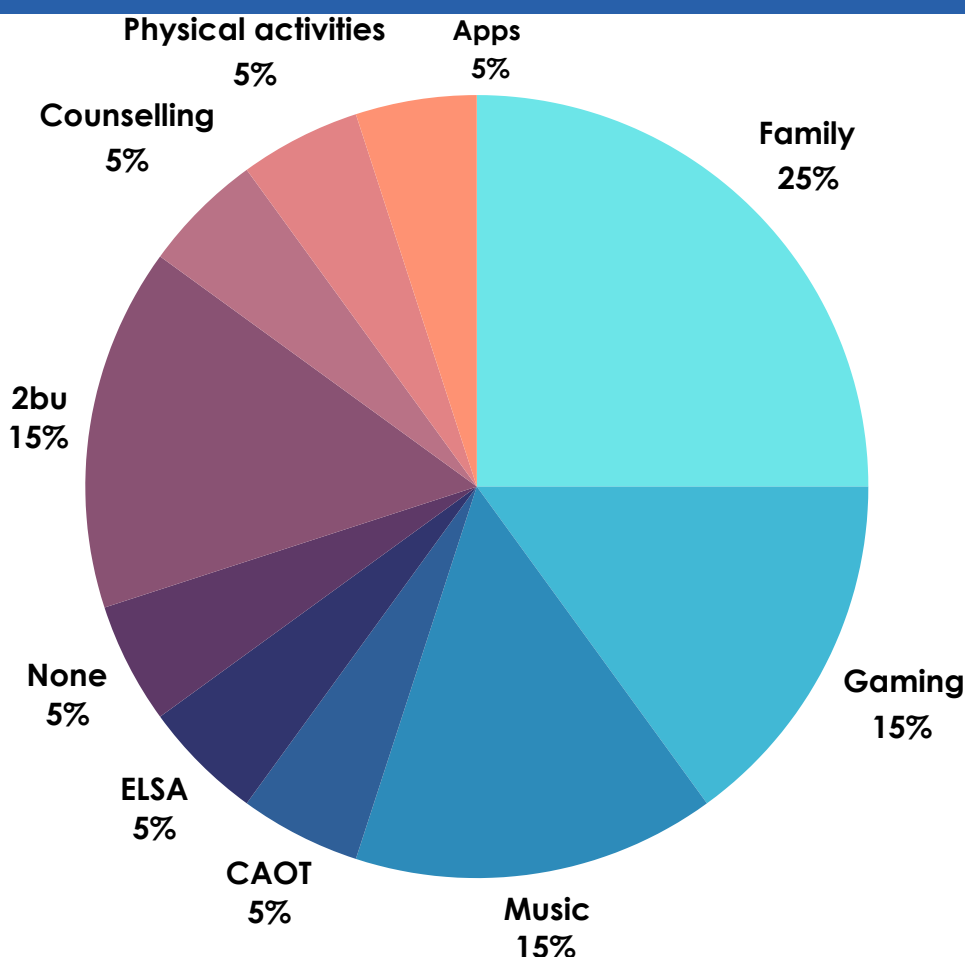
The survey was completed by 232 individuals made up of children and young people, parents/parent carers and practitioners working in Somerset.

Children and young people

The survey received 39 responses from children and young people. Through our review of existing services, we knew there were many different information sources available regarding feelings and mental health, so we wanted to understand where children and young people went to find information and how easy it was for them to access.

If you were looking for help with your feelings/mental health, where would you go?





Things young people identified as helping them

The response 'Other' included "Nowhere, I have trust issues", "Play therapist mum and dad got" and "Finch app*".

* Finch is a self-care wellbeing app.

31% of the children and young people who took part felt that it was hard or difficult to find the information they needed, 23% felt it was of medium or average difficulty, and only 15% reported that they found it easy.

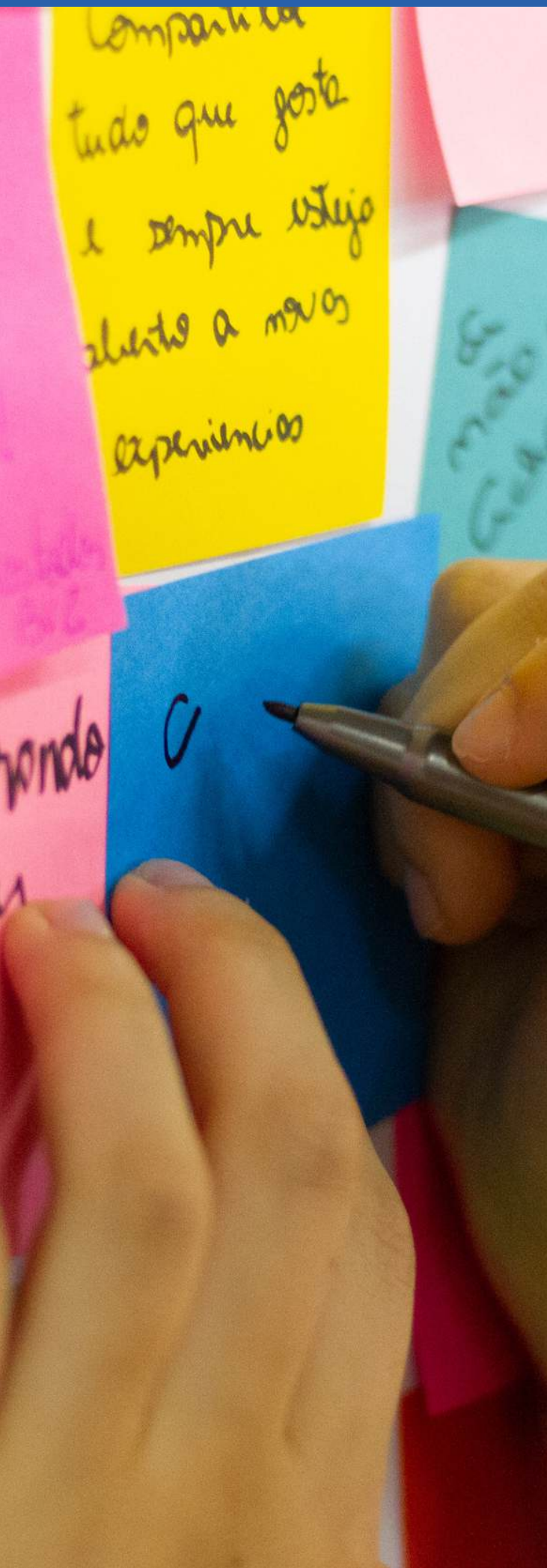
Barriers to finding help

- Times of the day when it was accessible.
- Doctors are difficult to access.
- Lack of acknowledgement and validation of feelings.
- Probably more information at schools.
- Bigger size print is hard to find vision disabilities.

We asked children and young people what support for their feelings and mental health they and their friends have found helpful. The answers focused on support from others or self-help strategies.

One young person said, "2bu has helped me be myself, which has been helpful because I'm used to hiding who I am, so others don't judge me."

Self-help strategies included music and gaming, with one young person reporting, "Music is a big one for me. It helps me focus on myself and calms me down."



Suggestions to improve finding help

- If it was more accessible especially late at night when places like ChildLine are very busy
- IF THE INFORMATION WAS EASIER TO FIND ON WEBSITES.

The survey showed that 44% of the children and young people who took part were unsure if they could trust the information or how to determine if it was trustworthy. The main reasons given for trusting information were that it came from a trusted person, such as parents, or from a trusted organisation or website.

“I hide it because I am told I am being silly or you’ll get over it by school. I try asking for help in school by teachers to be told I am being silly”

Parents and parent carers

The survey received 141 responses from parents and parent/carers. As with children and young people, we wanted to understand where parents and parent carers went to find information to support their children's feelings and mental health. Unlike children, parents used a wider range of sources, including a stronger reliance on online websites and social media.

The majority of parents reported finding it hard to access information, stating that it was often too generic. Several mentioned that the experience of trying to find help was confusing.

"It's too generic and at a low level. More serious conditions get lost because of the 'fashion' for talking about lower-level mental health issues. This is good, but also difficult because demand for services is greater, yet not everyone is in a serious situation."

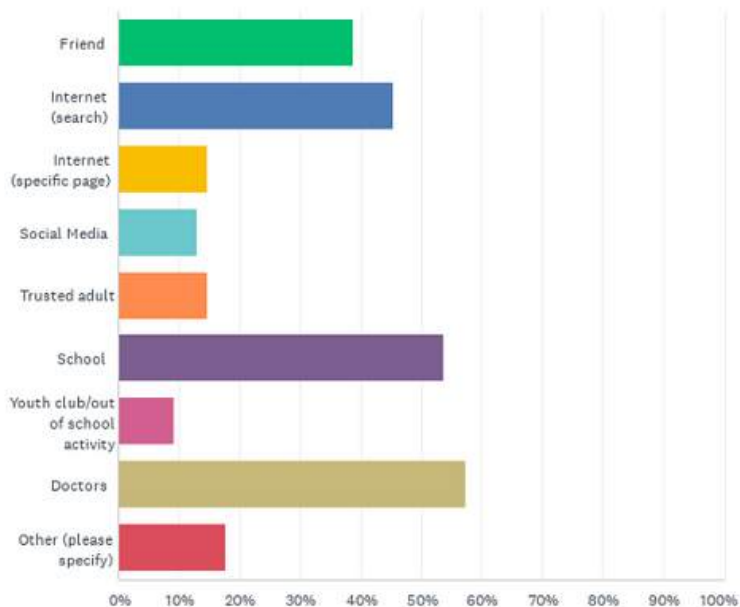
"Really hard, no one to really signpost you to get or access help."

Parents identified a range of different places they go to access support for their child's feelings and mental health. However, 26% of parents responded that they have not been able to access any support.

"I feel like with all support you have to fight for it or just get put on a waiting list. Caring for 2 autistic boys by myself can be exhausting and overwhelming in itself. And can feel like there's no support"



Q8 If you were looking for help for your child's feelings/mental health, where would you go?



Barriers to finding help

- no one to really sign post you to get or access help
- too many websites and info not up to date
- it was hard to search on internet.
- too much information
- the county websites are confusing
- difficult to access doctor
- so much harmful advice wrapped up as helpful
- limited access to CAMHS
- approaches not suitable for neurodivergent children and young people

We also asked parents/parent carers what support for their children and young people feelings/mental health have they found helpful.

Practitioners

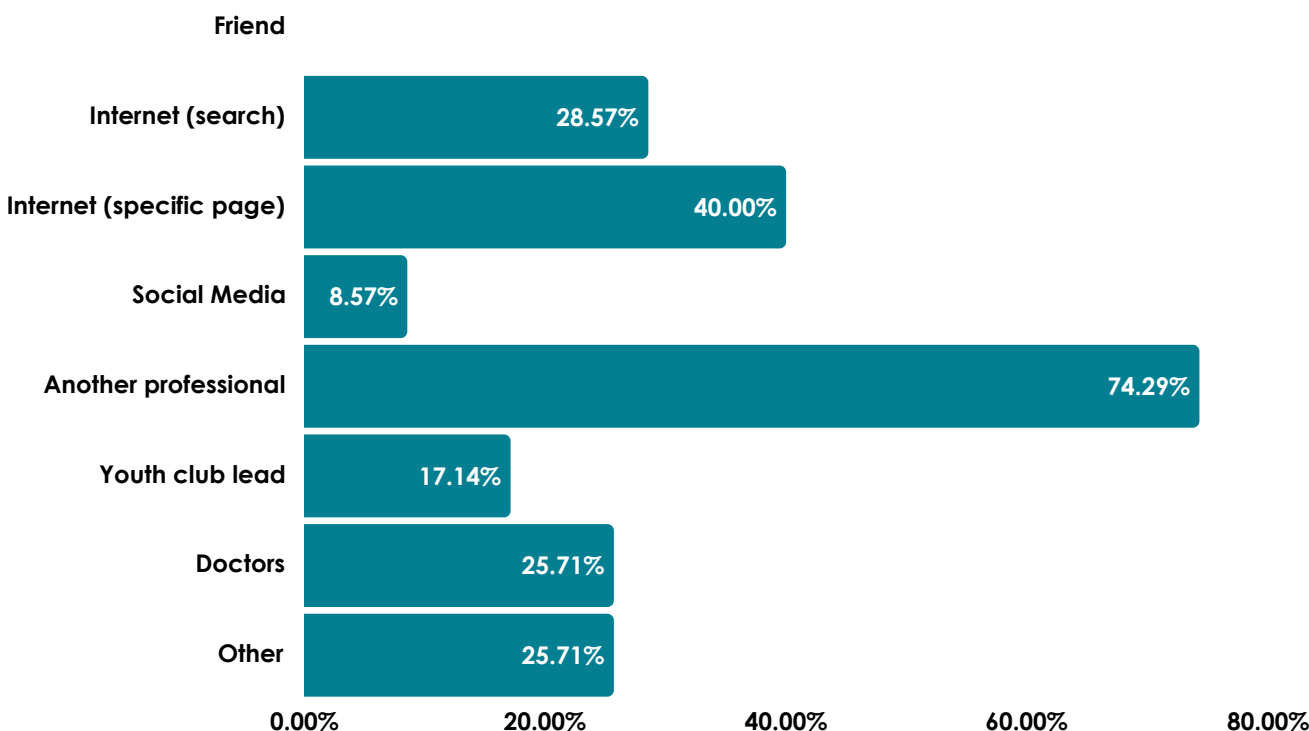
“Hard as so much out there which should be a bonus but not always”

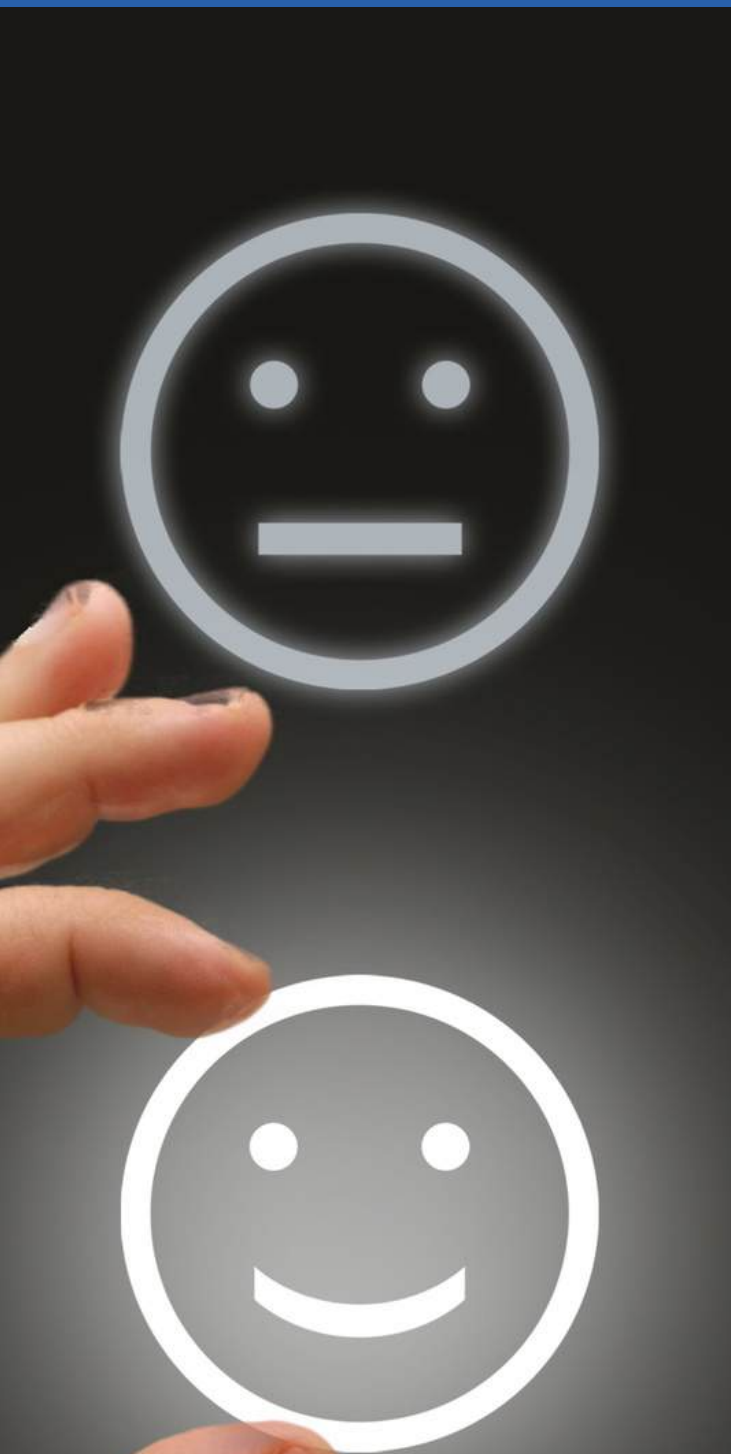
The survey received 52 responses from practitioners working in Somerset. Again, we wanted to understand where they went to find information to support children's feelings and mental health. Practitioners highlighted that their main source of information is other practitioners, closely followed by the internet.

Practitioners were clear in their feedback that online information needs to be centralised in one place and should be clear, including details on eligibility, how referrals to services can be made, and by whom. Multiple practitioners reported using the Big Tent website for information on services, unaware that the resource has been decommissioned and may no longer be up to date.

The ease of access to information varied, with some reporting they found online information easily, but access to services was more difficult. It was felt that services were not always as prompt as needed, especially in times of crisis.

Practitioners tended to use websites from trusted sources such as NHS, Somerset Foundation Trust, Young Somerset, and the Council. Some reported that this was how they knew the information was trustworthy, while others said they weren't sure if it was.





Barriers to finding help

- Length of time that it takes to get support
- Funding issues which can lead to information not being updated
- Lack of trust in services by users
- Unclear pathways
- Gap in provision between those low for CAMHS and too complex for Young Somerset
- Need outweighs services available

Suggestions to improve finding help

- Earlier intervention and support
- Having one place for all information which is clear and kept up to date
- Improved clarity on pathways and thresholds
- Workshops termly on support available
- A Somerset Mental Health factsheet of organisations/charities and what they can offer, for who, and what age range
- One page of who to contact and when

“Honestly? I don't - I know there are issues with funding for some reputable organisations and that links are not always up to date, may not always follow current NICE guidelines/BPS/BABCP best practice etc. but I look for evidence-based studies and reputable organisations. I avoid social media recommendations as they are often for private businesses which are very hard to judge.”

Findings from focus groups



2 groups took part in focus discussions which included 14 males, 4 females, 2 non-binary and 1 who preferred to self-describe. The age range covered 8-18 with the majority being 15 or above.

The group identified a range of places they would go for information and support. However, they also discussed being scared to call some of the larger services for fear that they might contact their parents. Young people expressed that larger organisations, such as Mind and Childline, are intimidating, so many avoid these services and try to find smaller, local ones instead.

Several young people also identified things they would do to help, such as running, spending time with animals, visiting certain places, and taking their dog for a walk

Young people were asked what support for their feelings/mental health they had found helpful and identified the following.

- **Support mechanisms:** sports, school, and in one case, video games for relaxation.
- **Organisations:** SASP's activity and sports club designed to help those that have experienced adverse childhood experiences. Bibic and 2bu group which provides a welcoming space to help young people feel accepted, understood, and confident in who they are.
- **Friends:** Used more for preventing struggles than for dealing with existing ones, as friends may stop communicating when someone is struggling.
- **CAMHS:** One individual is comfortable with CAMHS, but her brother doesn't find it helpful. One said the therapy service (not crisis team) were helpful.
- **School Support:** Schools offer mental health resources, but one person felt the visible support system discouraged engagement.
- **Social media:** Seen as helpful for indirect communication and sharing supportive content.

teacher
parents
internet 2bu
Transline-Mindline
Kooth doctors
Childline helplines
google

The experience of accessing information varied for each young person. Some reported receiving too much information all at once, which left them feeling overwhelmed.

Often, they relied on others to determine whether the source was trustworthy or from a well-known organisation. In one of the groups, they discussed how it was easier to get information than they had initially expected, with most believing it would be difficult.

Young people also told us there is a need of services that provide immediate short-term support for things that are “everyday” worries rather than a crisis, to stop them developing into a crisis.

Barriers to finding help

- Providing too much information at once and all written and overwhelming and not YP friendly.
- Feeling that getting information is going to be harder than it is
- Having to wait for information and not know what was happening
- Concerns about confidentiality

Suggestions to improve finding help

- Cards such as the Kooth cards are small helpful and easy to read
- More signposting for services around School/College and public places
- Apps such as Headspace were mentioned as helpful
- Knowing that it is easier to get help





Conclusion

This report reinforces findings previously given by children, young people, parent carers, and practitioners supporting them. Despite various websites and information sources being commissioned in the past, these have not succeeded in providing clear, up-to-date, and easily accessible information in formats that suit the needs of the target audiences.

Listening to the voices of children and young people reveals that they predominantly rely on each other and their parents for information and support. This highlights the need to ensure that high-quality information is readily available to these groups, without requiring access to mental health practitioners.

Specific consideration must be given to the approaches used for different groups to ensure accessibility. Information should be presented in a way that is not overwhelming and clearly outlines pathways to support.

It is apparent from the responses of parents, parent carers, and practitioners that the lack of clarity regarding service thresholds and pathways remains a significant challenge. This issue is further compounded by a gap in service provision between the Young Somerset and CAMHS offer.



Recommendations

Many young people express a clear need for emotional and mental health support yet face significant barriers in accessing the help they require. Both young people and adults have reported confusion regarding the pathways to obtaining help, often citing insufficient information about available services and how to navigate them effectively. To address this we recommend:

- Creating resources such as cards which are small helpful and easy to read
- Clear pathways are published in one place
- Clarity about who can access services and when this should happen
- Focus on early intervention
- Work to address the gap between Young Somerset and CAMHS services

Appendix A - The survey

This survey has been designed to help us understand the support available for children and young people around their feelings and mental health. CAMHS, Healthwatch, NHS Somerset ICB, Somerset Council, Somerset Parent Carer Forum and Spark have worked together to create the survey.

The following survey will be used to help us decide how we do things in Somerset, with the view to making things better for children and young people trying to access support. The information collected will be used by the organisations involved to inform what they do. No information about you will be shared without you saying it's okay to do so. Please do not include information that would allow you to be identified.

We estimate the survey will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. If you require any help to complete or would like a paper version, please contact us on 01458 259384 or email getinvolved@somersetparentcarerforum.org.uk. All data from this survey will be stored securely for up to 5 years in line with the forums GDPR policy which is available on our website.

Please do not use the survey to raise safeguarding concern, instead ring Somerset Direct on 0300 123 2224.

The anonymised results of this survey will be shared on Somerset Parent Carer Forums website.

1. I am

- a child/young person
- a parent/ parent carer
- a practitioner working in Somerset

Survey questions for people between 5 and 18

You can complete these on your own or ask a adult or friend you trust to help you.

2. What support for your feelings/mental health have you or your friends found helpful?

3. If you were looking for help with your feelings/mental health, where would you go?

- Friend
- Internet (search)
- Internet (specific page)
- Social Media
- Trusted adult
- School
- Parent / guardian / carer
- Youth club/out of school activity
- Doctors
- Other (Please use this space to tell us more)

Appendix A - The survey

4. What was it like trying to find this information or help? What could have made it easier?

5. How do you know you can trust the information you found?

6. Is there anything else you want to tell us about getting help with your feelings/mental health?

Survey questions for parents and parent carers

7. What support for your child's feelings/mental health have you found helpful?

8. If you were looking for help for your child's feelings/mental health, where would you go?

- Friend
- Internet (search)
- Internet (specific page)
- Social Media
- Trusted adult
- School
- Youth club/out of school activity
- Doctors
- Other (please specify)

9. What was it like trying to find this information? What could have made it easier?

10. How do you know you can trust the information you found?

11. Is there anything else you want to tell us about getting help for your Childs feelings/mental health?

Survey questions for practitioners working in Somerset

12. If you were looking for support for the children/young people you work with feelings/mental health, where would you go?

- Friend
- Internet (search)
- Internet (specific page)
- Social Media
- Another professional
- Youth club/out of school activity lead
- Doctors
- Other (please specify)

Appendix A - The survey

13. What was it like trying to find this information? What could have made it easier?

14. How do you know you can trust the information you found?

15. Is there anything else you want to tell us about getting help for the children/young people you work with regarding their feelings/mental health?

About you

We want to make sure we are hearing from lots of different people. To help us do this please complete the information below.

16. How old are you?

- 5-10
- 11-16
- 17-18
- 19-25
- 26-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+
- Other (please specify)

17. What is your ethnic group?

- White - Welsh/English/Scottish/Northern
- Irish/British Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Any other White background
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Any other mixed background
- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Any other Asian background
- Caribbean
- African
- Any other Black background
- Arab
- Prefer not to say

Appendix A - The survey

18. Please tell us the gender you identify as

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Intersex
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe

19. Please select all that apply

- I am disabled
- I have additional needs
- I am young carer
- I am a care leaver
- I am a child in care
- I am a member of or have a member of my family that is part of the Armed Forces community
- home educated

Appendix B - Focus group questions

Name of Organisation:

Name of group/setting:

Date of Session:

How many in the group

- Males
- Females
- Non binary
- Intersex
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe

Ages of the group:

How many identify as:

- Has a disability
- Has an additional need
- Is a Young Carers
- A child looked after
- A care leaver
- Home Educated
- Is a member of or have a member of my family that is part of the Armed Forces community.
- Another identity (please state)

What support for your feelings/mental health have you or your friends found helpful?

If you were looking for help with your feelings/mental health, where would you go?

What was it like trying to find this information or help?

What could have made it easier?

How do you know you can trust the information you found?

Is there anything else you want to tell us about getting help with your feelings/mental health?

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